

Open



Learn



Imagine

This brief article explores the meaning and management of organizational culture in the new 'Gig Economy.' The Cardiology Fellowship Training Program at the University of Michigan provides a fascinating case example of an organization whose people are always on the move. What they have learned about how to create (and sustain) their program's culture holds strong relevance for many organizations today, including some (like Uber) who are defining new organizational forms, and many others who are grappling with a high-churn millennial workforce.

Let's first admit that many of the traditional perspectives on how cultures get created and modified need to be re-imagined when we think about companies like Uber, Lyft, or Airbnb. These new organizational forms are radically different from the ones our founding fathers had in mind when they adopted metaphors like icebergs and ocean liners to set our sights on a slow-moving, evolutionary process. What does culture *really* mean, and how does it get defined and sustained in a fluid organizational setting? What roles are needed from the part-timers, short-timers, and consumer-employees in the new age of the 'Gig Economy'?¹

Consider for a moment the case of Uber, the innovative multi-billion dollar transportation app company. A 2015 survey of Uber's workforce found that half of new Uber drivers left within their first year, while one-third viewed "Ubering" as a temporary job while searching for full-time work elsewhere.² With this much changeover, I wonder how Uber will sustain its customer service, and what might be lost (or is most challenging) from a cultural perspective.³ Perhaps the latest controversies and lawsuits are indicative of these challenges. Perhaps Uber will learn new ways to create a culture around a fluid workforce, and teach us all *how* in the process.

As a change practitioner, the Uber case fascinates me as to *how* we can reach out to people who may not see themselves as part of the organization and ask them to play a central role in creating and sustaining its culture. There is a unique additional challenge when those people are in competition. How do you get a collection of individuals to see themselves as a *collective*? How do you build a *connected organization*?



What can we learn from universities?

Universities are interesting settings to witness these 'fluid' dynamics in action, and where the payoff of being intentional about the culture can be enormous. As with the Uber drivers, students are often in the role of consumer-employees when they simultaneously work for a department (or program) and receive an education and training from it. This means that students are an important part of what makes up these academic organizations and the cultures within them. But do others at the institution see them in this way, and more importantly, *do they see themselves in this way*?

Within the world of medical training programs, the traditional answer has been *not exactly*. The trainees, in their first years practicing medicine post med school, are there to learn from the attending physicians, and with



plenty of reminders of the established hierarchy along the way. Many if not all who have survived their training have their war stories and battle scars to show for it. And *this* is the culture that not only trains the next generation of physicians, but also that shapes the next generation of physician *leaders*. This begs the question: What cultures will they go on to create in the hospitals, health systems, and universities they will one day lead? For many, they will recreate what they experienced in their training.

The Cardiology Fellowship Training Program at the University of Michigan provides a compelling story of a graduate medical training program looking for a better way. The fellows come to the program from the best medical schools in the world. When they leave (typically after three years), many take prestigious jobs and make important contributions to the field. The program is among the top tier of a very competitive sub specialty of medicine. So, *what* is there to improve?

“Why do we need to change? Like everybody in the business world knows, the world is changing around us,” described the program’s director Dr. Peter Hagan.⁴ “We’ve had an explosion of knowledge and technology. The learners are changing. Society’s needs are changing. *And we have a culture problem.*”

Not everyone would agree with that last part. In my opinion, this is what makes Peter’s perspective so special (though my saying so will certainly make him uncomfortable). *In a training environment that is by any*

measure very good or even great, Peter sees how the program could be even better. He also knew that the cultural challenge runs deep, well beyond his program and the university. “Most programs operate on an old apprentice model, a cottage industry in the post-industrial world. We don’t apply modern, validated, education principles. So, how we train people is not a whole lot different than how people were being trained decades ago. I had this gnawing sense that there has to be a better way than the way we’re doing it right now.”

“There is a bigger story here. This isn’t about technology. You need to look at the culture and the environment, and how you’re training people.”

Peter credits an early discussion with a colleague, Chris Chapman (a media professional in the med school), as the spark for looking more closely at the program’s culture. Peter went to Chris bemoaning how they were ‘PowerPointing’ the fellows to death (or at least partially disengaging them from the lectures). Chris told him, “There is a bigger story here. This isn’t about technology. You need to look at the culture and the environment, and how you’re training people.”



For the fellowship, the key to the improvement process was going to center on empowering the fellows to build the program and the culture they wanted. In a fluid organization, not everyone will see the value and invest in a difficult change process.

Instead, the strategy was to start where the intrinsic motivation was strongest and look to create a tipping point with the others. “You need some people who are going to be your champions, who see the vision or have the ideas. The law of diffusion of innovation is something that we learned about. Not everybody bought in straight-up, and even to this day, some people don’t buy in.”

For those fellows who did buy in, they have found a cadence for honest discussion about the program culture. “We set a vision. We want to be the ideal training program. We want to empower and leverage our fellows to be builders. We want to develop a strong culture, a

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culture of ideas, a culture of support and openness. We want to improve that sense of community and energy.”

The ongoing dialogue about the program’s culture helped to set an agenda for fellow-initiated improvement projects. At first the wins were small but important.



Explore

They hosted a barbecue with faculty and alumni, they made more time for socializing with their peers, and they all got fleeces with a program logo as a symbol of getting more intentional about their brand. “If you say you’re going to do something and then a couple of months later nothing has changed, you’re done. And

luckily, the fellows were able to really make some rapid improvements in a very short period of time. Basically, fellows came up with ideas and said, ‘I want to do this,’ and off they went.”

Over time, there were deeper-rooted projects too. The fellows identified curriculum needs and explored new avenues for collaboration. They invited outside speakers to present on the topic of leadership. They started a process to redesign their work space to allow for greater peer collaboration. They engaged the faculty within the division in a similar process of culture introspection and dialogue.

They made culture a core component of their new fellow recruiting process.

As they took new jobs, senior fellows passed on their “champion” role to more junior fellows so that the process could repeat.

Though their story is still evolving, there are a number of early signals that the work is having a real impact. Faculty members across the division have commented on “what’s different with the cardiology fellows?!” Repeated surveys of the fellows over this same time validated the progress. The percentage of fellows whose rating of the program is “very positive,” the highest rating category on the 5-point scale, was up nearly 20 points to 80% overall, whereas the national average is 52%.



Every year, the fellows are asked another question (anonymously): *What percent of your personal potential do you feel that you are achieving in the program?*

The answer to this question is fundamental to Peter’s views about people and his reason for leading the program: “The Wright Brothers’ first flight of 120 feet at Kitty Hawk was in 1903, and we were on the moon within a lifetime. So, the human capability, the ability of humans when we want to do something or make something happen, is almost boundless. When people come to our program, my singular goal is that you’re going to reach your maximum potential, whatever that is.”

As with the overall program evaluations, the fellows’ response to the question about “personal potential” also improved by 10 points up to 80% overall. The fellows have responded to the progress they’ve seen over the last few years in a predictable way. *In a training environment that is by any measure very good or even great, they see how the program could be even better.*⁵



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Thought Starters for the Fluid Organization

The fellows' story highlights several lessons that we can use to create and sustain organizational cultures in the new 'gig economy'. Though there are many more principles to consider when getting a culture program off the ground and helping it to stick, this list focuses on the unique points of leverage within a fluid organization.

1 Identify the "storytellers" in your organization.

Even in the most fluid workplaces, there tends to be at least one or more people, often leaders, who provide constancy for the organization. Start there and engage these folks to the level of their interest and curiosity. Talk about the culture and try to understand their perspective on what could be improved. Down the path, they might either take on an active role to champion the culture work and/or play the influential role of "storyteller" to shape the narrative about 'our culture,' 'our journey,' and 'who we are.'

2 Cultivate a vision of an organization.

Many of the people in a fluid workplace may not see themselves as very connected to the organization. Getting them to invest in the organization's success will remain difficult as long as their sole focus is on their individual path and success. A vision that inspires people to think about their organization and work on its culture will likely have one or more of the following

elements: (i) the vision helps people see the interconnections between organizational success and personal success, (ii) it creates a stronger sense of investment in a community, and (iii) it gives people an explicit role in developing a "brand" that they will identify with, in the long haul.

3 Find the people who have the energy, and hand them the keys to the car.

There needs to be a vision that has credibility and spreads beyond the initial 'visionary'. However, the fluid organizational setting means that you won't reach everyone, and you won't have the luxury of a slow assimilation process. Instead, you'll need an efficient way to get your message out there and identify who has the interest and capability to step up. From there, it is about showing them how to engage and giving some guidance on their direction as needed. The 'car' you put them in should give them a rhythm for reflection and dialogue about the culture and should show them how to translate their ideas into action.

4 Use the rapid employee life cycle to energize the culture work.

A fluid organization has an employee lifecycle that is on steroids. Embrace this reality as an opportunity to define many touch-points to the culture work. During recruiting and onboarding, talk about the culture and the opportunities for improvement. Talk about the focus of the culture work and ask for active engagement in it. When people leave, use it as an opportunity to recognize their impact on the culture and ask them to 'pass the baton' to those who come next. After they're gone, ask them to come back and reflect on their experience, share their wisdom, and contribute to the longevity of the organization's cultural narrative.

5 Study the impact of the culture work.

It's an obvious point that people will be more likely to invest their time and effort into something that has a proven track record. However, when you reduce the expectation (or potential) for long-term employment, the bar might be that much higher to gain people's buy-in. Experience suggests that the work will be judged by the degree to which it empowers people to address some of the real challenges they face and do better on the real outcomes they care about. That is what will differentiate the culture work from being a 'nice-to-have' versus a 'need-to-have'.

References

¹ "Most remarkably, the number of Americans using these alternate work arrangements rose 9.4 million from 2005 to 2015." Check out Neil Irwin's article in *TheUpshot*: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/31/upshot/contractors-and-temps-accounted-for-all-of-the-growth-in-employment-in-the-last-decade.html?mwrsm=Email&_r=0

² This Forbes article by Ellen Huet provides a quick summary of Uber's 2015 survey of US drivers: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/ellenhuet/2015/01/22/uber-study-workforce/#2ad1482c1244>

³ There are hundreds of commentaries about the culture of Uber. Here is one by Arun Sundararajan in HBR that compares Uber to other companies using the consumer-employee model: <https://hbr.org/2014/11/what-airbnb-gets-about-culture-that-uber-doesnt>

⁴ Excerpts were taken from Dr. Hagan's 2016 invited presentation at the Denison Best Practices Forum.

⁵ I wish to briefly note that a second part to this article is planned that will focus on the perspective of the fellows whose efforts have been central to moving the culture work forward.



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