



# Driving culture change through consistent and effective leadership behaviors – A DLA Distribution culture update

The Defense Logistics Agency Culture Survey provides the organization with the opportunity to identify areas for improvement based on the insights of employees across the enterprise. A key for any successful culture change effort is for leaders to understand how leadership behavior drives the ability of a culture to adapt itself to changing circumstances.

As the organization begins preparations for another cycle of the DLA Culture Survey in October, it provides an opportunity to discuss more generally what culture is and how it is imbedded by leadership in an organization. “There are two key elements of culture: culture is group-based and leaders are ultimately the main means for imbedding and changing cultures, said John Destalo, culture champion and member of the DLA Distribution Organization Development team.

Denison Consulting defines culture as simply “the way work gets done.” Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) Professor Edgar Schein defines this simple definition with the following description:

“Culture is created in the interactions we have with others in our normal day-to-day work life. “

The group aspect of culture and culture change is conveyed in the following statements by Dr. Schein:

“The power of a culture comes about through the fact that the beliefs and assumptions that truly drive behavior are shared and, therefore, mutually reinforced and maintained.”

“The strength and stability of culture derives from the fact that it is group-based – that an individual will hold onto certain basic assumptions to ratify his or her membership in the group.”

“Therefore if culture change efforts are

directed more at individuals than the group, the group can quickly, but not necessarily consciously, work against the individuals that are trying to bring new behaviors into the work group,” said Destalo.

“Therefore when we are talking about culture change it means that the workplace behaviors of a group are changing, and this change is driven by different beliefs and assumptions about their work,” continued Destalo.

“Additionally,” comments Destalo, “Leaders are the primary drivers of culture change. Once we have established that a culture is group-based behavior we can then talk about how these new behaviors are generally (and most successfully) brought into the group, mainly through leadership behaviors.”

Dr. Schein identified the following as the primary embedding mechanisms that leaders have available to them:

- What leaders pay attention to, measure, and control on a regular basis
- How leaders react to critical incidents and organizational crises
- How leaders allocate resources
- How leaders deliberately role model, teach, and coach
- How leaders allocate rewards and status
- How leaders recruit, select, promote, and discipline

Dr. Schein states:

“Even casual remarks and questions that are geared to a specific area can be potent as formal control mechanisms and measurements. If leaders are aware of this process, then being

systematic in paying attention to certain things becomes a powerful way of communicating a message, especially if leaders are totally consistent in their own behavior.”

“On the other hand, if leaders are not aware of this process or they are inconsistent in what they pay attention to, subordinates and colleagues will spend inordinate time and energy trying to decipher what a leader’s behavior really reflects and will even project motives onto the leader where none may exist.”

“The second bullet in the list demonstrates that leaders have a critical role after a significant incident in making sense of these shared events/ experiences,” said Destalo. “These experiences provide a powerful opportunity for leaders to help group members understand what has happened and why they are feeling the way they are.” These statements that help the group make some sense of the situation are crucial components of culture creation/change if they result in shared meaning to an important emotional experience.

Destalo recently came across the following description of culture in the book “Rework” by Jason Fried and David Heinemeier Hansson:

“Culture is the by-product of consistent behavior.”

“So that we can say the culture of a group is the by-product of consistent leadership behavior, and if this behavior is effective (helps solve problems) then an effective culture will result.”

“So if a leader seeks to change the culture of a group, the leader must change to the new behaviors and be consistent with the new behaviors when interacting on a day-to-day basis with the group they seek to change,” Destalo concluded.