



FOCUS ARTICLE

Bridging the Gap Between Intent and Action in Organisational Practices

Author: Edward McCullough

Performance is an indicator of success in most undertakings, whether it is business, sport or even a leisure pursuit, the more impressive the performance, generally the more impressive the reward, practically as well as emotionally. In this context performance is “the action or process of performing a task or function”. Within our workplaces most of the energy expended is in either planning or carrying out these tasks, which vary as to type, complexity and context in a variety of situations. Indeed, an organisation’s culture can be defined by how tasks are done, often summarised as “how we do things around here”. This phrase generally refers to the management systems, processes and procedures that make up an organisation’s “practices”. When applied with a high level of operational discipline, these practices can have a significant influence on the levels of predictability and reliability an organisation can expect in its business. This is ultimately what differentiates an organisation from its peers and makes it unique.

There are two principal ways to influence organisational culture: you can change what people do, generally called the “practices approach”; or you can change how people think, generally called the “hearts and minds approach”. To win over hearts and minds, it is crucial to create a compelling “why you do what you do” for your workforce and then have the leaders within the organisation inspire their employees by role modelling this in a values-based way. At DEKRA OR, we are convinced of the value and utility of having a compelling “why” to motivate change. Having a “why” is intrinsically linked to a sense of purpose and self-motivation within

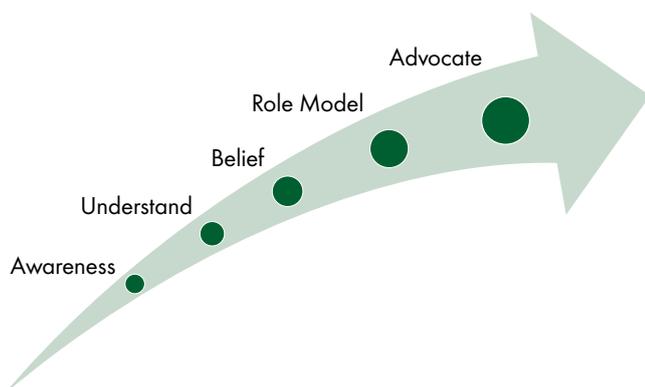
your teams. Without it, performance will falter as team members fail to understand thoroughly how your business functions and how your organisation’s practices influence that functionality.

When our clients ask us to assess or diagnose the maturity of their organisation’s culture, finding out what is motivating performance is critical to our approach. Finding out “what” people do is normally a straightforward exercise; finding out “how and why” they do it is the most interesting part of the intervention. The “how” is important, as most organisations express to us the

fantastic results they get when auditing their practices. They generally have all of the control of work tools they need to get the performance they want. What they have codified into their business more often than not passes the audit test with flying colours. However, the correlation between what is codified and what actually takes place continues to be a source of concern in many organisations we support. We are faced time and again with the question, “Why are we not consistently turning intent into action?”

There are many ways to explain this phenomenon. A key finding of our **diagnostics analysis** reveals that a lack of understanding of the organisation’s practices contributes to this gap. In addition, technical domain knowledge as well as custom and practice sometimes have more currency in decision making than do codified practices. If “how we do things around here” is how we define our culture, we need to know how well socialised our practices are. This is critical in understanding what motivates decision making and behaviour in the absence of authority. The majority of people we engage with are aware of their organisation’s practices, but we have found that they understand these practices less than they think they do. This points to a problem, because for any information to really be useful, you have to truly understand what it means and how to put it to use. As Albert Einstein said, “Any fool can know, the point is to understand”. Understanding influences problem solving and decision making, as well as behaviour, particularly in dynamic environments.

Our **Awareness to Advocacy diagnostic tool** is designed to assess how well employees understand their organisation’s practices and how well these practices are socialised into the company’s culture. These factors in turn indicate the impact on performance. The Awareness to Advocacy model allows us to focus on evaluating the “how” of an organisation. It enables us to look very specifically at areas where practices are designed to influence decision making and behaviour around controlling the greatest risks. The model has five stages, as defined below:



Awareness – This level indicates that employees know of the existence of an organisational practice and that they are conscious of such rules and procedures in the workplace. However, this does not necessarily mean that they can make decisions or behave in accordance with the rule or process. Awareness has limited impact on performance.

Understand – This level indicates not only that employees are aware that a practice exists but that they have a working knowledge of how to apply it in context. At this level, decision making and behaviour are influenced by the practices, which should influence communication and planning as well as behaviour. Understanding how to apply a practice has significant influence on performance.

Belief – At this level practices are intrinsically seen as adding value for those who use them. Those within the organisation not only understand the practices but believe in them. Willing compliance is established through personal and organisational experience of positive outcomes through their use. Employees accept as true and with conviction that applying the practices delivers safe outcomes. Belief in the application of practices and principles is fundamental to safety culture.

Role Model – This is how those within the culture socialise the practices into “how we do things around here”. In this context, role modelling has more influence the more authority someone has. This is where the principle of “walking your talk” starts to move “what people do” into affecting “how people think”. Role modelling by those who lead has a demonstrable effect on cultural maturity.

Advocate – At this level the workforce actively supports and recommends the use of the organisation’s practices even in the absence of authority. The workforce not only believes in them but sees their application as essential to both safety and business performance. The advocacy of organisational practices is fundamental to the continuous improvement and maturity of safety culture.

If your practices are well designed, how well are they known, understood and believed in by your teams? Most conversations that take place within working environments are about what is going on as opposed to “how”. If this is allowed to continue, the workforce prioritises “what” they are doing over “how” they do it, and this can easily translate into an attitude that the end justifies the means. Organisations that have well designed and codified practices need to be as informed as possible as to the depth and breadth of employees’ understanding and application of these practices. In most organisations we work with, practices provide the framework for planning, decision making and behaviour. If we are to reap their

full value, then we need to ensure that they are designed for use and add value to the business. Practices in their rawest form identify an organisation's intent as to how it does business. How well this intent

is turned into action will be influenced by how well these practices have been socialised into the fabric of the company's culture. How well are your practices understood?

EDWARD MCCULLOUGH

Edward McCullough is Senior Vice President, Assessment & Solutions at DEKRA Organisational Reliability Ltd. He has been at the front lines of safety for over 30 years working in some of the most challenging industries in the world, bringing his insight and practical knowledge to improve safety for people and companies. Edward McCullough has been with DEKRA since its inception, leading and managing activities in Europe, Australia, South East Asia, Africa, and the Americas. His work focuses on helping clients implement positive and sustainable improvements through the application of care. He believes that focusing on care as an input—through people, processes, and equipment—organisations can deliver safer and more reliable performance across all areas of industry.



DEKRA Organisational Reliability

DEKRA Organisational Reliability is a behavioural change consultancy. Working in collaboration with our clients, our approach is to influence the safety culture with the aim of 'making a difference for the better'. We deliver the skills, methods, and motivation to change leadership attitudes, behaviours and decision-making among employees. Measurable sustainable improvement of safety outcomes is our goal. We are a service unit of DEKRA SE, a global leader in safety since 1925 with over 39,000 employees in 50 countries.

For more information, visit www.dekra-organisational-reliability.com

Contact us

Subscribe to newsletter

