

Illustrates the use of culture surveys as a tool for improving organization performance.

Culture Surveys

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Management Decision, Vol. 30 No. 2, 1992, pp. 22-29,
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Business buzzwords for the 1990s include phrases such as "lean organizations" and "continuous improvement" for good reasons. In the past, companies could survive in spite of cumbersome work processes, ineffective managers, political infighting, and unmotivated workers. In fact, many companies perpetuated cultures that supported these ineffective practices. In today's highly competitive marketplace, however, companies can no longer afford such ineffective use of their human resources. Consequently, many business managers are faced with the challenge of changing the organization culture to support new ways of accomplishing work.

Culture surveys have become an important tool for managers in business and industry. In this article, we explain the advantages of using a culture survey as part of an organization's change effort. In addition, we describe principles for designing, implementing and analysing the data resulting from a culture survey. We conclude with a case study that describes the successful application of these principles in an organization.

Advantages of Culture Surveys

Managers who seek to guide the process of changing organization cultures are generally compelled to gather from employees information about the system and the

culture in which they work. Theorists of organizational change emphasize the importance of compiling this information and communicating it to employees along with the new organizational visions[1]. Culture surveys can make managers' information-gathering and communicating tasks more effective and efficient. Surveys, when used properly, are invaluable in guiding change. Used improperly, surveys can be counterproductive to the change effort.

Information Gathering

Culture surveys can be used to gather information that is not quickly available from other sources. For example, managers who experience problems in their operations often use production reports to get information about the status of an operation. But production reports are insufficient for guiding a culture change effort. They relate such information as the amount of product, labour hours, raw material use and overtime costs. Production reports, although they are useful in identifying production problems, stop short of providing information about employees' perceptions of the larger systems in which they operate and the underlying causes of problems.

Managers who are armed only with the numbers from production reports find themselves in the role of Sherlock Holmes looking for clues. For every problem, the manager must investigate and gather additional information from all the involved parties — a process which can require meeting after meeting after meeting. Then the manager must sift through the gathered information to identify the pieces that fit together and those pieces that distort the truth. Because time is money, the longer it takes the manager to solve a problem, the greater the cost to the organization.

Solving complex problems with multiple causes is even more challenging. During the investigations, the manager may discover that each person uses the language and models from his or her specific areas of expertise to describe the problem. For example, one manager found herself analysing balance-sheets and speaking accounting language with the finance department, studying computer printouts and talking systems language with the computer information department, reviewing standard operating procedures with the engineers, and examining statistical process control charts with the line workers. This manager translated the information derived from each of these perspectives into her framework, identified the solution to the problem, and then appropriately communicated the solution to the involved parties. Such an information-gathering method is time-consuming for the manager, focuses almost totally on the manager's needs, and does little to encourage employees to communicate with one another, let alone work together in solving problems.

This report is based on a co-operative study sponsored by the Institute of Research in Training and Development at the Pennsylvania State University and the Training and Development Research Center at the University of Minnesota.

Culture surveys provide a more effective and efficient approach to information gathering. An organization culture survey consists of a set of written items that require employees to respond in some meaningful way[2]. Every item on a culture survey focuses on an aspect of how work gets done within the organization. Culture surveys also contain items designed to gather specific descriptive information about the individual who is completing the survey. Examples of descriptive items are work group, job title, and shift. Figure 1 provides examples of culture survey items.

Each employee who is selected to participate in the data-collection process completes a copy of the survey by recording a response to each item. In completing the culture survey, each employee translates his or her perceptions about the organization into a common framework provided by the survey items. The information contained in the completed surveys can be summarized quickly and can provide a more complete and more credible view of how the organization's work gets done than can be gained from any single individual.

Summarized survey information is useful in making decisions about where to focus organization efforts and resources. First, a manager could use the summary information to compare a work group's responses related to specific issues. For example, through a survey a manager could discover that 80 per cent of employees on a manufacturing line are satisfied with their jobs, but that 90 per cent are dissatisfied with the availability of parts needed to complete their work. Secondly, a manager could use the summary information to compare the views held by various departments or work groups within the organization. For example, useful information could be gained by comparing the views of line workers about the effectiveness of their training to the views of accountants, managers and salespeople about the effectiveness of their training. Thirdly, a manager could use the summary information to compare the various views of what is happening in the organization with their views of what should be happening. For example, managers who expected employees to rate their organization as a good place to work could check the results to discover whether that is, indeed, the employees' perception.

Managers also can use the results of culture surveys to benchmark organization progress. In benchmarking, the same culture survey administered over time is used to measure changes in employee attitudes. Returning to the earlier example, a manager who found that employee satisfaction levels were lower than expected could take actions to make the organization a better place to work. Then the manager could readminister the culture survey at a later date to measure changes in employee perceptions. Culture surveys can reveal where effort to address problems and opportunities for improvement is needed and areas where no additional effort is needed.

Culture Surveys as a Communication Tool

A culture survey, by its nature, is participatory and highly visible. Management can use a culture survey to communicate its vision of the organization's culture and the performance expectations that operationalize the vision. For example, if management's vision of the organization culture emphasizes employee participation in decision making, items on the culture survey could measure employees' perceptions of their involvement in specific decision-making processes. As another example, if management wanted to change the organization's culture from supporting activity-based training to supporting performance-based training, the culture survey could contain items to measure employees' perceptions of the usefulness of specific training programmes.

A culture survey can produce powerful information about the whole organization and about each of the subgroups that work in the organization. The way management uses the survey information communicates to employees management's role in the organization's culture. The process that is used to design, administer, analyse and report the results of the survey communicates management's philosophy in action. Both managers and employees are interested in the decisions about who participates in the survey, how the data will be analysed, who gets the results and how the information is going to be used. The survey activity itself generates significant attention because those who have responded want to see results. Employees at all levels recognize early in the survey process that the data could be powerful and that "cultural skeletons" could be uncovered.

The initial concerns of management and employees can be addressed by planning the survey process and communicating the expectations to all employees. Following through by implementing the process that was communicated builds trust. For example, the managers of one organization with whom we worked emphasized employee participation as an important performance expectation in the organization's new vision. While planning the survey, we asked the managers how they would use the survey results. The managers realized that they had three choices: they could ignore the survey results and continue to base their decisions on the old vision of top-down management; blame the supervisors for the problems in their departments and threaten to fire them if they did not change, or praise success and help supervisors and employees work together in resolving difficulties. Given the organization's new vision of participation, management decided that only the last choice was satisfactory. In summary, managers can use culture surveys to communicate the new vision of the organization, the performance expectations that operationalize the vision, the management's primary role in implementing the new vision.

Figure 1. Sample Culture Survey Items

CORPORATE CULTURE SURVEY

YOUR JOB CATEGORY (check one)

<p>Salaried Exempt</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Engineer</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Manufacturing</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Material Management (acctg, personnel, gen. admin.)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Salaried Non-Exempt</p>	<p>Hourly Production</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Mills (mills, preassembly)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Finals (framepress, finals)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Doors</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Combos</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Hourly Service (ship/rec, QA, maintenance)</p>
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YOUR OPINIONS (for each sentence give us your opinion — strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree).

SA	A	D	SD	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	1. New people receive good orientation.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	2. When problems occur in my job, I have the freedom to solve them.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	3. Our company's future is very secure.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	4. My supervisor helps me solve problems that occur in my job.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	5. The equipment with which I work is usually in good condition.
				⋮
				⋮
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	59. I think my performance is judged fairly.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	60. Management cares about the wellbeing of employees.

What do you like best about the company?

If you have any comments on any items, place the number of that item below, followed by your comments:

Principles for Using Culture Surveys

The five principles that are useful in successfully implementing a culture survey are set out below.

Analyse the Situation before Developing the Survey

Using this principle includes making decisions early in the process about the survey's purpose, implementor, framework, employees, and final report. Deciding the survey's purpose involves considering the outcome of the process. Managers can use culture surveys to serve a number of purposes including monitoring employee attitudes, providing management with feedback about changes, and helping the organization achieve its business plan. A culture survey, however, is not an appropriate tool for constructing a business plan and should not be used for that purpose.

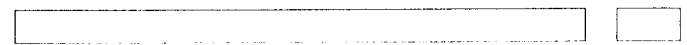
After deciding the purpose of the culture survey, management should determine who will implement the survey. In making the selection, management should identify individuals who have experience in using surveys and questionnaires. Also both management and employees should trust the individuals who are selected to design, administer, analyse and report the culture survey. If external consultants are selected, they should work closely with individuals who are knowledgeable about the organization.

Another decision involves selecting the survey's framework. A survey instrument can be broadly based on a conceptual model of the organization or it can be targeted to the organization's strategic goals. Both options have advantages and disadvantages. A survey instrument based on a conceptual model could contain a great many items and be three pages long. An advantage of such a survey is that it could be used for many years. A disadvantage of a conceptually based instrument is that it could produce contaminated or irrelevant data. For example, the survey could resurrect past issues that are no longer important in the organization and management could start treating these non-issues.

An advantage of using a survey instrument targeted to the organization's strategic goals is that the survey immediately has a purpose related to the organization's bottom line. There is higher accountability for management because the survey items are associated with consequences. A survey instrument containing questions that are meaningful to the employees and management is riskier to implement because "hot buttons" can be revealed. Hot buttons are those unresolved issues that are critical for achieving organization goals. A survey based on the strategic goals can produce useful information about these issues and can also raise expectations that these issues will be resolved. Such a survey is riskier to implement because employee frustration can be heightened if such issues are raised and not resolved. Another disadvantage of a strategy-based instrument is

that it must be updated frequently to reflect the organization's changing strategic plans.

Another analytical decision involves selecting the individuals who will participate in the survey. The choice of employees should reflect earlier decisions about the purpose of the survey and the information to be gathered. In some instances, it may be better to survey every one of the organization's employees; in other instances, it may be better to select a sample of employees.



Managers will have unexpressed and conflicting expectations

During the process of analysing the situation, some key decisions are made that affect the final report. Often the various managers within an organization will have unexpressed and conflicting assumptions and expectations about how the results of a culture survey will be reported. Therefore, prior to designing a survey, management should reach consensus on the following issues. What kinds of information must be included in the final report if it is to achieve its purpose? Will the entire report or a summary of the report be distributed to employees? Will the report be given to all employees, to those who participated in the survey, or only to management? Will individual responses be kept confidential and only grouped information reported? How will the report be distributed? Will there be follow-up actions? Answering these questions early in the process avoids later misunderstandings.

Design the Survey Instrument to Collect Specific Information

This principle focuses on the data-gathering instrument. A culture survey instrument will produce useful information only if the items on the instrument relate to the purpose of the survey and if each item is clearly understood by all those who complete the survey.

One design decision involves choosing the types of items that will be used on the survey instrument — forced-choice items, open-ended items or both. Forced-choice items require the individual to make a specific type of response such as marking yes or no, placing a checkmark in a box or on a scale, or writing a word in a space [2]. Responses to these items can be coded quickly, and the resulting data can be grouped for analysis. Open-ended items, on the other hand, allow employees to respond in their own words. These items prevent employees from becoming frustrated if the survey instrument limits their responses.

A disadvantage of open-ended items is that more time and more sophisticated skills are needed to group and analyse the responses. A culture survey can include both forced-choice and open-ended types of items. For example, a culture survey consisting of 50 forced-choice items can contain space for employees who wish to comment on their forced-choice answers.

Another design decision involves determining the number of items on the survey instrument. Multiple items are required to examine all the aspects of complex organization issues, such as supervisor effectiveness, work efficiency, or training and development usefulness. At the same time, employees should be able to complete the instrument within a reasonable length of time.



The random order encourages careful reading of every item

Designing the survey instrument also involves writing individual items that will elicit the desired information. Each item should be written as a short sentence that contains a single thought. Items should be written at the reading level that is appropriate for those who will complete the survey. Employees are unlikely to record accurately their perceptions on items that contain words and phrases they do not understand or cannot read.

The items should be placed on the survey instrument in a random order. That is items related to an issue should not be grouped together. The random order encourages careful reading of every item. Pilot testing the survey before it is implemented helps to ensure that employees will understand each item. Individuals with the same characteristics as those who will complete the survey should participate in the pilot test.

In summary, there are a number of issues to consider in designing a culture survey so that it will produce useful information and, at the same time, will be easy to implement and analyse. A good source for additional information on constructing culture surveys is a report entitled *Construction and Analysis of Organization Climate Surveys*[3].

Administer the Survey Consistently

Decisions must be made about where, when and how the survey will be administered. Will employees complete the survey during work time or before or after their scheduled work shifts? Where will they complete the survey: at the work site, in the lunch room, or at home? What will they

do with their completed surveys? If individual confidentiality is to be maintained, will the completed survey be mailed directly to external consultants or placed in a sealed envelope? The process that will be used to administer the culture survey should be described to all employees, and the survey should be implemented as described. Consistency between what is said and what is done is a key to success in administering a culture survey.

Take Care Not to Over-react to the Data

The goal of data analysis is to understand the meaning of the information that was gathered through the survey. Put another way, the goal is to view the survey data in ways that provide management and employees with useful information. A major challenge with data analysis is to avoid either over-interpreting or over-reacting to the results.

One way to improve the data analysis is to make decisions about the practical significance and the data interpretation levels before implementing the survey, and then to summarize the data based on these decisions. For example, it is important to decide before looking at the data how much change in before-and-after data will constitute a gain.

Another way to improve the data analysis is to have at least two people involved in the process. Double-checking assumptions and perceptions increases the validity of the results. Double-checking is especially important when comparing open-ended responses with forced-choice responses. Every comment provides an inherently more powerful and, at the same time, more limited view of the organization than the corresponding forced-choice response.



The way that information is presented can influence what is highlighted

The way results are presented is also important. Some of the results will be highlighted. The way that information is presented can influence what is highlighted. One challenge at this point is to keep management from over-reacting. The best option is to highlight a few key results related to the purpose of the survey. Telling management that the data from the initial survey provide baseline information and show where improvements are possible helps prevent their over-reaction. It is also useful to communicate to management the fact that the data relate to their actions and to other events over which they have no control.

Act on the Results of the Survey

The narrow purpose of the culture survey is to gather reliable and valid employee perceptions of the organization culture. This purpose can be accomplished without sharing the data or without taking any meaningful actions in improving conditions.

The broader purpose of the culture survey is to use survey results to improve the organization's performance. For this broader purpose to be achieved, the data must be shared with all employees. Problem areas must be openly and honestly discussed in a non-threatening environment, solutions to problems must be proposed, and actions must be taken.

The Principles in Action: A Case Study

The following case describes how we used the above principles to design, implement, and analyse a culture survey in a Wisconsin organization. The AMSCO Division of Nichols, HomeShield Corporation used a culture survey process to provide a better working environment for its 240 employees and, at the same time, to increase productivity. AMSCO, which is located in Rice Lake, Wisconsin, is the sole supplier of door and window screens to a larger manufacturing organization. In 1988, managers at AMSCO realized that producing a high quality product would be a key to retaining their major customer. They also realized that any increased emphasis on a high quality product would require changes in the division's culture. In the past, as with most American firms, AMSCO's management had "managed by numbers"; in the future, they would be managing for product quality and continuous improvement. The management made plans for implementing quality improvement projects that would change their organization culture and the fundamental way that work was accomplished. They would expect employees at all levels within the division to learn:

- a new language of work;
- new work methods;
- new ways to document the work;
- ways to work together in groups;
- a new level of responsibility and ownership;
- how to solve problems.

Because the management viewed this culture change as critical to the division's very survival, they designed and implemented a series of culture surveys over time to help guide and monitor the changes. The following sections describe the process and the results of implementing the initial and subsequent surveys.

Planning the Survey

Management at AMSCO decided to monitor the changes in the division's culture over time by administering a

culture survey every six months. Specifically, they planned to use the information from the culture survey to:

- chart changes against expectations;
- identify employee concerns that were not being adequately addressed during the change process;
- identify problem areas that would benefit the most from additional attention.

After identifying the purpose of the project, the management elected to employ external consultants to implement the survey. Their reasons for taking this step were as follows. First, the organization did not employ anyone who was experienced and skilled in implementing culture surveys. Secondly, there was a low level of trust between management and employees within the division. External consultants were perceived by management and employees to be more knowledgeable about the survey process, to have a lesser stake in the outcome, and to be more trustworthy. The organization's personnel and training managers contracted with the authors to implement the survey project. The authors, the personnel manager, and the training manager comprised a four-person survey team who worked together to determine the design framework, to select the survey employees, and to make decisions about the final report.

The major concern in determining the framework for the survey was that it should produce meaningful data related to current goals and to management's new vision of the organization's culture. Consequently, the four-person team selected the organization's strategic plan as the basis for the culture survey. The team decided that the culture survey should measure the following dimensions: job evaluation/job satisfaction; work efficiency; training and development; communication; management effectiveness, and view of the organization.



**Management was serious
about the new
vision**

The team decided to use the culture survey to communicate to all employees that management was serious about the new vision and would be monitoring changes related to the vision. Therefore they decided that every employee within the division should complete a copy of the survey. The team also decided to maintain individual confidentiality by asking all employees to place their completed surveys in sealed envelopes. The sealed envelopes were gathered together and mailed directly to the external consultants. The consultants used work-group classifications in summarizing, analysing and reporting the data from the completed surveys.

The team decided to provide each manager with a full copy of the report and each employee with a two-page summary of the report. The team also decided to make the full copy of the report available to all employees. This reporting decision helped to build trust within the division. In the past, employees had been asked to participate in various activities, but had not seen any data or any results from their participation. Making the reports available communicated to the employees management's role in implementing the new vision — first, by making information available and, secondly, by committing to follow-up action.

Designing the Survey

Designing the survey instrument to collect the desired information required using both forced-choice and open-ended items. Figure 1 shows a sample of both types of items and the layout of the survey. An important design decision was to limit the size of the survey to two sides of one legal size page (60 items). This was expected to reduce instrument intimidation and to allow employees to complete the survey in 20 minutes or less. The items on the survey addressed the six cultural dimensions relevant to the organization's strategic plan.

The survey was pilot-tested with a small group of employees from another firm and then with a four-person group of AMSCO employees. The pilot test revealed that some items needed to be revised because they contained words or phrases that were not clearly understood. The pilot test also revealed that it took on average only ten minutes to complete the survey.

Administering the Survey

The survey team decided to use the organization cafeteria as the site for completing the survey. The personnel manager and the training manager administered the survey over a two-day period to small groups of employees. Employees completed the survey during their work hours.

Before distributing the surveys to each group of employees, the personnel manager informed the group that a 30-minute period was available to complete the survey. Employees were instructed to put their completed survey in envelopes, and then to place the sealed envelopes in the box at the front of the room. They were informed that the box would be mailed directly to the external consultants, who would analyse the data and report the results in ten days.

Reacting to the Data

The external consultants analysed the data using the practical significance and data interpretation levels that had been previously determined. They combined the forced-

choice data using the computer and statistics software. The forced-choice items relating to each culture dimension were grouped and presented in graph form by culture dimensions and by organization work groups. The consultants also summarized the written comments and grouped them by item. They checked one another's assumptions and perceptions about the data and determined the key results related to the purpose of the survey. To control for over-reaction on the part of organization employees, the consultants carefully reported the results in written and in verbal presentations.

Results for the Organization

The culture survey was administered every six months during an 18-month period. The first survey provided baseline information. The results from this survey were reported to management first. The consultants identified the key issues related to the purpose of the survey and suggested specific changes that management could make to facilitate the change process. Management thoroughly examined the report and asked survey team members a number of questions. After management had thoroughly reviewed the information, the survey team provided each employee in the organization with a copy of a one-page, double-sided summary of the report. Copies of the entire report were placed in the lunch room, in the personnel office and by the water-fountains.

Sharing the results of the survey with all employees was important

Sharing the results of the survey with all the division's employees was important. Employees were curious about the findings and wanted to see if their confidentiality had been maintained. When employees discovered that their responses had been accurately reported and that confidentiality had been maintained, they began to trust the culture-survey process. Then management held communications meetings with each work group to talk about the organization and about the survey findings and what changes would be forthcoming. Employees were curious and not quite certain that they could trust management to carry out the changes. Many of the employees stated that they were pleased with the culture survey process.

When the second survey was implemented six months later, the employees apparently trusted the survey process. They used the survey as a tool for communicating their concerns to management. The surveys reported attitudes that had never before been publicly aired in the

organization. The results of the second survey indicated that the person who had originally championed the culture survey had experienced significant difficulties in implementing the changes needed to move in the direction of the new vision.

When management examined the report from this survey, they were surprised at the intensity of the employees' feelings and at the specificity of their concerns. The plant manager commented: "We were devastated with the results. The message was that we were inefficient and not very nice people. We thought we were going along okay and making some changes and Wham! It is clear that the employees don't think we're going along okay."

The culture survey results caused management to look very closely at the organization and to re-examine their vision. They decided that they needed to focus on quality, to be a participative organization and to execute an open-door policy. As a result of the survey, management made a number of decisions and held communications meetings to share these decisions with the employees in each work group. Management decided to implement the following action plan:

- changing the structure of the workforce;
- insisting that managers and supervisors work participatively with employees;
- revamping the process for awarding jobs so that assignments would be based on the individual's fact file rather than a manager's whims;
- taking longer when talking with employees to share management's point of view;
- instituting owner-operator training so operators could shut down their machines when there was a problem;
- eliminating levels of management so that employees could more easily talk to the top managers.

By the time the third survey was implemented, management had begun to see a change in the way work was done within the division. Employees were contributing

towards product quality, quality had become important throughout the division, and management was no longer "the enemy". The culture survey had forced management to listen to employees; their listening began to pay off in increased employee satisfaction and increased productivity. Management felt that they had not got far, but that they had turned the ship around. When management held communications meetings to share the results, employees genuinely looked forward to attending the meetings. At this time, management decided to post comments on the culture survey item "What we like best about the organization" in the lunch room.

Summary

This article has focused on the culture survey as a tool that managers can use in guiding organization culture changes. We presented the advantages of using culture surveys, and the principles for using the surveys. We also described how a series of culture surveys was successfully implemented in one organization to guide the change process. At AMSCO, using the culture survey process resulted in increased productivity and an improved work environment. One year after the third culture survey we asked the plant manager, "Was it worth it?" He replied, "Without a doubt, it changed AMSCO — it's a better and more productive place to work". After three surveys and a great deal of day-to-day effort by AMSCO employees at all levels, the organization has fundamentally improved.

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Application Questions

- (1) Do other employees see the firm the way you see it?
- (2) Will your organization face major culture changes in the future?
- (3) What tools do your managers have available to guide the change process?