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Understanding Your Organization's Culture

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Facilitator's Guide

Understanding Your Organization's Culture

The only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture. —Edgar Schein

Rationale:

Effective members, volunteers and leaders have a profound effect upon the culture of their organizations. Members, volunteers and leaders develop policies and serve as role models for the organization. All of these factors impact an organization's culture; therefore, it is important that members, volunteers and leaders understand the importance and role of culture in the organization and learn how to operate within the culture of an organization to gain the desired results.

Program Goal:

To develop a working knowledge of the role that culture plays and the effect it has within an organization.

Program Objectives:

- Define general and organizational culture
- Recognize different levels of culture within your organization
- Recognize the effects of a toxic culture on an organization and determine ways to make the organization's culture more positive

Pre-Program Preparation:

- Read and make copies of "Understanding Your Organization's Culture" (CLD2-1) fact sheet.
- Print (or import into a PowerPoint) the two or three pictures you will use for the Introductory Activity.
- Gather and bring tangible items to demonstrate the different levels of culture of your organization. (See Objective 2, Learning Activity 2 for a list of examples.)

- Make copies of the "Is this Organization Toxic?" handout.
- Secure flip chart and markers.

Introduction:

A variety of features give an organization meaning and make it familiar and recognizable. One of these features is culture. Culture gives meaning to nearly every aspect of life and is no less important within an organizational setting. Understanding culture in the general sense can lead to a working knowledge of organizational culture. This understanding could result in more effective members, volunteers and leaders, expanded community engagement and increased growth for your organization. Do you understand the culture of your organization? Are you able to identify the culture of your organization? What impact does culture have on your organization and the way it does business?

Introductory Activity:

For this Introductory Activity, locate several pictures that illustrate examples of different cultures. Ideas for pictures include families from different countries sitting down to dinner, families from different countries celebrating the same holiday, birthdays, etc. Select pictures that give meaning and demonstrate specific values for the group. For example, with a picture of a youth exhibiting a project at the county

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fair you could discuss differences between rural, metropolitan and urban environments, issues of diversity, the types of values that families who participate in these activities hold, etc.) Examples of pictures can be found in *National Geographic*, *Life*, and the illustrations of Norman Rockwell, etc.

Activity: Ask participants to look at selected pictures. (If you have time, present these to the large group one at a time. If not, break into groups of four to five and give each group a picture). Pose the following questions to the group(s):

- Who are the people in the picture?
- What do you think they value? Why?
- What is the culture of this group?
- Does this group represent more than one culture?

Share: Individual and group values are part of culture. They help to give meaning to life. Move into Learning Activity 1.

Objective 1: To describe general and organizational culture

In general, culture is the shared beliefs and values that give meaning to life; those beliefs and values allow social groups to set norms and customs that shape everyday life.

Learning Activity 1:

Kentucky 4-H is unlike any other youth-serving organization in the United States; shared beliefs and values make the organization unique and different.

Have individuals pair up and develop a list of five beliefs or values unique to 4-H. Give the groups approximately five minutes, then ask each group to share one of their examples. Write these beliefs/values on a flip chart; repeat the process (as time permits) until you have developed a good list. Once you have a list of beliefs on the flip chart, pose the following question to the group: How do these beliefs/values affect the culture of 4-H?

Similarly, individual county 4-H programs exhibit their own unique cultures. Organizational culture is the set of shared values, goals and practices that give meaning to a population, family, group, organization or community. Some describe it as the personality of the population, family, group, organization or community.

Maintain the same groups as above. Have individuals talk and come up with three values/practices that define their organization and make it unique. Once everyone has shared, discuss the following question: How do these values affect the culture of your county 4-H program?

Bring the discussion to a close by discussing how different values/practices demonstrate the organizational culture of 4-H. If some of the values or practices seem out of place with the overall 4-H mission, it is important to note there may be a difference between promoted values and what is actually being demonstrated (the “talk” doesn’t match the “walk”). Positive or negative, this can be a great introduction to a club visioning process.

Objective 2: To recognize different levels of culture within your organization

The culture of your organization has different levels, including:

- **Artifacts:** Artifacts are those things that individuals see on the surface. Artifacts are tangible aspects that people see, hear or feel when interacting with an organization. You can identify organizational culture from the way employees dress, the way the furniture is arranged, and how employees, members, volunteers or leaders utilize artifacts when interacting with one another. Generally, artifacts of an organization are easy to observe, but it may be difficult for an outsider to decipher what they truly mean.
- **Shared values:** Shared values are the significant values, morals or beliefs claimed to be especially important by members, volunteers and leaders in the organization. All deeper levels of organizational culture begin as a shared value and eventually become shared assumptions (over time, after repetition). For example, values such as trust, honesty or integrity play a strong role within the moral structure of many organizations.
- **Basic assumptions:** Basic assumptions are largely unspoken, are developed over time through repetition, and are utilized to deal with situations or resolve problems within the organization. Rules, policies and procedures within an organization are based on shared assumptions that have developed within the organization’s culture. A good example of shared assumptions within any group are the procedures or the precedents by which the organizations handle routine tasks, programs, projects or activities.

Learning Activity 2:

It is important to have an understanding of how your organization's culture is demonstrated to others. It could mean the difference between a thriving organization that is attracting members, volunteers and leaders, and one that is struggling to survive.

As the facilitator, assemble and bring in a few tangible items from each level of culture. For example:

- **Artifacts:** Gavel, 4-H Record Book, food
- **Shared values:** 4-H pledge, 4-H motto
- **Basic assumptions:** Distribute index cards to each person and ask them to write one of their basic assumptions about the 4-H program on each card.

Take a closer look at the artifacts brought to the meeting. Ask the individuals to identify the level of culture to which each artifact belongs. To do this, hold up each artifact individually and ask the audience to identify the appropriate cultural level. When finished, either write down or explain the correct answers.

Debrief with a discussion:

- How do these artifacts demonstrate the culture of our organization?
- Are all of the artifacts illustrative of our current culture? Should some be considered historical artifacts?
- Are there objects that aren't here (things we would like to be a part of illustrating our organizational culture)? How could we incorporate those artifacts into our culture?

Objective 3: To recognize the effects of a toxic culture on an organization and to determine ways to make the organization's culture more positive

To introduce the group to Learning Activity 3, ask them to decide if the organization's culture is positive or toxic. (Both you and your group members should decide if the culture of your organization is positive or toxic in order to get a clear picture of how all members see the overall group.) Some easy (but fun) ways to read your group's culture are:

- List six adjectives that describe your organization.
- Think of a song that depicts the culture of your organization.
- Create a metaphor... "If my organization were an animal, it would be a _____, because..."
- Compile a history of your organization.
- Interview an older member of the organization and ask them to tell you their "4-H Story."

Give group members time to read your organization's culture. Once everyone is finished, have group members share their read on your organizational culture. Consider the effects of the health of your organization. (**Notes:** It's a good idea to have someone recording general thoughts/ideas so you can capture the overall feelings of the group. As previously mentioned, this activity is a fabulous introduction into a visioning process. It is also a great introduction to Learning Activity 3. However, don't feel pressured to move into Learning Activity 3; the read activity can stand alone.)

Learning Activity 3:

However it is illustrated, it will be fairly obvious if the culture of your group is positive or negative (toxic). Unfortunately, some groups experience a toxic culture—a culture that is lethal to the well-being of its members as well as to the overall success of the organization. Write the signs of a toxic culture on the flip chart:

- Rampant gossip and/or rumors
- Us vs. them mentality
- Retaining poor talent
- Double standards for leadership (accountability, rewards)
- Inconsistency
- Ethical issues

Distribute the "Is This Organization Toxic?" hand-out. Give individuals five minutes to choose which organization is toxic and complete the worksheet.

Once individuals have finished, take time to review the worksheet. On a flip chart or whiteboard list the issues individuals identified; next to the issues, list the suggestions they have for improvement. Talk about the appropriateness of their suggestions, ask for their own personal examples, and discuss appropriate suggestions for improvement.

Summary:

Organizational culture is an important aspect that is often overlooked or misunderstood by members, volunteers and leaders. Having a strong organizational culture can mean stability for an organization; it gives the organization permanency and encourages it to look into the future. An effective leader will learn the basics of organizational culture and be able to recognize a toxic culture and understand how to influence their organization toward a successful future.

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Is This Organization Toxic?

Directions: Read the following scenarios. Determine which organization has a toxic culture, and answer the questions below.

Organization A: Ellen has been the leader of the Jasper County Progressive 4-H Club for 13 years. Over those 13 years, she credits her recruitment strategies as part of the reason that 4-H member enrollment is up, and more members are stepping into club officer roles. A primary goal that Ellen has is to establish a culture within her organization that values every individual, encourages personal development, and ultimately contributes to the community. Even though Ellen will retire from her 4-H leader position, she feels that the organization is making active progress toward changing its culture to be more inclusive and welcoming, encourages members to accept leadership responsibilities and service roles, and has become a great organization to which to belong.

Organization B: John has been a member of the Bridge View 4-H Horse Club for 10 years, and until recently has loved every minute. In the beginning, the culture of the club was welcoming; it valued new members and their families and encouraged involvement in the community. However, recently a new leader (Susan) has taken over the club, and things have changed drastically. Susan's primary mission is to make the club more exclusive, and with that has come some unhealthy side effects. Gossip, rumors and negative postings on Facebook are now regular occurrences (both inside and outside of meetings), and Susan has begun to play favorites with certain club members who stable horses in her barn and doesn't require members to follow the rules and procedures of the club, county and state horse program. All of this has many club members and their parents very unhappy. As a direct result, half of the certified volunteer leaders have resigned and no one is stepping forward to accept leadership roles. Overall, the club's culture is suffering, but no one knows how to rein in this horse club leader.

Which organization has a toxic culture? _____

Major Issues: _____

Suggestions for improvement (How can the issues listed above be addressed?):
