

Organizational Culture Checkup: An Interview with Erline Belton

by Lissette Rodriguez

***Erline Belton** is the CEO of the Lyceum Group in Boston. Clients identify her as an organizational healer, and she is honored to be of service as she practices organizational development from her heart and head.*

How do you help people understand what is at the heart of organizational culture?

This concept is still elusive for many of us. A good way to approach this is for people to ask what it feels like to be part of an organizational system. They need to ask, "What can I give to this system, and what is this organizational system going to give to me?"

Culture doesn't just happen to an organization; it is fed by those within it. People operating in a healthy environment are nourished positively; cultures that make people feel small and where people don't want to come to work are poisonous; they starve our spirit. But no culture is all negative or all positive. Problems can arise, for instance, when good people leave a more negative culture; they leave a void that is difficult to fill because they were part of the healthy pockets of the culture. The system is the people.

Cultures are not static; an organization's culture can change based on what people feel, see, and experience day-to-day. Such shifts often happen over time, but they also happen following an unusual event or when a specific behavior triggers a change. It comes with the startling realization that people are not perfect or predictable. This is a common reality for nonprofits, which rarely have enough staff or funding available to fill

the demands of the work. When staff have to juggle too many demands, taking on more work than people are capable of doing, causes the structures and systems to fail, sometimes creating the opportunity for people to fail one another over time. It is rarely a question of the commitment to the work or to one another, although this becomes a question, as faith in the organization and one another falters. The simple fact is, things are not what we thought they were when we joined the organization, (and they seldom are). Once disbelief becomes part of the organizational fabric, it is a difficult story to change. The goal is then to recreate the story to be what we want it to be. The only way to do so is to recapture the belief that it is possible.

If you want to change a negatively experienced culture, the key questions to examine collectively are these: How did things develop this way? How can things be different?

Why tackle this tough issue? Can organizational culture really be changed in substantial ways?

Everyone needs and wants to work in an organization where the culture supports growth and development, their work, and the people they are committed to serving. For those of us who have a passion for our work and have chosen work that is dedicated to being of

service to others, it is very important to be supported by a culture that nurtures the best in us. But sometimes we find ourselves in a quicksand of culture that deteriorates into lies, gossip, defensiveness, mean-spiritedness and cronyism. This creates a deadly atmosphere that's not conducive to getting the best from staff.

But few organizations like to talk about or deal with organizational culture and find any reason to avoid the topic. They think about people only in relation to systems and policies, not necessarily in terms of relationships and beliefs and how they create and shape the culture of the organization. But all organizational work evolves in the context of culture, and many systems are formed to fit or react to the culture.

So to affect the culture of an organization is to impact the organization's fundamental work; it is not a side job; creating the right culture is part of the core work of the organization.

In the early stages of my consulting work, I was constantly dumbfounded by the fact that those of us doing organizational consulting were helping to create change strategies that didn't work. You'd talk to people in the organization, you'd feed the information back to them, create a strategy, and then come back a while later, and it was *still* broken. So I would think, "This organization has good people and they do good work; why can't they move the needle?" I eventually realized that people would not stop to have the philosophical discussion about their

beliefs or the underpinnings of an organization's mission and vision. Nor would they take the time to understand the individual beliefs that drive how and why they work. I realized that you need to create the safe space for this reflection to happen in order to get at the issue of organizational culture—namely the way it feels to work in a particular system.

Our beliefs define who we are as individuals and as an organization. It is our public statement to those we work with that speaks to who we are and what we will and won't stand for. These beliefs can change over time if they are acknowledged, and explored with tenderness and honor, and accepted as part of the *real* work of the organization. This offers leaders a big challenge, because the workplace isn't traditionally a place that examines feelings, beliefs, and emotions supported by our collective voice. And while we may say that we support the opportunity for everyone to grow, the reality is often quite different. This fact alone demands that examining beliefs must be sanctioned by leaders and seen as part of organizations' primary work.

With the world moving faster and faster, I'm more concerned about how organizations address their staff's beliefs, drives, and feelings. When people in the same organization operate with different belief systems and don't take the time to deal with this reality honestly, it causes enormous confusion and difficulty. If you don't create the safe space for that conversation to happen, you will never create a high-performing organization. Either way, a culture will exist. You can either choose to be the shaper and architect of that culture or not.

How do you create the safe space for this conversation?

An organization has to be willing to explore the myths that exist within it and the untruths in effect. Nonprofits would do well to regularly examine the truths and myths about their cultures and make corrections to encourage a

healthy environment in accordance with that truth. In the process of exploration about what is real and true about the culture, the soil is loosened, so to speak, and this creates the opportunity to deal with the real issues. But people are often afraid to have this difficult conversation and tell the truth.

Every organization has myths and untruths that need to be uncovered. The courageous organization says, "Let's uncover these issues so we can decide what we actually want to be true about our organization." That is a hard step to take, but when taken with conviction, it's very liberating. I help start the conversation by asking, "When you were successful, what beliefs were in effect at the time?" as well as "What was happening for you personally, and what was happening organizationally?" When people can identify these trends, it is enormously powerful. They can begin to understand what worked for them in the past and operate from that reality. When people can't bring these questions and passion into their work, they retreat, remove their soul from their work, and lose their passion and spirit. And ultimately, the organization loses them as well. And you tend to lose the good people, because they have other options, and because they will look for a place where they can bring their passion *and* their intellect with them.

But the work is not easy. Two things can happen when you talk about myths: (1) there is an enormous sense of relief that the myths have been uncovered; or (2) the myths are uncovered, but their implications are too difficult or threatening and get pushed down again.

What happens if an organization accepts the challenge of dealing with its myths?

If an organization takes the opportunity to deal with its myths, then the hard work begins. Now the issue becomes one of trust; in many situations, people in an organization may have tried previously to deal with the issues and failed. It is important to pick one or two high-

priority organizational concerns and deal with them well. You can't do too much, or it won't get the attention it needs and the effort can fail again, which diminishes trust even more.

This work requires a *lot* of patience, dialogue and a willingness to trust again. It also requires leadership that is willing to invest time and effort. Without authentic commitment by an organization's leadership, change won't happen.

For leaders undertaking this kind of dialogue and change, it is important not to do the work in a blaming way but to approach it from the perspective of "What can we do together?" Many find it difficult to make the shift from blaming to accountability, and it is important to know the difference. When you blame, you are asking, "Whose fault is it that we are in this situation?" When you hold someone accountable, you ask, "We made an agreement, and we're not sticking to it. What happened? What can we learn from what we did?" That is a very big difference.

Can't some organizations do this work without the support of leadership?

Most people want someone else to do the tough organizational work. It's not easy. But when a leader is willing to take it on, it also encourages others to engage in the work. Leaders model the behavior that is necessary for change, which helps to develop a new belief system in the organization, and it increases the trust level, especially in leadership. But in many cases, leaders don't want to do the work, it's hard. So a leader needs to be convinced that the work is necessary, must pursue the effort relentlessly, and must allow others to hold him accountable. It requires a level of vulnerability and courage that frightens most leaders. This new type of leadership enables the healing and coming together of a work community.

If leaders are doing this work, it becomes important to keep the questions at the forefront. That's the tough part; no one can let it slip.

You can undergo the process without a top leader if that leader agrees that the work should be done and delegates it to someone else. That person has to be willing to take on a leader and others in senior management and say, "This is not going well, this is not what we agreed to, this is not who we are." That is not a whistle-blower role so much as it is the role of an ombudsman, but it can be unpopular because leadership may not want to hear it. And this person has to bring feedback, facts, and examples to show what is happening. It can't just be this person's opinion; it has to be based on real evidence. This is a person who commands respect, has credibility, and is considered independently minded. For this role to work, an organization has to be willing to stop, ask questions, and dissect what happened before it is too late.

What kinds of things are happening in organizations that are doing this work?

An example is they tend to manage their time differently. One organization is trying to reshape its organizational culture because too many of its staff members could not focus on what they wanted to focus on. So they devised the concepts of "control time" and "response time." During control time, there are no interruptions and people focus on specific tasks. During response time, they have more of an open-door policy, where others can walk into an office, ask questions, and chat. This distinction has given the staff a sense of control about how it manages its work, which was a major issue previously.

They have staff meetings, and an item on every agenda is a discussion of how organizational cultural changes are going. They ask, "How are we doing on the things we said we would do?" They take on the organization's leader; they challenge one another. It's very hard, and it does not work all the time. But they've learned to recognize when they're stuck and that they can't always do it themselves, and they ask for help. They have learned to speak more openly and have

moved from blaming (i.e., "You said this was going to happen, and it didn't") to accountability (i.e., "Help me understand what happened").

Another important question for these kinds of organizations is "What did we learn?" When things go well or even when they don't, this question is always worth asking, and organizations that have done this work routinely look at what they learned and what they would do differently; they realize the importance of reflection and they build it in. When an organization truly reflects, it decides what it wants to be and that it wants to be different from what it is currently. To do so, however, it must engage the intellect, the spirit and the heart of its people.

Can you share an example of an organization that took on this work and made major changes?

I can tell you about a community organization that I worked with for about three years that took on the core of organizational culture. It was experiencing tremendous growth, and it was saying yes to everything. It didn't establish boundaries as it grew and brought in people who did not share the organizational culture of the original group of staff, which created a major cultural clash. Within three to four months of a huge hiring surge, big conflicts had erupted. This made folks realize that they needed to stop and ask several questions: "What matters to us around here? What do we want to keep? What needs to change? What is the culture we want to create?"

So I helped them look at their history and the culture they had created over time and to see how it had once worked and how it was not working now. We then divided the work into short-term and long-term fixes. For short-term fixes, finance was an important area. There was an all-out war between the old-timers and the new accounting folks. The old accounting system was laissez-faire and based on trust, and the new folks put in a highly structured system that had more

accountability but that most experienced as bureaucratic. So we asked the entire group what was and wasn't working. The finance folks shared their perspective, and the program people shared theirs. It was a fabulous process—tough, but needed. The finance folks were relieved to talk about what was not working because they were not getting what they needed from the rest of the staff, and the program staff talked about what they believed were the police tactics of the finance folks. The finance staff then thought about processes that were absolutely needed in terms of a strong financial system of accountability and they pared back a lot of the bureaucracy. They implemented a new system, and it worked because the finance folks were no longer policing resistant people, and the rest of the staff members no longer believed that in order to be accountable they had to respond to a highly bureaucratic system. It was very interesting to ask, "What is really needed to be accountable?" which is how these groups got to the point of having real balance.

This may not seem like a cultural issue, but it is. You have to move from a family atmosphere to a more bureaucratic environment and find the balance of accountability. And how you go about that is about organizational culture. We had to ask the finance folks what was important to them, and they said, "customer service." But what does that look like? What are the behaviors? They had to grapple with the fact that policing folks was not customer service and to develop the beliefs, values, and behavior that would drive that customer-service orientation. At the same time, the program folks had to understand that the organization was changing and needed more structure and that they in turn needed to find a new way. Ultimately, they met more or less in the middle, and they did so based on agreements about the culture they wanted to shape and contribute to.

In another instance, the program folks were challenged in how to best provide

services to community residents, particularly their tenants. The organization had created a “do for me” approach to community services rather than an approach that encouraged self-sufficiency. They explored the history of that service orientation, asking what was currently going on, what would allow them to move to a model of providing services that was self-sustaining and that would lead to greater self-sufficiency among families. They had to confront their own beliefs and behavior and had to recognize how this behavior supported dysfunction. They asked how they could move to a culture of partnership with tenants. So they explored their philosophy and beliefs and then aligned programs with this belief system. Some programs were expanded, others were canceled, and services were entirely reorganized to align with organizational mission and the beliefs. It was a profound shift to go from a parent-child relationship with the community to a customer-service model based on mutual accountability and interdependence. It was hard work because this organization dealt with all the ailments of society—abuse, drugs, dependence, displacement—and there had to be a conversation about what was and wasn’t acceptable and how to deal with the unacceptable in a caring and responsible way. Again, the work of culture is always about the real work of the organization, and it demonstrates the choices we are and aren’t willing to make as we, together, create the story of the organization.

What attitudes and behaviors keep our cultures stuck? How can we change these?

Usually one person is mistakenly believed to be the culprit. Often the leader is blamed for the organization’s shortcomings. In my work, however, I have never found one person to be totally responsible for organizational shortcomings. In fact, choosing to blame a leader clears everyone else of accountability and responsibility. That said, my experience also suggests that a leader rarely recog-

nizes his organization’s dysfunctional culture. Many times the truth is beyond reach because no one has had the courage to articulate it; and sometimes a leader simply does not want to hear the reality. But no matter the reason, it’s a leader’s responsibility to know the truth. And it is still the obligation of those in the organization to bring forth the truth and have it heard and acted upon.

Some may act as bystanders. Some think it’s OK to give ourselves permission to engage in criticism, judging, and skepticism from the sidelines. We are still committed to our work but many times assume no ownership or accountability for the problems we identify. We see and feel all that is wrong from our vantage point and hope for a change that does not come. This behavior allows us to stay stuck in the belief that things will never change. We look for data to support our beliefs, and we refute any data that might cause us to change our view and our own behavior. If you are a bystander, you put the culture on hold with a wait-and-see attitude. Over time this diminishes the spirit of the organization and prevents it from moving forward.

There is also the role of the storyteller of the truth about others. In this role, we interfere with building organizational belief because we hold on to some powerful truth about others. We can see with a great deal of clarity what is wrong with them. Not only can we see it, we are convinced that everyone else can see it too. We hold a belief that if only that person would change, everything would be all right. The most laughable part is that while everyone sees it, no one tells the person who most needs to hear it. It’s as if we have no responsibility to one another or ourselves for the building of right relationships and for speaking the truth to those who need to hear it.

Finally, is the role of storyteller about ourselves. The truth we hold about ourselves is often filled with what we wish were true rather than the reality of how others experience us. The only way to substantiate our truth about ourselves is to

acknowledge that we need others to share their experience with us. If we build up a wall of defensiveness and deny that it’s there, we prevent others from coming forward to speak about their experience. If they have the courage to speak their truth and we reject it or refuse to listen, we miss an opportunity to move forward. And if we do nothing to modify our own behavior, we can’t expect others to continue to invest in our growth. If we don’t take advantage of these critical moments, we lose ground on the journey toward building belief. We lose the opportunity to enable the organization to change. It is easy to forget that we are the organization and the organization is us.

If we are to build belief in our organization’s culture and hold onto the belief that things will change, then we have to be willing to change ourselves and invest in supporting others as they attempt to change themselves. All these roles that impede organizational change must be addressed openly and truthfully. And a leader needs to create a shared commitment to examining and making visible the beliefs that inform what people do and don’t do. They must engage in frequent and truthful dialogue. This dialogue must allow for input and imprint of new data that potentially informs and identifies new collective beliefs that can be embraced by all and for which everyone feels accountable and responsible. Accountability and responsibility and caring from the heart become the work of the leader and everyone in the organization.

LISSETTE RODRIGUEZ is contributing editor at the *Nonprofit Quarterly*.

What kind of culture exists in your organization, and why? Have you ever participated in the kind of organizational change discussed here? Share your story with us at feedback@npqmag.org.

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