

ethikos Volume 32, Number 4. July 01, 2018 Before you change corporate culture, define it

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“Culture” is today’s buzzword. Greed, false advertising, board complacency, poor team morale, exploitation of consumers, and sexual harassment of men and women in the workplace are among the challenges undermining a healthy corporate culture.

Although the word culture is heard a lot, what does it mean?^[1] Too often words or phrases are used and their meanings are taken for granted. Sometimes they can be confused or interchanged. Not only are there different types of culture (e.g., social, popular, political), a certain type of culture, like corporate or organizational, merits a definition specific to your entity.

The definition will be further shaped by the values and mission of an organization. Due to the complexity of what seems like a straightforward word, make sure everyone is on the same page.

Ask five lawyers to interpret an ambiguous clause in a contract and chances are you’ll get five different answers. Several years ago, I participated in a quality assurance (QA) committee meeting and asked folks at the table to define what they meant by QA. Not everyone had the same definition. This isn’t to suggest some were right and others were wrong. It underscores the point that an organization needs to be working off the same page. Assume nothing.

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