Uncovering Organizational Culture: A Necessary Skill for Athletic Trainers

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The athletic training literature has advocated development of a healthy culture in the clinic, industrial, and corporate practice settings. Although important, these are not the only settings where athletic trainers practice. Every athletic training practice setting will have a culture, and learning the culture in any setting is important.

When joining a new organization, the athletic trainer will have to learn its culture in order to succeed, regardless of whether he or she will be assuming a subordinate role or a leadership role. This learning process, generally referred to as the socialization process, is important to athletic training; however, the process can be more or less an unconscious act. Consequently, individuals can acquire organizational and professional values without fully understanding the basis for the values or why they are necessary.

The purpose of this report is to relate the importance of recognizing and understanding organizational culture. Athletic trainers need to understand the socialization process and should be actively engaged in the assumptions that guide the organization’s activities. Awareness of organizational culture will prepare athletic trainers to influence change within the practice setting.

Defining Organizational Culture

Organizational culture has been defined a number of ways in the literature. Organizational culture can be simply defined as the combination of knowledge, beliefs, values, behaviors, and practices that influence the manner in which members of a group think and act. Although groups within an organization may generate their own subculture, this report will focus on the culture of the larger organization. Among the various definitions of organizational culture that appear in the literature, the definition provided by Schein has gained widespread acceptance in the areas of organizational leadership and change. Schein defined organizational culture as follows:

A pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.
Schein conceptualized organizational culture as existing on three levels, with the essence of organizational culture represented on its deepest level by basic underlying assumptions (Figure 1). An advantage of Schein’s definition is that it identifies the socialization process, while acknowledging that the process involves a much deeper level of communication than most individuals usually perceive. The socialization process clearly conveys characteristics of the organizational climate, but it does not always reveal the underlying culture that has created the organization’s climate. A distinction should be made between organizational climate and organizational culture. Another advantage of Schein’s definition is that it recognizes the importance of the socialization process in communicating assumptions that are accepted by members of the organization.

Importance of Uncovering Organizational Culture

One of the most basic reasons for analysis of organizational culture is to successfully produce change. Before individuals who are in leadership positions can effect change, they must first understand what organizational members currently know, believe, and value. As subordinates come to an understanding of the beliefs and values driving the decisions made by leadership, they are better equipped to understand leadership decisions and the reasons for change. Furthermore, subordinates will be more capable of effectively communicating perceptions about the outcomes of leadership decisions.

Schein suggested that most occupational communication failures are the result of intercultural factors. This concept is particularly important to an athletic trainer because he or she is often a central figure in the delivery of care to patients. An athletic trainer communicates a plan of care for an injured athlete to coaches, administrators, and other health care professionals, each of whom are influenced by different organizational and professional beliefs and values. Developing a better understanding of the beliefs and values held by other individuals who are associated with the care process will facilitate effective communication.

Another reason to understand organizational culture is to help the organization adjust to its external environment. Although Schein emphasized the effect of technology on organizations, no organization is fully insulated from the external environment. Two key traits of successful companies identified by de Gues are (a) awareness of their identity and (b) tolerance for new ideas that will expand knowledge and understanding.

Although the observations of de Gues specifically referred to organizations, Schein acknowledged that occupations have cultures, just like organizations. Therefore, an occupation that wants to succeed must also have an understanding of its culture and must be open to changes that are necessary to adjust to the external environment. The growing influence of evidence-based medicine in healthcare is forcing athletic trainers to develop processes for reflecting on their beliefs and values so that they are more open to changing past practices that are not supported by evidence.

In summary, developing an understanding of the dynamics of an organization’s culture can help reduce the confusion and anxiety one experiences when presented with seemingly irrational behaviors from other groups within the organization, the organization’s leadership, and/or groups with similar interests outside the organization. An individual who identifies with