



Do No Harm Ethical Dilemmas in Cultural Change Processes

What is black and white, and read all over? Books on corporate culture, of course! Peters and Waterman's 1982 bestseller "In Search of Excellence" resurrected and catapulted interest in corporate culture as a source of competitive advantage. With that interest has come a multitude of theories, models and tools to help organizations create the culture they want. But is the business of changing culture black and white? This article makes the case that cultural change is a ripe ground for ethical dilemmas, and that HR practitioners must recognize the moral conflicts that underpin popular cultural change processes.

Let's examine a hypothetical cultural change effort at Company XYZ, a financial services organization. During their strategic planning session, the executive team recognized that in order to be successful in the rapidly converging marketplace, fundamental changes were required. Company XYZ was "a tight ship" - very hierarchical and internally focused. To survive in a fast-paced, competitive environment, they needed to become agile, innovative and market-focused.

A multi-year, multi-faceted change plan was created. First, the executive team clarified the new vision, mission and values. Organizational and individual competencies required for success in the new marketplace were identified, and development plans created. Communication sessions were held with employees, and leaders attended training sessions to prepare them for their new role. HR processes were aligned to reinforce the new values, behaviors, and competencies. Policies and procedures were revised to ensure they supported people working in new ways. Even the organizational structure was changed to create a more market-responsive organization.

So, what kinds of ethical dilemmas might emerge in this typical cultural change approach?

- [Organizational Control and Individual Freedom](#)

How can employees' right to freedom of thought, speech and expression co-exist with the organization's efforts to create a cohesive culture - particularly if employees disagree with the culture the organization wishes to create?

- [Alignment and Systematic Exclusion](#)

How can the organization align staffing, appraisal, reward and promotion systems to reinforce the new culture without systematically excluding people "who are not like us"?

- [Legitimacy](#)

Is the cultural change truly pivotal to the functioning of the

organization?

- **Power**

To what degree is there pressure to conform and comply?

- **Misuse of Trust**

Does the change effort play on people's need for a sense of belonging or cause them to over-identify with their employer?

- **Social Responsibility**

Is the desired culture appropriate given the environment or community in which the organization operates? Will the direct and indirect impacts of the cultural change improve or hurt society?

These ethical dilemmas are not easily resolved. HR professionals who are involved in cultural change processes can find general guidance in their professional codes of conduct. Another powerful tool is to simply ask "would I be willing to publicize, and provide a rationale for my actions to my fellow professionals?" Other actions that help may prevent or mitigate ethical dilemmas in cultural change work are:

- ensuring at least minimal alignment between our personal values and the desired cultural change
- keeping our change methods visible and discussible
- creating a feedback-rich environment so ethical issues can be surfaced and resolved

Diane MacDonald & Associates Inc. is a Calgary based consulting firm specializing in cultural change. Ethical dilemmas described in this article come from consulting experiences, and the work of such authors as Robert E. Quinn and Joseph W. Brockbank. Diane invites you to continue this discussion by contacting her at diane@orgtransformation.com.