
GROWTH POINTS

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Cultural Realities

The fact that local churches have a corporate culture is well acknowledged by pastors. It is agreed that the church's corporate culture powerfully impacts present and future ministry. However, it is not clear to most why this is so and what can be done to leverage culture for growth.

What is Culture?

There are numerous definitions of culture. Some authors define it as the total beliefs, morals, customs, lore, and documents of an organization.

Edgar Schein proposed a three-level understanding of culture. The *first level* of culture is seen in its technology, publications, facilities, and behavior patterns. The *second level* is observed in an organization's communication patterns, e.g., what an organization says to explain or justify the first level. The *third level* is the deepest, and includes the ideas and assumptions that guide levels one and two. Thus, at its very basic, *corporate culture is the set of assumptions and beliefs (often unstated) that participants in a church share in common.*

Understanding culture as a set of assumptions makes it more difficult to

measure, as they are often unseen, unheard, and unstated. Yet, if these assumptions and beliefs can be identified and understood, it has the potential to yield larger insights into the total church ministry.

Shared Assumptions

There are many assumptions that may be held in a church. It is, however, the widely shared ones that have major impact. The two main types of assumptions that are widely held in a church are *beliefs* and *values*.

Beliefs include views of reality, particularly how the world and life actually work. Among other things, this includes perspectives on the nature of God, mankind, sin, salvation, eternal life, etc.

Values include perspectives on what ideals are worth striving for as a church. Among other things, this includes ideas on love, peace, outreach, faithfulness, etc.

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As leaders often discover, church culture is influenced not by what people *say* their beliefs and values are, but rather by the beliefs and values they *actually* hold.

Understanding a church's true, shared beliefs and assumptions is critical, as they influence the direction of a church's behaviors. For example, a church may say it values reaching people outside the church, but resist adding a second worship service or site that might help reach them. The *stated value* of reaching lost people is subverted by the *real value* for close fellowship between those already in the church.

Deciphering Assumptions

Determining a church's true beliefs and values is difficult to observe or measure. It is a subjective activity, and clearly cannot be determined simply by asking people about them. The best approach is to look at actual evidence—historical and current. The following is a systematic procedure based on three important questions that are often overlooked.

First, what was the background of the founders of the church and those who followed them? Understanding the background, personalities, and passions of the founders provides important clues to core assumptions. For example, knowing that the original founders of

the church were driven by a reaction against new forms of music will reveal core assumptions that continue to underlie resistance to new ideas today.

Second, how did the church respond to crucial events in the past? Understanding how a church reacted in stressful times reveals two important keys: (1) how assumptions were formed, and (2) the actual priority of beliefs and values. During traumatic times, a church must decide which beliefs and values are the most important, which hardens the assumptions into the overall culture.

Third, who were considered deviant in the church culture? As some people violate the underlying beliefs and values of a church, they are rejected by the culture. Understanding who these people were, reveals the boundaries of the church's culture. Assumptions are regularly buried so deep that they are taken for granted, that is, until someone violates them. Discovering when the anger of the whole community was displayed against a person(s) may reveal strongly held beliefs and values.

Think It Through

Put together a team of three people: yourself, one newcomer, and one insider.

Together, investigate by asking and answering these three questions about your church or organization.

Determine the shared assumptions which are the most important to your church.

Doing so will help define your culture.

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