Chapter 3
Culture: Leadership Principles for Building Healthy and Productive Distributed Teams

Mark A. Rennaker
Indiana Wesleyan University, USA & South University, USA

Dan Novak
South University, USA

ABSTRACT

Culture represents a pattern of beliefs, values, assumptions, and behaviors that both develops and persists over time within a social unit. Cultural patterns might be observed at multiple levels including beliefs or assumptions (Schein, 2004), multiple layers including corporate or global (Marquardt & Engel, 1993), multiple factors including religion and family (Marquardt & Engel, 1993), and multiple dimensions including power-distance and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2001). The multiple locations and individual cultures represented by distributed team members suggests that creation and enhancement of culture by distributed team leaders is more complex than in face-to-face teams. Culture-building tools available to leaders include primary embedding mechanisms such as what leaders pay attention to and who leaders recruit, along with secondary embedding mechanisms including philosophies and creeds (Schein, 2004).

INTRODUCTION

Schein (2004) began his work on culture by stating, “If we understand the dynamics of culture, we will be less likely to be puzzled, irritated, and anxious when we encounter the unfamiliar and seemingly irrational behavior of people in organizations” (p. 10). Given that culture appears to be an ever-present phenomenon (Schein, 2004), considering culture within the context of the growing use of distributed teams in organizations seems an important topic of study on our way to
reducing puzzlement and anxiety with regard to distributed team leadership. Distributed teams are comprised of individual members who work at multiple locations to accomplish team goals. For the purposes of this chapter, the terms distributed teams and virtual teams will be used interchangeably. A key question that emerges when culture is conceptually intersected with distributed teams is what are the leadership attitudes, attributes, and actions in a distributed or virtual environment that stimulate a healthy and productive culture?

Three objectives exist for this chapter. First, a general background of the important themes and constructs in organizational culture will be discussed. Second, implications for distributed team leadership will be derived from the culture discussion, including some of the main issues and possible solutions or recommendations. Although the key question ponders the identity of leadership attitudes, attributes, and actions to stimulate culture in the distributed context, the focus will be upon the general principles existing in the cultural literature that should guide the development of leadership attitudes, attributes, and actions rather than a mere checklist of leader activity. Greenleaf (1977) observed, “Leadership…is so ‘situational’ that it rarely draws on known models. Rather, it seems to be a fresh creative response to here and now opportunities. Too much concern with how others did it may be inhibitive” (p. 34). As each distributed team is likely to be contextually specific, knowledge of general principles guiding activity might be more valuable than a list of specific actions. Finally, the chapter will address some of the future research directions that should be considered relative to culture and distributed teams.

**BACKGROUND**

**Definition and Description of Culture**

The term culture derives from a Latin etymology (i.e., cultura stemming from cultus) and suggests the agrarian idea of cultivation or tillage. As an agricultural term arising in Middle English in the 15th century, culture primarily referred to the growing, training, and development of plants. By the 19th century, usage of the term evolved to include the personal enhancement of an individual through education and other developmental activities. In the 20th century, anthropologists began utilizing the term to describe the human capacity to use symbols to classify experiences and to reference the local, common classification of experiences by people groups living in different locations around the world.

Relative to organizations and teams, it is the anthropological usage of the term that seems most relevant. Accordingly, the Merriam-Webster (2010) dictionary defines culture as the integrated and shared pattern of human attitudes, knowledge, beliefs, values, goals, conventions, behaviors, and practices of some type of social group that depends upon the processes of learning and transmission to succeeding generations for propagation (para. 6). In essence, humans have the capacity to develop and function within shared patterns of thinking and acting.

Similar to the dictionary definition of culture, Schein (2004) offered one of the most widely embraced conceptualizations within the organizational literature. He defined culture as:

*A pattern of basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems* (p. 17).