

Investigating Our Organizational Culture



M.A.P. FOR JEWISH
LEARNING & LIVING

This session allows participants to dip their toes into the field of organizational culture. As integrated members of the organization, it is often hard to see how others perceive the organization and to question the underlying assumptions which have been guiding decision making. This exercise helps community leaders step back and look at the organization, its program and communications.

This program relies on content generated in the session entitled, [Identifying Our Priorities](#). Participants will consider how well the organization's various structures are aligned to the core values identified in that session.

Goal

Participants will investigate how the behaviors in their organization match up with the core values they have identified, exploring how the organization might change as behaviors are aligned to the values.

Materials

- Copies of [My Aspirations Playbook](#)
- Top priorities from [Identifying Our Priorities](#)
- Copies of "Finding Youth Engagement Under the Table," by Rabbi Dena Schaffer (below)
- Various artifacts from the setting (hard copy or electronic)-- mission statement, description of the learning programs, calendar, newsletter, building design and signage, website, budget, emails or letters home, org chart, photos
- School's mission statement (if you have one)

Plan

Introduction (5 minutes)

Check in with participants since the last meeting. Has anyone seen the values we identified reflected (or not!) in the publications or programs of the organization? Take an example if anyone has one.

Activities

Case Study (10 minutes)

In groups of 2 or 3, read the article by Rabbi Dena Shaffer below. Discuss: What assumptions did they need to challenge in order to come to a new model? How and why did they challenge those assumptions?

Components of Organizational Culture (10 minutes)

Explain that the article is a great example of one component of organizational culture identified by Edgar Schein called "basic underlying assumptions". These are learned beliefs that become taken for granted in an organization. In the article, the assumption might be described as, "The best way to engage teens is through NFTY Youth Group." Another one could be, "If youth group is perceived of as 'cool,' teens will come." Or, "If teens knew about these great programs, they would come." These assumptions can lead

to diagnoses and solutions that may be incorrect, as Dena found when she opened herself up to direct feedback from the teens themselves.

Schein describes two other layers of organizational culture: artifacts (the tangible products of the culture) and espoused values (the stated mission, goals, and philosophy). All of these levels of culture can be hard to decipher. Sometimes they are contradictory.

Museum (10 minutes)

Explain that we will take a novice attempt at investigating our organization's culture. Even if we are not completely loyal to the components described by Schein, this exercise can help us identify if our actions and messaging are consistent with the core values we have identified from the aspirations framework.

Distribute artifacts to small groups. Instruct participants to analyze the artifact. What could it signify to a member? To someone from outside the organization? It is acceptable to list contradictory possibilities, as an artifact could signify multiple messages. (For example, a police presence can indicate security to some members, while others might find it threatening and unwelcoming.) Look at what is presented in your artifact as well as what is missing, i.e., are the pictures on the website of diverse populations, or are some groups missing?

If the group has time, they can interpret another artifact. Participants can write their observations in the form of questions if they prefer, such as, "Why does Tot Shabbat meet once/month instead of every week?"

Consider the artifact in relationship to the top priorities. In what ways might it align with the aspirations identified last time? In what ways could it contradict those values?

Conclusion (10 minutes)

Ask a few groups to share. Have the groups submit what they found and compile them into a document to share with the participants after the meeting.

Share that this activity is a first step in opening our eyes to how the organization is aligned to the mission, in big and little ways. Read the school's mission statement. Ask: What might need to be changed to better align our program with the aspirations we have identified?

For further learning

Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (5th edition), 2016. (Chapter 2)

Finding Youth Engagement Under the Table

November 25, 2015

By Rabbi Dena Shaffer

There's an old Hassidic story about a prince who is convinced that he is a rooster, and therefore takes off all his clothes and refuses to eat unless he may do so from underneath the king's table. After inviting many experts in child rearing (whose advice fails to make an impression on the prince), the king finally calls upon the local rabbi. Much to everyone's surprise, the rabbi too crawls under the table and eats a meal there with the prince. After some time he says to the prince, "hey, did you know that roosters can wear clothes if they want?"

"Oh good," replies the prince and pulls his sweater over his head, "I was getting cold under here." After a few more minutes the rabbi continues, "Did you know that roosters, too, can eat at the table if they want?"

"Oh good," replies the prince, crawling out and climbing into a chair. "My back was starting to hurt sitting under there." And thus the rabbi succeeds in bringing the prince back to the king's table.

The story is an allegory, and one that has profound implications for those of us who work with teens. It hits upon the lesson we have been learning and repeating for years. As a Jewish professional, the rabbi knows that he may never convince the prince that he is not a rooster, but he also understands that this is not his job. Instead, his job is to crawl under the table and simply be with the prince wherever he happens to be.

This idea of "meeting them where they are" is one that drives us in youth engagement and has become our mantra in recent years. We know that when we do this, we are successful, even when it is difficult and accompanied by a sense of sacrifice and loss. When we don't, we are typically less successful. We are left wondering why, though we lead the proverbial horse to water time and time again, he never takes a drink. We talk about this adaptability in youth leadership all the time, but it is so much harder to follow in action. I suspect there are a few reasons for this gap from theory to practice.

First, we get stuck in the rut of trying to replicate what worked for us when we were young. We know that those methods are tried and true; clearly they were powerful strategies of engagement, or else we wouldn't be doing the work we are doing today. And yet, we forget that a teenager's world today is so vastly different than our own was. Even aspects that remain unchanged, such as the value of youth group programming, have to be re-interpreted for this new generation.

Secondly, we get caught between competing values in our profession: The first, to act like that rabbi in the story who is unafraid to go out on limb and try something completely crazy in order to prove the relevancy of Judaism to our youth. And the second, to protect and safeguard the authenticity and sanctity of Jewish life. This conflict often makes it easy to talk about revolutionary change - but much, much harder to implement it.

This past year, the youth culture in my community – Congregation Beth Israel in West Hartford, Connecticut – found itself in the midst of these competing values. We had watched as our traditional youth group, WHTY, dwindled to a mere fraction of what it once was. Our participation in regional events had, over time, become nearly non-existent, and our young leadership was nowhere to be found. By May of 2014, we were at a point of no return. Only one teen, a rising high school senior expressed an interest in “running” for a position on what was an effectively defunct youth group board.

So what were we to do? As you might imagine, in the months leading up to this demise, my youth programmer and I spent many hours re-hashing what went wrong and what we could have done better. These conversations were largely unproductive. There was a feeling of “what was done was done.” We then spent time with that rising senior, teaching him about engagement and strategic conversations, role-playing with him so he could replicate these experiences with his friends and try to subtly prompt them into becoming active members of the youth group. But it was to no avail – he simply, as teenagers often do, did not follow through.

We were at an impasse, and plagued with the challenge that our youth group would not look like it was “supposed to.” In my mind, we had two choices: fold up the entire operation, shift our efforts to our 6th, 7th, and 8th graders, and hope that in a few years’ time we would create the culture we envisioned (and hope also, that suddenly the secular high school experience in our community would be different). Or, we could run our youth group ourselves with no student board, using a model traditionally reserved for much younger cohorts, and thus disenfranchising the very population we were hired to empower.

But perhaps there was a third option. Instead of following either of these paths, we did something that was, for us, revolutionary. We listened to the kids themselves. Over a few weeks, we had dozens of impromptu, completely informal conversations with teens. These were not forums. They were not organized by the synagogue. They were off-the-cuff dialogues that took place in hallways, in the car, over the phone, and through texting.

We simply asked kids, with no judgment – “Where are you?” We asked them questions like, “How come we never see you? Do you know that this programming is going on? Why don’t you ever want to come?” And what we got were honest answers that confirmed none of our worst fears. It wasn’t that teens thought youth group was lame or that they weren’t receiving communication about it. Instead, their answers clustered around one central theme: college.

What our students cared about more than anything else was getting into a good college. They were thoughtful and careful about their activity choices with this end in mind. They weren’t stepping up as leaders in WHTY programming because they did not see it as serving this goal. We were not meeting them where they were; we had failed to get under the table! We knew how youth group was “supposed” to be run, so instead of listening – we were trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.

So, at this milestone point in NFTY's history, we abandoned the sacred structure. We no longer have programming vice presidents (PVPs) or membership vice presidents (MVPs). We painstakingly threw all of that away in an effort to get under the table. This year, for the first time, our youth group is being run by three incredible Youth Engagement Interns. They will spend the year building their resumes and learning skills that will benefit them in the college and professional worlds. They are being paid a stipend, being supervised rather than advised, and have partnerships with both professional staff, and key lay leaders in our community. They have portfolios, not positions; an office, not a lounge.

We cut the programming calendar down to just three events that they will plan and execute for their peers; and the rest of the time they will be managing projects in the fields of development, member relations, and communications – projects that impact the entire congregational landscape, not just their own WHTY corner of the map. We know that it may be harder for them to relate to their peers in NFTY-North East (regional events are now “professional development opportunities,” by the way) and only time will tell whether this change will be as successful as it predicts on paper. But for now, the view from under the table looks pretty good!

Rabbi Dena Shaffer is the Associate Rabbi at Congregation Beth Israel in West Hartford, CT where she enjoys the frequent opportunities to “get under the table” and dream up new ways to engage Reform Jewish youth. When she’s not in Connecticut, she can be found in Haiti with teens from her congregation or training young Jews in the art of self-defense in her weekly “JewDo” class.

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