

## **WHAT IN THE WORLD IS AN ORGANIZATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGIST?**

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*A prospective client once asked me, "What in the world is an organizational anthropologist?" Other clients have asked similar questions related to how I work with clients and organizations. I put together this FAQs to address some of these issues.*

### ***What is an organizational anthropologist?***

An organizational anthropologist is someone who has completed graduate work in cultural anthropology and who specializes in describing and analyzing the culture of organizations. It helps if the person has experience as a manager in a corporation or other organization. To be effective in diagnosing organizational problems, you really need a combination of skills, education, and experience.

### ***Why contact an organizational anthropologist?***

Usually for the same reason that you would call your doctor—because something “hurts.” In the case of an organization, that “hurt” might take the form of a symptom such as higher than average employee turnover, or union difficulties, or decreased productivity after a merger or downsizing.

At the same time, companies can use the services of an organizational anthropologist for very positive reasons: evaluating new programs or services, devising strategies for increasing diversity in their workforce and markets, or identifying the cultural factors which will influence their operations in another country.

### ***Aren't most problems and opportunities external to the organization rather than internal?***

The best organizations don't blame the external environment for all their problems. Rather, they monitor the external environment closely, accepting change as a given, and they closely monitor the internal state of their organization.

Each organization has a unique culture and within that culture are the “seeds” for success and failure. Leaders need to identify the “seeds,” or the organization's underlying beliefs and values, which are the basis for all decisions. These beliefs and values go beyond what is written down as organizational values; they include the informal or implicit rules that employees at all levels of the organization use to determine how they do their jobs. Because individuals in an organization are so close to these beliefs and values, they are seldom able to articulate them in the way an outside observer can. If the beliefs and values are not articulated—and modified, if necessary—they remain an invisible but very powerful force directing the organization.

### ***Shouldn't organizations just implement the best practices of their industry and leave it at that?***

I don't believe that any real leader is satisfied with “boilerplate management.” That's a prescription for mediocrity. We have to recognize that when an entrepreneur or CEO puts together a complex mixture of resources, including talented people of all sorts, something unique will happen. You could describe the process of turning these basic elements into gold, i.e., into a successful product or service, as organizational alchemy. And to be successful at organizational alchemy, a leader needs more than just a best practices mentality.

### ***What exactly is this thing you call “culture?”***

It's a concept that was first developed by anthropologists studying small cultures as early as the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Culture is the term they used to describe the unifying phenomena they observed in each group. Similarly, when studying organizations, one can refer to the culture as the pattern of shared assumptions that the group has learned over time and that newcomers to the organization learn as the correct way to behave and think as members of the group.

Most of the time, an organization's culture is just there, a part of the organization but not interfering with everyday operations or demanding attention. Managers and employees are most likely to be aware of the role culture plays in an organization at junctures like these:

- when a large number of new employees join the group, e.g., through an expansion or acquisition;
- when two groups, or subcultures within the organization, e.g., accounting and sales, have an on-going conflict; or
- when management makes and implements critical decisions, e.g., introduces new technology or reorganizes major functions.

I was involved in an organizational culture study at General Motors not long after GM acquired Ross Perot's company, Electronic Data Systems (EDS). The two companies had radically different cultures and our team's job was to identify those differences and suggest ways to lessen the tension between the two groups. Just because two companies merge, or in the example of GM and EDS, one company is acquired by a much larger company, doesn't mean that all employees will suddenly begin to think and act according to what the parent company believes is the norm. And very often managers and employees cannot identify why this is so until someone like an organizational anthropologist ferrets out the underlying values and beliefs affecting behavior.

### ***Why would an organization contact an anthropologist rather than a management consultant?***

Because an anthropologist approaches the study of an organization in a holistic manner, i.e., she looks at all levels of the organization, not just top management, and she studies the various subcultures of the organization.

Also, anthropologists focus on qualitative measurements which unveil issues that employees themselves identify as being important. This is different from a survey instrument containing questions which the researcher has deemed important. By talking to employees, through interviews or focus groups, I find out what they consider to be key issues and let them define the problem—or positive aspects of a situation—rather than assuming I know what the problem is before I even go into an organization.

I completed an organizational culture study for the Mayo Clinic at its three sites in Minnesota, Arizona, and Florida. One of the key points that emerged from my research was that employees and managers at the three sites have differing perspectives on time. What I discovered was that some emphasize the importance the past has on the present and thus they minimize the importance of the future. Others focus on the future and de-emphasize the importance of the past and the present. This finding has key implications for how the three sites relate to each other and for the organization's strategic planning process. None of the managers who hired me said, "I think we have a problem with differing perspectives on time." That was something which emerged from interviews, focus groups, and participant observation at the three sites.

Another reason to use an anthropologist is because we place a great deal of importance on the concept of cultural relativism. That's another way of saying that not all organizations are alike and therefore what works in one situation may not work in another. Uniqueness has to be respected. The maxim, "Respect diversity," applies to organizations as well as individuals. It's from the unique elements of an organization that innovation comes.

***Why did a highly successful organization like the Mayo Clinic decide to do an organizational culture study?***

Mayo has grown rapidly in the past 15 years, both geographically and in sheer number of employees; they currently have about 30,000 employees at their three sites and expect to add another 2,000-3,000 in the next few years. The purpose of the study was to define for them what it is about their culture that makes them so successful. In addition, they wanted to know how they can build on these strengths and how they can transmit the elements of this culture to the hundreds of new employees they hire each year. This project took about three months; the length of time a particular project requires will vary greatly depending on the complexity and size of the organization.

Another client, in Detroit, is a family-owned manufacturing firm with about 200 employees. They were considering expanding to Europe and contracted with me to explain the cross-cultural issues they would need to be aware of in the targeted countries. Before we looked at this issue, however, we did a study of their organizational culture to see if they were ready internally to do business in foreign cultures. This study took just a few weeks and their top management used my research to prepare for the expansion to Europe.

***Do you make recommendations when you document the organization's culture?***

Absolutely. Collecting and presenting data are just part of what I do. For this data to be useful, I need to make recommendations tied to the client's goals. I always thoroughly study the organization's strategic plan and tie my recommendations to explaining how the elements of the organization's culture can be a help or a hindrance in achieving the goals and objectives outlined in the plan.

***What is the hardest thing to convey to a prospective client about organizational culture?***

The most difficult thing to convey to managers is that organizational culture is not something they can create or change just by issuing an edict or mandate. It evolves over time and it usually changes slowly. Many consultants have written about changing your organization's culture as if it were something as easy to change as office furniture.

In an organizational culture study for a large hospital system in Michigan, my client was looking for ways to improve physician-management relations at their eight hospitals. This was a relatively new system—although most of the hospitals had been in existence for several decades—and no one had examined the cultural implications of bringing together these hospitals as one corporation. Because a new corporate culture doesn't just "happen" when separate hospitals come together as one entity, this client was looking for the action steps needed to create a unified culture.

It's important to remember that top management alone does not create an organization's culture. Rather, the culture includes everything managers and employees—past and present—do and think.