

Culture: The BI Boogeyman

By Maureen Clarry

Question: Why is it so crazy around here?

Answer: It's the culture

Question: Why don't our customers become more involved?

Answer: It's the culture

Question: Why isn't our technical team more responsive to urgent business needs?

Answer: It's the culture

Question: Why don't we have a more clear direction?

Answer: It's the culture

Question: Why can't we have more business impact with the data we provide?

Answer: It's the culture

Question: Why don't things ever change around here?

Answer: It's the culture

Question: Who lurks in the shadows, threatens our success, and makes us want to run and hide?

Answer: It's the culture

It's the culture... a convenient boogeyman to blame when things don't seem to work the way we'd like them to. The culture will never change, the culture won't allow us to succeed, the culture gets in the way of our business intelligence progress and performance. Here are some of our favorite myths about culture:

Myth: Culture is intangible, esoteric, difficult to manage, and "squishy."

Truth: Culture is behavioral, measurable, and manageable. It does require awareness, attention, and leadership.

Myth: Culture is nice to have, but we don't have time for the "soft" stuff.

Truth: Fifteen years of research involving 1,200 organizations shows us clearly how culture works—and reveals a clear link between it and an organization's effectiveness.

Myth: Culture is solely embedded in the founder of the company or, worse yet, culture "just happens."

Truth: Effective cultures are almost always the result of thoughtful leadership that involves the entire organization in a focused direction.

Myth: Culture is a luxury to be thought about when there is extra time and resources.

Truth: Cultural issues have strategic impact and must be managed to preserve business value and ensure success.

Myth: Changing culture is a cumbersome, difficult, and painstakingly slow process.

Truth: By precisely targeting and developing behaviors that support known results, both culture change and its desired performance improvements can be achieved quickly.

Many of us would prefer to delegate culture to the HR department... another one of those "soft" issues that the HR folks should handle. Perhaps you think it is separate from the BI initiative you are trying to implement and does not matter. Well, think again. Culture, whether you're talking about your company, department, or team, matters. It can't be delegated to HR, and if the culture is getting in the way of your effectiveness, you can't afford to wait and let someone else deal with it. So what *can* you do about it?

First, let's examine culture from a business perspective. Dr. Daniel Denison, author of surveys and books including *Corporate Culture and*

Organizational Effectiveness, has spent the last 15 years researching culture. His work has helped to move culture out of the academic realm and into the arena of everyday business realities. A total of 950 businesses of all sizes and sectors participated in the development of Denison's culture model, which has subsequently been applied to more than 1,200 organizations, ranging in size from 10 people to more than 300,000. The findings are compelling—and will help you to understand in a new way how your culture is enabling or impeding the achievement of the results you want.

The model, whether you are looking at the business as a whole or the BI organization as a subset, measures four basic cultural traits:

Mission—The degree to which the organization knows why it exists and understands its direction.

Involvement—The degree to which individuals in the organization are engaged and aligned with that direction.

Adaptability—The ability of the organization to know what customers want, and the degree to which it can respond to external forces and demands.

Consistency—The organization's systems and processes that support efficiency and effectiveness in reaching goals.

This model embraces, rather than ignores, the basic paradox faced by all leaders, whether they are CEOs or BI project managers: "It's not about doing either this *or* that. To be successful I must do this *and* that, even if those two things are in direct conflict with each other!"

Can you relate that paradox to your BI initiative? You need both higher quality *and* lower cost. You need both rigor *and* speed. You need to adapt quickly to changing needs *and* be efficient. You need to please both customers *and* employees, even when serving one appears to hurt the other. You have to pay attention to the inside *and* the outside of your organization; to the short term *and* the long term. Denison's model reflects this reality.

Denison's research shows that the highest-performing organizations are those that show strength in all four cultural traits. In other words, they have developed cultures that fully address the paradoxical demands facing them. Try this on as an example of the best business or BI organizations you have seen: they are clear on why they exist and where they are going (*mission*). Their people embrace the defined

direction, are aligned with the goals, and leverage their skills (*involvement*). They understand what their customers want, and are able to learn what is needed to respond to changing demands (*adaptability*). And they have systems, structures, and processes in place so that they can be both efficient and effective in their pursuit of results (*consistency*).

If you are convinced that culture is a strategic lever for success, you've cleared one of the biggest hurdles between you and getting the results you want. Culture can be measured, managed, and changed to make it more effective. That doesn't mean it's easy, especially for those who have long avoided the "people stuff." The fact is that if you want to create change and have an impact, you cannot delegate culture to the HR department. Culture is the work of today's leaders, and *you* have to do it! How do you start?

Assess—Determine what your culture really looks like. Analyze where you are and where you want to go to improve results. If you are unsure or lack confidence in tackling the culture boogeyman, engage the experience and perspective of professionals to help you.

Focus—Identify those factors that directly support the results you want. Don't try to tackle everything at once.

Partner—Solicit the support of your network: peers, subordinates, your boss. Don't underestimate the impact that a small group of people can have when they are focused on improving results through cultural change.

Execute—Make something happen! Small changes will lead to results, which will lead to other changes and additional support. Dominoes, snowballs, grassroots campaigns... you get the picture!

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