

H4 Consulting Brief

Sedimentary Culture

Organisational culture is a product of people working together over time. Every individual's behaviour will both change, and be changed by, culture. Cultural norms established long ago are passed on to new team members, becoming stronger and more resistant to change. New cultural norms can gradually shift the whole organisation. Organisational goals alone, however, are rarely strong enough to penetrate deep layers of sedimentary culture.

Publicly funded organisations tend to have long lives and a high proportion of long-serving workers. This means that many different people contribute to the culture over many years, reinforcing some norms until they are deeply embedded and introducing new norms only slowly.

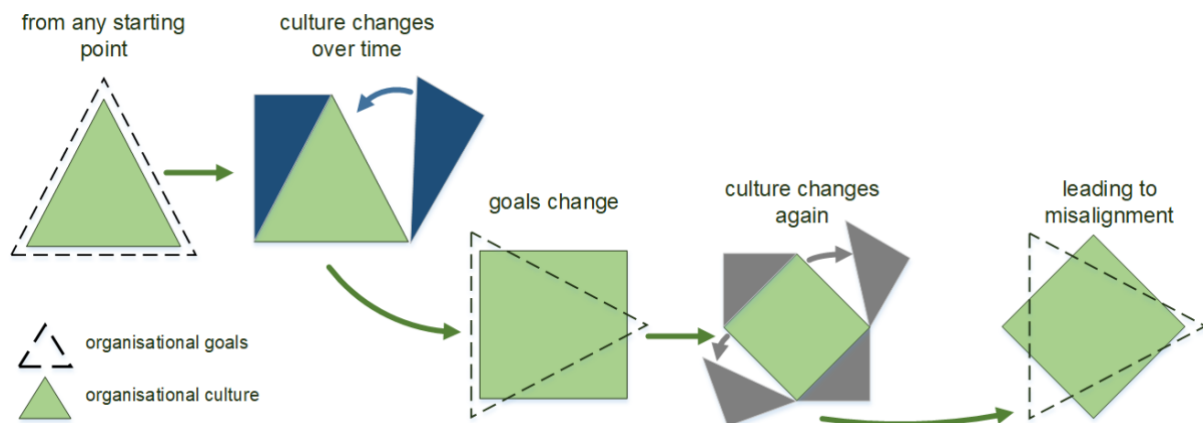
Community and political expectations tend to change more quickly than organisational culture, so culture gradually becomes misaligned with goals. Even a culture that was well-suited to organisational goals at a point in time may not keep pace with important changes, or may shift in a different direction.

Organisations rarely analyse the mix of formal and informal cultural cues for workers. These can be difficult to shift over time, especially across teams.

Misalignment between organisational goals and culture impedes delivery, and is frustrating and confusing for workers. Long-standing employees may feel alienated from an organisation they thought they understood, and new workers may be confused by inconsistent messages from peers and management.

This can create friction between colleagues, as some parts of the organisation adapt to new expectations more quickly than others. Factions with competing norms can make effective collaboration more difficult.

Hardened norms can be difficult to change. Even clearly communicated organisational goals and values can be rejected, or unconsciously reinterpreted, to defend cultural norms that have become a barrier to public value.



Organisational culture cannot be expected to spontaneously align, or re-align, with organisational goals. Leaders and managers need to proactively assess and influence both formal and informal signals of cultural norms to prevent misaligned norms from hardening to change and becoming a barrier.

Assessing culture includes analysing formal cues, like strategies, policies, role statements, and KPIs, and informal cues such as how people dress, speak, work, and relate to each other day-to-day. A formal dress code is less persuasive for most workers than observing what colleagues wear to work.

Influencing culture means shifting the organisation's centre of gravity to better suit its goals, guiding worker behaviour, and reinforcing desired cultural norms.

Analysing and influencing the formal and informal cues that shape organisational culture takes effort. Better alignment of goals and culture will, however, improve clarity and satisfaction for workers, and public value.

Adopting and reinforcing formal and informal cultural cues that are consistent with organisational goals also helps to reduce friction between management and workers, and between colleagues who adapt to changes in organisational goals at different rates.

An organisation that can understand, and actively influence, its culture is better able to deliver its current goals and meet changing expectations. Gradually shaping organisational culture is more efficient, more effective, and less disruptive than trying to break through deep, calcified layers of sedimentary culture.

To find out more about how you can use this approach in your organisation, contact us: info@h4consulting.com.au
Find additional resources at www.h4consulting.com.au/resources