

Making Culture Change

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Improving quality and improving processes is foremost a culture change activity. The idea of changing the culture of an organization is a challenge that should not be underestimated (and cannot be over-estimated). But, what does it mean? Is it indeed possible?

The Basics

Let's start with some basic concepts first to understand why you need to concentrate on culture change and what it is. When we talk of "maturity", we are talking about the knowledge that an organization has of its capabilities and limitations. This is true within organizations as with individuals. You do not have mature sixteen-year olds, maturity takes time: a mature person is someone who has made mistakes and learnt lessons, someone who has discovered that there are things (s)he cannot do and others that (s)he can do better than other people. Learning to live with those skills and limitations and learning how to use them is critical in the path to improvement, wisdom and maturity. A mature organization is not one that delivers what was promised, but one that promises what can be delivered realistically.

Within a low-level culture maturity organization (I am not talking about CMMI style maturity or capability levels, but cultural maturity), people will do what they believe is correct within the context of today's pressures and priorities; they respond to the politics and do their best. When the culture matures, they start to place their needs and priorities within the context of long-term benefits of the organization. The "me" gets subsumed to the "we".

The culture of the organization is deeply ingrained in the way things are done: this is the way things are done spontaneously and "obviously", without questions or discussion. The culture of the organization is embedded in every part of the organization, in every individual, in every procedure – just like the DNA of a living being is repeated in each one of its cells.

Changing the culture is therefore a major issue and needs to be carefully thought out if any level of success is to be expected. There is no easy solution, there is no one-answer that will work in all organizations, whatever the context, but there are some things to be considered.

In order to focus the change of culture, you need to consider three aspects and try to manage them in parallel:

- The brain or intellectual reasons: there are measurements and statistics to help you make the change, there is industry evidence out there;
- The heart of affective reasons: why would I want to change, why would I want to move out of my comfort zone;
- The gut or instinctive reason: come on, you know this makes sense!

Why

The first step in changing the culture is clearly to identify why you are trying to change anything. What is the point of change? Many organizations start a major change programme without really understanding why they are trying to do it at all. Some consultant has sold them a model, an idea, an approach; someone at the board level, hundreds of kilometres away has read a book. If you want to change the way things are done, you need to know clearly why you are trying to do it, really. You are not interested in achieving maturity level something; you are interested in reducing cost, in improving quality, in improving work conditions, something tangible.

In order to clearly identify why they want to do something, I usually request top management to do a double exercise: first please, consider, write and communicate (not necessarily to everyone) what would happen if you did not improve, what would be the future of the organization if things continued as they are today, in a predictable environment. If the management thinks that their market share is going to expand and the customer satisfaction improve, then they do not need to improve and will not do it. This is a good time to stop wasting energy. The second exercise I encourage them to do is define what their expected results are. This is framed in terms of measurable trends. Maybe you don't know the numbers, but give me the graph: "I would like to see the number of defects reaching the testing phase going down by a noticeable percentage each year", "I would like to see my average project budget reduced by 20% over the next three years". If these expectations are based on a measurement that exists, it is easier to frame it in real terms; otherwise, I am happy with terms such as "noticeably", meaning that once we have a baseline, we will clarify what this means.

Understanding the purpose of the change is critical, but it is a waste of time if it is not communicated. The communication to the staff needs to focus on what matters to them. And that means you need to understand what matters to your staff; and that means listening to the staff! I would expect the publication of the policy to respond to this need. The policy lays out management's expectations in terms of results. These are not (as I have seen too often) very high level descriptions of the process according to CMMI, these are clear guidelines as to what are the expectations:

- What are the objectives of the organization?
- Why do we want to improve?
- What do we want to improve (and please define what you actually mean by terms such as "quality")?
- How you plan to achieve this?
- How is the current change / improvement programme going to help this?

What

What are you planning on changing needs to be identified early on and clarified so that people will understand clearly the approach being taken. If process improvement is your

key strategy, make sure that this is clearly defined. Perhaps it is not critical to do everything that CMMI Maturity Level 2 says you should do: how would you know if you don't take the time to think it through? So the next phase is a root cause analysis. If your objective is to reduce time to market, start analysing where you are spending (wasting?) most time. You may discover that you need better estimating and planning, better control, better configuration management, better management of changing requirements... You will certainly find out that you need a measurement programme that will focus on identifying and formalizing the things that are important to management, the things that management wants to improve. You will also identify that you need some sort of objective evaluation and control of the activities being performed to make sure that you can identify the real areas of strength and weakness.

What will change, again, needs to be communicated in terms that are meaningful to the people who have to live with this: "we want to reduce stress levels", "we want to increase customer satisfaction", "we want to reduce the occurrences of panic induced overtime".

How

Having clearly identified the objectives and the things you want to change within your organization, you now need to know how you are going to change them. A person or group needs to have the authority to make things happen. This group reports directly to management and needs to have clear measurable objectives and progress measures that can be collected on an ongoing basis.

More important than this, we need to have a clear commitment to the change we are trying to implement. This means that both management and the improvement group must clearly and visibly demonstrate that they believe in what they are doing. Tom Peters said: "They watch your feet, not your lips." Equally the improvement team needs to visibly be working at a higher level of maturity/capability than the rest of the organization. How can you persuade the rest of the company to work according to a process, if you have not tried it, used it, and demonstrated its usefulness yourself?

The visibility of the commitment of management and the process people will help people believe in this. The restrictions that are being created are for everyone, not just me. This will help reach the gut.

Who

The team you want to put together is a team that understands their activity. Within the case of process improvement, I am looking for a team that has a good understanding of processes, of the model or technique being used, of the ultimate goal we are trying to achieve; they also need to grasp specific activities such as process modelling. These are not people who understand the contents of the processes they need to implement: their job is to listen and standardize, they need to openly admit that are not requirements or estimating or architecture or testing specialists, they have to acknowledge their incompetence. Then, they will be ready to listen to the experts, the people who are doing

the work and focus on modelling their activities, building up the training, standardizing the templates, etc.

Using the staff to help the improvement group model what they do, using the best practices as they already exist, is key to getting the people on board and supporting you. They now understand that you are using their experience to improve the organization rather than sitting in your ivory tower to tell experienced and competent engineers how to do their work. Focus on the opinion leaders, the people who are respected by their peers. Identify the areas of resistance. Winning over a resistant opinion-leader will greatly facilitate your efforts.

When

The improvement activities can start as soon as everyone understands what and why; all we need is a plan that will say who and when.

Conclusion

If you are embarking on a major and very expensive change, make sure you think very carefully before you jump. Changing the culture is not easy, and if it does not come from the top, if it is not framed in a clear and coherent strategy, it will not work.

The mind will be won over by understanding why we need to change, the heart will be reached by seeing that this is good for me, the gut will be won over if I can see it working for management and the process people.