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 interchange-
ably. 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

...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,
seems to be a fresh creative response to here
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 guid-
ing 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 ag-
gricultural 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 organi-
zational 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).
Accountability to a Servant Leader and OCB: The Role of Follower Integrity
Wallace A. Williams Jr., Christopher Thomas, Anthony P. Ammeter, Mario Hayek and Milorad M. Novicevic (2014). Servant Leadership: Research and Practice (pp. 1-23).
www.igi-global.com/chapter/accountability-to-a-servant-leader-and-ocb/106102?camid=4v1a