

I once had responsibility for a large technology project that never delivered on its objectives. We had a team of highly skilled people with a great track record of successful projects. They used processes that had succeeded repeatedly in the past. But we never got the traction to make this project take off.



The reason, I believe, lies in an unintentional shift that had occurred in the organization's culture. That change sucked the energy, passion, and motivation from this highly competent team. They had always been passionate to succeed but now they were just trying to get a job done.

## Defining Culture

In the 1980s, Dr. Edgar Schein did some foundational work on organizational culture at MIT. He defines culture in three layers.

On the surface, we see **ARTIFACTS** – easily observed characteristics like facilities and furnishings, how people dress, how they interact with each other, meeting practices, slogans and creeds, and other language choices.

Beneath these artifacts we have **SHARED VALUES** that drive behaviors and decisions that result in the artifacts. It's not just the core values hanging on the wall, even if those have been well articulated and are evident in the DNA of the organization. We have many layers of individual values. When we come together these get shaped -- intentionally or unintentionally -- into the values we share as a group.

But beneath the values is yet another layer. These are the **TACIT ASSUMPTIONS** that we don't consciously recognize in normal interactions. Participants become acclimatized to the "unspoken rules", taboo topics, and sacred cows that exist largely at a subconscious level.

The depth and complexity of culture explains why we find it so difficult to change.

Changing the artifacts alone won't create a new culture. Put in as many ping pong tables and coffee bars as you want, but those changes won't give you a Google-like culture.

Tacit Assumptions are hard to uncover and even harder to change. Once we discover them, they're no longer tacit. But other Tacit Assumptions will still lay below the surface.

Our best leverage comes from focusing on the *Values* layer. At some level, everything we do is driven by our values. Losing weight is hard if I value the momentary pleasure of that second (or third) scoop of ice cream over the health benefits of moderation.

Operating from a *shared understanding* of the reasons **WHY** we do things and the **NORMS** we expect everyone to operate by creates a powerful lever we can lean on to drive success. But too often, we just assume everyone shares our unspoken values.

In Part 2 I'll offer some tips on how to begin the process of changing organizational culture.

*enLumen Leadership Services: Turning Leadership Potential into Leadership Success*