# Uncovering Organizational Culture: A Necessary Skill for Athletic Trainers

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The athletic training literature has advocated development of a healthy culture in the clinic, industrial, and corporate practice settings.[1] Although important, these are not the only settings where athletic trainers practice. Every athletic training practice setting will have a culture, and learning the culture in any setting is important.

When joining a new organization, the athletic trainer will have to learn its culture in order to succeed, regardless of whether he or she will be assuming a subordinate role or a leadership role. This learning process, generally referred to as the socialization process, is important to athletic training[2]; however, the process can be more or less an unconscious act.[2] Consequently, individuals can acquire organizational and professional values without fully understanding the basis for the values or why they are necessary.

The purpose of this report is to relate the importance of recognizing and understanding organizational culture. Athletic trainers need to understand the socialization process and should be actively engaged in the assumptions that guide the organization's activities. Awareness of organizational culture will prepare athletic trainers to influence change within the practice setting.

## Defining Organizational Culture

Organizational culture has been defined a number of ways in the literature.[3] Organizational culture can be simply defined as the combination of knowledge, beliefs, values, behaviors, and practices that influence the manner in which members of a group think and act. Although groups within an organization may generate their own subculture, this report will focus on the culture of the larger organization. Among the various definitions of organizational culture that appear in the literature, the definition provided by Schein[4] has gained widespread acceptance in the areas of organizational leadership and change. Schein defined organizational culture as follows:

> A pattern of shared 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.

## KEY POINTS

▶ Organizational culture influences how to perceive, think, and feel.

▶ Professional socialization teaches culture to new members.

▶ Organizational culture consists of artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic underlying assumptions.

▶ Deciphering organizational culture requires honest and open dialogue.

▶ Athletic training needs to explore the culture of the profession.

Schein conceptualized organizational culture as existing on three levels, with the essence of organizational culture represented on its deepest level by basic underlying assumptions (Figure 1).[4] An advantage of Schein's definition is that it identifies the socialization process, while acknowledging that the process involves a much deeper level of communication than most individuals usually perceive. The socialization process clearly conveys characteristics of the organizational climate, but it does not always reveal the underlying culture that has created the organization's climate. A distinction should be made between organizational climate and organizational culture. Another advantage of Schein's definition is that it recognizes the importance of the socialization process in communicating assumptions that are accepted by members of the organization.
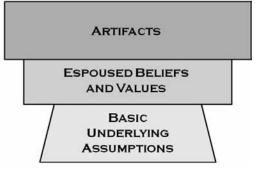


Figure 1    Levels of organizational culture.

## Importance of Uncovering Organizational Culture

One of the most basic reasons for analysis of organizational culture is to successfully produce change. Before individuals who are in leadership positions can effect change, they must first understand what organizational members currently know, believe, and value.[5] As subordinates come to an understanding of the beliefs and values driving the decisions made by leadership, they are better equipped to understand leadership decisions and the reasons for change. Furthermore, subordinates will be more capable of effectively communicating perceptions about the outcomes of leadership decisions.

Schein[5] suggested that most occupational communication failures are the result of intercultural factors. This concept is particularly important to an athletic trainer because he or she is often a central figure in the delivery of care to patients. An athletic trainer communicates a plan of care for an injured athlete to coaches,

administrators, and other health care professionals, each of whom are influenced by different organizational and professional beliefs and values. Developing a better understanding of the beliefs and values held by other individuals who are associated with the care process will facilitate effective communication.

Another reason to understand organizational culture is to help the organization adjust to its external environment. Although Schein[5] emphasized the effect of technology on organizations, no organization is fully insulated from the external environment.[6] Two key traits of successful companies identified by de Gues[7] are (a) awareness of their identity and (b) tolerance for new ideas that will expand knowledge and understanding.

Although the observations of de Gues specifically referred to organizations, Schein[4] acknowledged that occupations have cultures, just like organizations. Therefore, an occupation that wants to succeed must also have an understanding of its culture and must be open to changes that are necessary to adjust to the external environment. The growing influence of evidence-based medicine in healthcare is forcing athletic trainers to develop processes for reflecting on their beliefs and values so that they are more open to changing past practices that are not supported by evidence.

In summary, developing an understanding of the dynamics of an organization's culture can help reduce the confusion and anxiety one experiences when presented with seemingly irrational behaviors from other groups within the organization, the organization's leadership, and/or groups with similar interests outside the organization.[4] An individual who identifies with
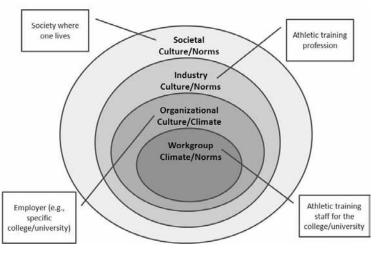


Figure 2    Contextual impacts on organizational culture.

multiple cultural levels may experience internal turmoil (Figure 2; T.D. Kane, written communication, April, 2009), and the emotions aroused by conflict may generate feelings of mistrust and animosity among related groups. Negative emotions and conflicting cultures may cause individuals to generate differing interpretations of laws, ethical guidelines, organizational policies, and professional priorities (e.g., the common misperception that athletic trainers are not highly trained health care professionals). If subsequent events reinforce these differing perceptions and interpretations, they can become ingrained in the group's culture and will be taught to new members through the socialization process, which will perpetuate negative attitudes.

## Analyzing Organizational Culture

Schein's concept of organizational culture provides a process for uncovering characteristics that may be somewhat hidden and complex.[4] This discovery process is most effective when each member of the organization is fully committed to it. Although the discovery process may reveal much about an organization's culture, a complete understanding may never be realized if individual members of the organization are unwilling to participate in a sincere and honest effort to uncover that which is essentially hidden.

A first step in the process of uncovering an organization's culture is generation of a list of the organization's more visible behaviors, which are referred to as artifacts (Table 1).[4] Artifacts reflect the most superficial characteristics of an organization's culture: the things that one sees, hears, and feels when interacting with the culture. Examples include the physical environment, technology, language, published values, dress, behaviors, and displays of emotion. Other examples might include stories, myths, heroes, ceremonies, and rituals. Past events are important in the development

of an organization's culture, because they presented the organization's members with problems, questions, and issues. The beliefs and values in place at the time the events occurred exerted influence on the decisions made to address them. In turn, the outcomes of these decisions create cultural artifacts.

There is a difference between organizational climate and culture. Some may view them as two sides of the same coin, but there is a distinction. An individual experiences organizational climate when he or she is told, "this is the way we do things here." According to Schein,[8] such a statement is directly communicating the "artifacts" of the organization's culture to new members of the organization. When the organizational climate is not in alignment with its culture, there is greater likelihood that dysfunctional behaviors will be displayed. Interpreting artifacts as representations of the organization's culture can lead to misunderstandings about the organization's beliefs, values, and basic assumptions. An example is an orthopedic rehabilitation clinic that is self-identified as a sports medicine clinic. The term "sports medicine" conveys an image to the public, but the sports medicine label does not identify the involvement of a specific profession or the delivery of specific services. To assume that a particular clinic's organizational culture values the specialized services that athletic trainers provide is a potential misinterpretation of the visible artifact.

Whereas organizational norms are accepted behaviors that are demonstrated in specific situations (i.e., artifacts), espoused beliefs and values are more abstract ideas that the organization holds about what is right or wrong and important or unimportant (Table 2).[4] To identify these beliefs and values, Schein recommends asking a question about the various observable artifacts: "Why are you doing what you are doing?"[(p.343)] This question should generate value statements about

| TABLE 1. ARTIFACTS OF THE ORGANIZATION'S CULTURE | |
|---|---|
| **Level** | **Superficial** |
| Description | What an individual sees, hears and feels when experiencing a new culture |
| Finding the artifacts | Physical environment, technology, language, published list of values, dress, displays of emotion, stories, myths, heroes, ceremonies, and rituals |

| TABLE 2. ESPOUSED BELIEFS AND VALUES OF THE ORGANIZATION'S CULTURE | |
|---|---|
| **Level** | **Intermediate** |
| Description | Abstract ideas the organization has about what is right or wrong, important or unimportant |
| Uncovering the beliefs and values | Why are you doing what you are doing? |

the artifacts. For example, if the cultural artifact is the presence of an athletic trainer at all home athletic events, the value statement may be, "We believe athletic training coverage of competitive events is important for the welfare of our athletes."

A crucial point to understand is that beliefs and values typically reflect those held by organizational leaders or the founders of the organization. As the organization encounters new problems, organizational leaders rely on beliefs and values—those that distinguish good from bad and significant from insignificant—to make decisions about management of the problems. If members of the organization perceive the outcomes from these decisions as positive, the beliefs and values supporting the decision may become espoused beliefs and values. It is important to note that espoused beliefs and values are only those beliefs and values that can be shared.[4] Each individual brings personally-held beliefs and values into the organization that are not shared by all members. For example, an organizational leader may have strong religious values that are not subject to organizational validation unless the organization is presented with relevant problems or the personally-held values are considered important to the organization's activities.

The most difficult aspect of an organization's culture to understand is what Schein[4] referred to as basic underlying assumptions (Table 3). As beliefs and values of the organization are repeatedly tested and validated (i.e., they have successfully solved problems and supported effective decisions), they become accepted truth that organizational members no longer question. The beliefs and values become basic assumptions that have a subconscious influence on the ways that organizational members think, feel, and behave in a given situation. Such assumptions are usually quite difficult to uncover.

| Table 3. Basic Underlying Assumptions of the Organization's Culture | |
|---|---|
| **Level** | **Deep** |
| Description | Beliefs and values that have become taken-for-granted truths (i.e., believed to be reality) |
| Uncovering the basic underlying assumptions | Do the identified espoused beliefs and values thoroughly explain all artifacts? |

Artifacts (i.e., organizational climate) and espoused beliefs and values are not always consistent with underlying assumptions. To test this consistency, Schein[4] recommends assessing the extent to which espoused beliefs and values explain artifacts and whether on-going activities contradict the beliefs and values expressed by organizational members. Conflicts among artifacts, beliefs, values, and assumptions are likely to create anxiety and confusion within the organization. Although any change within an organization may generate concern and resistance, a new arrangement or procedure has the best chance for success when it does not conflict with the basic assumptions held by the members of the organization. If a conflict exists, some individuals will resist the change and attempt to prevent it from occurring. Those who are unable to align their values and basic assumptions with the new arrangement will ultimately leave the organization,[9] or they may remain without a strong emotional connection to the organization, which can negatively affect work performance.[10]

For example, a policy of having athletic training coverage for all home athletic events, without providing such coverage for away athletic events, is inconsistent with the espoused value statement, "We believe athletic training coverage of competitive events is important for the welfare of our athletes." Identification of this contradiction might lead to group discussion about the basic assumption underlying the policy for athletic training coverage at home athletic events only.

The process advocated by Schein for uncovering organizational culture is quite helpful, but we recommend one additional element. A basic tenet of intercultural communication is awareness of personal biases when communicating with other cultures.[11] The process of uncovering the culture of an organization requires open, honest, and risk-free dialogue,[8] which requires an unbiased interpretation of that which is communicated. To be able to interpret what one sees and hears without prejudice, an individual should reflect on the question, "Why do I believe or behave the way I do?" The process of uncovering an organization's culture will be easier after personal biases are identified through reflection.

## Conclusions

The athletic training profession grew from a need to provide health care services for student-athletes in colleges and universities.[12] Thus, the athletic training

profession has assimilated beliefs, values, and assumptions that are consistent with the organizational culture of college sports, rather than the beliefs, values, and assumptions held by other health care professions. Although organizational research in athletic training is limited, there appear to be conflicts between the profession's foundational culture and more recently developed beliefs and values. Pitney's[13] qualitative study of athletic trainers and athletic directors who work at institutions with National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I athletic programs reported that the organizational culture can devalue the role of the athletic trainer. Winterstein[14] reported a positive commitment of college head athletic trainers to student-athletes and athletic training students, but there was not a consistent commitment to athletic departments. Although these studies did not specifically focus on organizational culture, both of them identified an organizational culture issue affecting athletic trainers.

The importance of professional socialization in athletic training is widely recognized, but the profession has not thoroughly explored the beliefs, values, and basic underlying assumptions that are transmitted through this process. These beliefs, values, and basic assumptions acquired by athletic trainers in a college sports setting may conflict with those that characterize other practice settings (e.g., hospitals, medical clinics, industrial settings). Athletic trainers need to understand what they believe and value and how they relate to various practice settings. Understanding the profession's culture and the cultures of the organizations where athletic trainers practice is important for both the individual athletic trainer's professional success and the advancement of the athletic training profession. ▮

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