



Traversing the Culture Continuum—Executive Summary

by Glenn Smith

One could make the case that at the core of APPA's mission lies the term "improvement." APPA, in its pursuit of facilities management excellence, is constantly striving to find knowledge, tools, and educational opportunities that will allow each of us to do our jobs better. But with any pursuit of excellence—any desire to improve—comes the need for change. There's a familiar saying, "If you always do what you always did, you'll always get what you always got." Improvement, by definition, requires change.

This all sounds easy enough, but as Adam Wolfe stated so succinctly in the December 4, 1998 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "No institution in America is more resistant to change than the university." And thus, the dilemma starts to take shape. Change is essential to any improvement effort, and yet our institutions of higher education are, by their very

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nature, highly resistant to internal change. So where do we start? Perhaps at the very place where that resistance resides—the institution's culture.

Organizational culture—We've heard and used the term, but do we fully appreciate what it means or the power that exists within it? Many of the references listed at the end of this article describe the concept of "culture" in great detail, but in essence, it is the way things routinely operate and the way people interact. It can be defined by the unwritten rules, the answer to the question "How does it really work around here?" and the "if—then" cause and effect beliefs of the employee population. According to Marshall Sashkin and Kenneth Kiser in *Putting Total Quality Management To Work*, "Culture is the cumulative perception of how the organization treats people and how people expect to treat one another."

The important point is to understand that the effectiveness of any efforts to change the output, product, or service of any organization is dependent upon the organizational culture—the interrelationships, interactions, and interdependencies of people, and the written and unwritten rules that govern them. Performance and success, however measured, is directly linked to organizational culture. The change required by an improvement effort almost always requires a change or shift in organizational culture.

My independent study, observation, and experience dealing with this phenomena of organizational culture has led me to develop a chart I refer to as the "Culture Continuum" (see page 39). By evaluating an institution's culture in terms of five different, but interrelated components, one can better understand the forces that are either encouraging or resisting change. The Culture Continuum represents two extremes, which I refer to as "traditional" and "stewardship." In truth, no culture functions totally at one extreme or the other, but somewhere in between. The issue becomes, in which direction does our culture need to shift in order to encourage the kind of meaningful change and improvement we desire? Or, what should be our culture vision?

The first component, **Leadership Style**, is where any institutional culture finds its roots. Culture, as a force that has become deeply entrenched over time, is a product influenced more by the legacies of the institution's leaders and their individual styles than any other factor. The Culture Continuum contrasts a command and control leadership style with what we have come to refer to as servant leadership. Despite the presence of many different leadership styles within any institution, the culture of the institution will inevitably be a reflection of the leadership philosophy practiced at the highest levels—in our case, by the president and senior administrators.

What leadership styles do you see being practiced at your institution? The top-down autocratic approach of a George Patton or a Bobby Knight, or do they model Max DePree's belief that "A leader is one who serves. Leadership is a concept of owing certain things to the institution. Leadership should

CULTURE CONTINUUM

	Traditional	→	Stewardship
LEADERSHIP STYLE	command & control	→	participatory or servant
ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT PEOPLE	negative	→	positive
MOTIVATION	punishment/reward	→	pride/joy of work
RELATIONSHIPS	parent/child	→	partnership
SUSTAINING FORCES	fear	→	trust
LEADS TO	favoritism (perceived or otherwise) compliance rules/policies/regulations win/lose or lose/lose decisions competition frustrated/angry employees dependent employees leveraged power blame bureaucracy short term/reactive results	→	fairness commitment common sense/sound judgment win/win decisions cooperation satisfied employees empowered employees balanced power organizational and personal accountability entrepreneurial spirit long term success
INSTITUTION IS	stagnant	→	vibrant, learning, improving

be about stewardship rather than ownership.” Larry Wilson of the Pecos River Learning Center puts it this way:

The whole idea of leadership has turned upside down. Today’s leaders are there to serve rather than be served. They are there to empower people; they don’t come to work having the answers. The objective of today’s leaders is to help people bring 100 percent of their creativity and courage to bear on the problems of the organization.

The kind of meaningful change required to bring about a better performing facilities department is dramatically influenced by the leadership style that exists in the institution’s highest levels. And don’t mistake collegiality for servant leadership.

Another component of organizational culture deals with the **Assumptions About People** that exist. Generally, these assumptions are expressed in terms of the policies, rules, and procedures that exist. In Douglas McGregor’s 1960 book, *The Human Side of Enterprise*, he lays out his Theory X and Theory Y assumptions about workers. Theory X assumes that people inherently dislike work, need to be coerced into putting forth work, have little natural ambition, and wish to avoid responsibility. As a result, strong direction and control

is required from management, mirroring the traditional leadership style. Theory Y, on the other hand, assumes that physical and mental effort is satisfying and natural; people will exercise self-direction and self-control in the service of objectives to which they are committed; and the average person learns, under proper conditions, not only to accept but to seek responsibility.

Frequently management agrees with the Theory Y assumptions, but the policies and rules in place tend to send the message that employees cannot be trusted; they must be closely monitored; and they respond best to external forms of motivational prodding or inducement. In an educational setting, this trend just builds hypocrisy. Every institution of higher learning harbors Theory Y assumptions about its students. Students have unrealized potential to grow, to discover, to create, to lead productive lives. Many schools have adopted honor codes, implying that students are inherently honest and trustworthy and capable of holding one another accountable to the code. What a contrast this can be to the way college and university administrators tend to view their employees.

The assumptions that management makes about employees lead very naturally to the **Motivational Techniques** used

to obtain desired results or behavior. Most of us have experienced the use of “carrot and stick” extrinsic motivators. Do something good and we will give you something desirable. Do something bad and you will be punished. Typical performance appraisal systems, merit pay systems, bonus, and reward policies all resort to dangled rewards and threatened punishments in an attempt to get certain performance results from employees. But the culture continuum suggests an opposite extreme to typical carrot and stick motivational techniques—creating an environment and a culture where people are intrinsically motivated. Stephen Covey contends that:

The highest level of human motivation is a sense of personal contribution . . . People [are] the most valuable organizational assets—as stewards of certain resources—and stewardship [is] the key to discovering, developing, and managing all other assets. Each person recognized as a free agent, capable of immense achievement, not as a victim or pawn limited by conditions or conditioning.

William Damon, in an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, puts it this way:

As a half-century of research in cognitive and social psychology has shown, ideas are a far more reliable source of motivation for higher human behavior and civic value than are sticks, carrots, or social controls. . . . Even ordinary moral behavior—habits of honesty, consideration for oth-

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ers, respect for social mores—is sustained in the long run more by understanding and belief than by reward or punishment. People who have faith in the purpose of a law follow it more than those who simply know what will happen to them if they get caught breaking it.

Next, let’s take a look at the true nature of the **Relationships**, especially those between manager and subordinate, which exist within an institution’s culture. Traditionally, bosses have provided direction and control over subordinates. In Peter Senge’s words from *The Dance of Change*:

Traditional authoritarian hierarchies foster dependence by placing concentrated decision-making power in the hands of a few and demanding compliance from the majority.

A parent-child relationship tends to develop where employees become dependent upon management to tell them what to do, when to do it, and how to do it. Employees even find

themselves dependent upon their employer for their own happiness—something most employers are unable to provide, even though they try. Employees begin to lose their sense of self-awareness and the proactive muscles that allow them to make choices and exercise judgment start to atrophy. As James Champy describes in his book, *Reengineering Management*, organizations that encourage command and control leadership and dependency relationships “tend to suppress all possibility of human imagination, initiative, decisiveness, dissent, individual responsibility, or real teamwork.” In the end, if managers insist on treating employees like children, they will behave like children and will resort to child-like responses, such as whining, complaining, rebelling, or doing anything to get attention, even if they know it is wrong.

Relationships based on partnering, or partnerships, offer a stewardship alternative to parent-child dependencies. In a partnership, all members of the community respect each other and

Multiple Choice Question

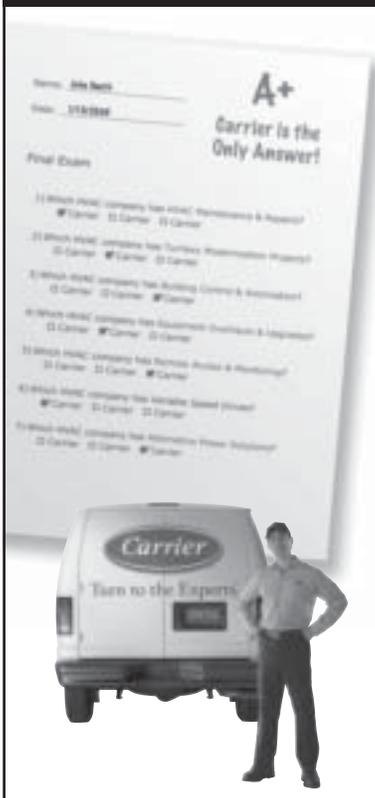
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treat each other as mature, empowered, interdependent adults, with unique, mission-critical roles to perform. All are team members and must rely upon and trust one another for their collective success. In the words of Max DePree:

We have to become competent in our relationships. Almost no one is going to have the luxury of working alone. All of us are going to be working in ways in which we're interdependent with other people. And the only way we can do that effectively is to build competence in relationships.

I refer to the final element of the Culture Continuum as **Sustaining Forces**. In any culture, certain forces emerge to ensure that the conditions that created the existing culture continue. In a sense, organizational culture takes on a life of its own and tries to guarantee its own survival. Most cultures have survived for generations, as many different leaders have come and gone. The inertia that must be overcome by leaders in their attempt to make meaningful change in their organization's culture can be tremendous, and if the change effort is not sustained, the culture will try to spring back to its former form.

In a traditional culture, fear is the sustaining force. Fear can manifest itself in many subtle ways, such as fear of making mistakes and being punished for them; fear of repercussions; fear caused by inconsistent leadership; fear of government or legal intervention; fear driven by lack of knowledge, information, communication, or understanding; fear driven by the lack of a vision, fear of being vulnerable, and, perhaps the most powerful of all, fear of change. But in any of its forms, fear tends to cause leadership styles, our assumptions about people, underlying motivational techniques, and basic relationships to follow a "traditional" pattern.

The force that counteracts fear—that lies opposite to fear on the continuum, and is an absolutely necessary ingredient to any stewardship-based culture—is trust. Therein lies the challenge to meaningful and lasting culture change—for trust is considerably harder to generate than fear, harder to hold on to, and in many ways harder to define. Complicating the matter fur-

ther, when we make building trust a goal, it often leads to higher levels of suspicion—where employees fear that trust-building programs are just a ruse for getting them to buy into whatever management wants. Trust, in its purest form, is the naturally occurring result of a culture that embraces the conditions found on the stewardship side of the culture continuum. And when trust exists in this form, it becomes a powerful sustaining force for the culture that gave it birth.

These five elements—leadership style, assumptions about people, motivating techniques, relationships, and the sustain-

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ing forces that they generate define an organization's culture. As these elements interact, overlap, and intersect, certain characteristics of the culture they have defined start to emerge. When contrasting the characteristics of traditional cultures with those that embrace a stewardship approach, we find evidence of favoritism versus fairness; compliance rather than commitment; rules, policies, and regulations are relied upon more heavily than sound judgment and common sense; win/lose or lose/win outcomes prevail over win/win results; frustrated, angry employees seem to outnumber content, satisfied employees; employees are dependent upon others for direction, rather than empowered to make their own decisions; power is leveraged instead of being kept in careful balance; blame and finger-pointing is more prevalent than organizational and personal accountability; and the organization is focused on short-term, quick-fix results rather than long-term success. Institutions that cling to the traditional culture model become stagnant and many do not survive. Those which have made the shift toward stewardship are vibrant, constantly learning, and continually improving. They also recognize the need for and, in fact, welcome and embrace change.

So, how does an institution, particularly a change-resistant institution like a college or university, go about shifting its culture from the traditional model to a more stewardship approach? Bryn Mawr College has been going through such a transition for over five years now. There are times when it feels like all we have to show for our efforts is a greater appreciation for the change-resistant nature of our traditional culture. Fear continues to exist for various reasons and that fear tends to pull us back to a culture we are trying to leave behind, but we are also seeing rays of hope. Decision making across the board has become a far more collaborative process, especially in the area of facility project planning and design. Nancy Vickers, president of Bryn Mawr college since 1997, is leading this shift toward a more participative leadership style by encouraging the formation of trust-based teams. As part of this

effort, the college developed and published a set of workplace principles, which articulates how the staff desires to relate to one another—a huge step toward building effective relationships. Within the facilities services department, the focus has been on developing a compelling vision, a process that has done much to generate a true spirit of cooperative teamwork and move away from the more traditional hierarchical model.

There has also been a steady review of HR policies, seeking better alignment with our stewardship model. Peter Block contends, "Human Resources practices do not impact the culture of an institution, they are the culture." With that in

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mind, we have revamped our sick leave policy to one that assumes that employees are basically honest in contrast to the former policy that focused on how to identify and punish sick leave offenders. A task force is now meeting regularly to review the college's approach to performance appraisals. Within facilities, we have taken all members of the department through Stephen Covey's 7 Habits of Highly Effective People training, believing that all change starts with the individual.

We are also actively engaged in making sure our daily actions are in close alignment with the college's mission and goals. The shift to a new culture has started and there is strong commitment to sustaining the momentum necessary to see us successfully traverse the "Culture Continuum."

In closing, let me leave you with this thought from Edgar Schein, author of *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide*:

. . . you cannot create a new culture. . . [you can only] set the stage for the culture to evolve . . . It can be evolved—if you think clearly about it and understand its dynamics. 🏢

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