effective environments

designing innovative solutions for success

Designing a Culture of Excellence

Introduction. A powerful way to affect a breakthrough in organizational effectiveness is to design and work in a culture of excellence. A "culture of excellence" is, by definition, out of the ordinary. Creating such a culture requires a vision of what is possible, a plan to set it in motion, and the practices to generate it on an ongoing basis.

What do we mean by "culture?" Organizational culture is our working environment. It directly affects our ability to be productive, our sense of accomplishment and even our quality of life. *Culture is a function of the articulated values of our organization and how effectively those values are expressed in day-to-day operations.* It includes our organization's world view, how people communicate with one another, use of ceremonies, traditions and daily work practices, how problems are resolved and how success is measured and acknowledged.

Every organization has a culture, whether it has been deliberately designed or left to chance. We don't decide whether to have a culture -- but we CAN choose whether to take a hand in shaping our organizational culture. We begin by declaring what the qualities of the culture we're shaping will be.

What do we mean by a "culture of excellence?" We mean an organization-wide way of thinking and working that leads to a sense of "aliveness" in everyone in the organization. A culture of excellence is a conspiracy to excel, a commitment to *be* excellent. "Excellence" is way of *being* and thinking rather than a destination.   Excellence is never handled. It requires ongoing invention and creation. Working daily from "being excellent" has an impact on how people interact with each other, on how the work is carried out, and on their sense of personal satisfaction.

A culture of excellence is not a set of rules to follow. Instead, a culture of excellence is a choice, derived and manifested as a commitment to go beyond the ordinary. It requires recognizing the importance of each individual and a willingness to step outside our "comfort zones." Fundamentally, a culture of excellence is based in an organization-wide sense of striving rather than settling, and of enjoying the journey.

What are the qualities and characteristics of a culture of excellence? It's an environment where people are called upon to contribute to each other and to the success of the organization. There is a sense of team and ownership, of being a stakeholder.

The factors that promote such an environment include:

- Shared vision, goals and practices

- Commitment to excellence in fulfillment of the vision and mission

- Mutual support by staff for each orher's success

- Clearly stated and aligned on principles and agreements for working togehter

- Encouragement of innovation and creativity

- Emphasis on communication up and down the line

- Emphasis on training and development of staff

- Individual performance objectives set jointly by management and staff

- Commitment-based communications and interactions.

One aspect that distinguishes a culture of excellence from another kind of culture is management philosophy. The focus is more on managing commitments, goals and results than on managing process or personalities. There are high standards of performance at all levels and people are held to account for meeting them.

A culture of excellence emphasizes standards and results/outcomes, as well as staff development, self expression, contribution and satisfaction. Managers find the right spot for the right person. The work environment brings out the best in people. Employees strive for their personal best. Mediocrity is not tolerated.

There isn't a single culture of excellence.
There isn't just one way it can look. Remember, a culture of excellence is, fundamentally, a philosophy, a way of *being*, marked by a spirit of commitment to excellence in the fulfillment of the organization's vision and mission.

The nature of the organization has an impact on what a culture of excellence means, or looks like, and how it is developed. We wouldn't expect the features of a culture of excellence in General Motors to be the same as in The United Way, for example. *"Culture of excellence" in each case means finding the most effective and satisfying way to fulfill on the organization's vision and mission.*

Moreover, as our organization changes over time, so will our culture of excellence. A commitment to excellence demands ongoing creation.

Here's the bonus: Fostering a culture of excellence allows organizations to be forward-looking and anticipating, rather than reacting.

Why design a culture of excellence? The reason is simple: A culture of excellence shapes the organization. If we don't design the culture, we may not like what we get. If we don't make conscious choices about the culture of our organization, we stand to inherit "the way it has always been." In the ordinary course, our customary thoughts, behaviors, interactions with others, and work practices will probably get us by; however, they may include sloppy habits and even practices that are counterproductive and detrimental.

For example, we may communicate with co-workers absent-mindedly, neglect to convey important information, or seem rude. Similarly, we may accept a substandard work product -- even though it does not represent the commitment of the organization or our own commitment to excellence -- because that is the path of least resistance. In short, unless we intervene in the natural drift of events, our organizational culture may fall short of supporting us.

In a designed culture, we are more likely to generate cohesion and unity among our entire staff. In turn, this experience allows the staff to form and reform into different teams without significant interim delays and to work with heightened velocity and satisfaction to get the job done.

Companies that have cultivated their individual identities by shaping values, making heroes, spelling out rites and rituals and acknowledging the cultural network have an edge.

Terrance Deal &
Allen Kennedy,
The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life

What are the requirements for inventing a culture of excellence? *1. Be willing to change.* It may seem risky to think about

fashioning a new culture. The process requires a willingness to let go of the past and to invent a future not based solely on history. Uncertainty is a natural part of this process. Even if we can clearly envision the kind of culture we intend to invent, we may not know what we need in order to get there.

If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you always got. You can be assured that inventing a culture of excellence will mean being willing to change. In addition to the practices and systems you may be implementing, you may also find that you have to sacrifice behaviors that are inconsistent with what you are creating.

In the process of trying something new, there may be practices to incorporate and practices to delete. Be aware of what you may have to surrender to have a culture of excellence. Among other things, you may have to give up statements and ways of thinking such as:

- "We've always done it that way" or
- "That will never work."

You may also give up "fixing the blame" rather than fixing the problem.

2. Make It a Priority. Designing a culture of excellence begins with an organization-wide commitment to the process and to the outcome. This commitment comes when we can see a direct connection between devising and working in a culture of excellence and achieving the mission, goals and objectives of the organization. The move to a new culture demands that we clearly define the benefits, or the return on investment, of engaging in the work of designing it.

3. Involve Everyone. The process involves everyone -- not just part of the organization. Be willing to invest the time and resources both to fashion the culture and to keep everyone informed. Success depends on providing paths for input and for feedback.

4. Apply Excellence to Every Part of Your Organization. Remember, inventing a culture of

excellence involves identifying what excellence means in your organization and then choosing how to foster that in day-to-day action. Ultimately, a culture of excellence refers to everything from the way people think and about the organization and their colleagues to the rules for working together and the practices everyone uses to "be excellent" and to do the work of the organization.

What is the process? Designing a culture of excellence begins when staff and management, working together, articulate a shared vision for a new culture and define its qualities.

Key questions to ask include:

- What are the values that define our organization?

- What difference will the "new" culture make? How will it contribute to the success of our staff and our organization?

- What will be the qualities, or hallmarks, for *this* organization?

- How will we know when we've succeeded in establishing a culture of excellence?

There are no "right" answers. However, the responses you are after will be inspiring and will ring true.

For example, our clients have identified such measures as "We resolve conflicts quickly and in a spirit of partnership," "Every piece of correspondence that goes out of our office is impeccable," and "We can count on each other to do what we said we would do, WHEN we said we would do it."

Create a team of people drawn from every area or department the organization, with one person accountable for managing the process and the team. The team's function is both to design the

culture and to be catalysts and champions of change.   They are the ones to:

- Clearly articulate the results of the process and why it matters

- Identify the practices to put in place to support those results

- Define how people will work together to make those practices a part of the culture

- Establish how you will evaluate progress and make necessary changes

- Design a process for ongoing inquiry and creation of the culture.

Generally, the qualities of the culture are not hard to define. Once people see a commitment to change, then ideas about what is wanted will be communicated. Begin by brainstorming about what you might invent. The brainstorming list likely will include:

- Qualities (nouns) such as "integrity," "honesty," or "responsibility,"

- Qualities (adjectives) such as "impeccable," "clean" or "effective,"

- Practices such as "regular proofreading," "resolve fights fast" or "no gossip,"

- Desired results, such as "we won't settle for mediocrity," "we will meet deadlines," or "we will work in partnership, seamlessly."

It is important to distinguish the desired outcome from the ways to achieve it. Often, people are afraid to dream for fear that what they dream may be impossible.   Allow your staff to imagine that all is possible, and invite them to dream as big as they can.

Once there is alignment on the qualities of the culture to be invented, it is time to look at the practices that would support its creation.

Practices that Foster a Culture of Excellence. Specific practices may seem mundane after lofty discussions of the culture of excellence you are creating. Nevertheless, it is often in "the little things" that great shifts are effected. Ultimately the practices that make a lasting difference in the culture of an organization fall into three categories:

1. Those that generate alignment, partnership and a powerful place to stand,

2. Those that foster effective communication, and

3. Those that maintain an environment of experimentation, creation and invention.

A Place to Stand

Identify, articulate and publish widely your creed of commitment -- the "mega-principles" or statements of context that foster the culture you are inventing. Such principles could include, for example:

- "Check your ego at the door."

- "Our shared commitment and partnership are the starting points for every discussion," or

- "There's always a way through. Our job is to discover together what it is, and then implement it!"

Your "ground of being" or mega-principles are of vital importance. When you stand in shared commitment, vision, partnership and mutual trust, any issue can be resolved, and anything is possible!

Effective Communication

Excellent outcomes are rarely achieved without full communication by those involved. Practices that encourage open communication make a dramatic difference in our ability to fulfill on project results, meet deadlines and empower

teams. Possible communication practices include:

• Make a point of communicating information to *everyone* who would be empowered to know it. [One fund development team we worked with was surprised to realize that the CEO wanted to receive their weekly and monthly pledge reports!]

• When you promise to do something, agree on when it is due. This provides certainty to both parties.

•Once you have completed something that you promised to do, report back to the person you promised. This practice "closes the loop" and allows both parties to stop thinking about it.

• Be responsible for results you have promised. Hold yourself accountable for, or in charge of, ensuring that those results are produced. Don't assume something is being handled: Follow up -- even if you think you shouldn't have to. Never delete an action from your personal list of "things to do" until it has been fully completed (and the completion has been communicated to whoever needs to know it) OR until the accountability has squarely landed with (and been accepted by) someone else.

• Be responsible for what you say. Words have an important effect for good or ill. Adopt practices (individually and as a group) that recognize this phenomenon and reflect your commitment to build a culture of excellence. For example:

˜ Cultivate opportunities to celebrate and acknowledge accomplishments

˜ Eliminate gossip and complaining

˜ Seek solutions to problems, rather than ways to lay blame.

Maintain an Inventive Environment: Keep the Commitment Alive!

What you are inventing will require ongoing attention. It will be a dynamic process, requiring periodic "tuning." The practices that will make a difference here are:

1. Ensure that everyone knows the mission, goals and ground of being: Include references to the commitment to a culture of excellence in staff meetings and in your orientation of new employees.

2. Encourage dialogue and inquiry about what will make the difference in inventing the new culture. Be sure that everyone is included. It is key that senior management be an integral part of the process, and that -- from the President to the mail clerk -- all employees are engaged in creating a culture of excellence.

3. Establish accountability within your organization for managing the process of creating the new culture. Appoint one or more people as your "culture champions" whose responsibility it is to generate opportunities for:

• regular evaluation of progress
• acknowledgment of accomplishment
• identification of what's needed NOW, and
• adding correction to the process.

Your culture champions will also be accountable for involving everyone, serving as a repository for ideas and operating as the hub of an organization-wide conspiracy of excellence.

A final note. Throughout this process, a single ingredient will be key to your success: Hold your vision intact and use every circumstance as an opportunity for learning.
Be sure to capture and acknowledge the difference in your organization's productivity and effectiveness -- and in the aliveness and engagement of the people who work there -- as you invent and work within a culture of excellence.