Forefront

March 22, 2018

Forefront Large Conference Room

**Making Sense of Your Org’s Culture & the Complexities of Merging Two Cultures**

Forefront held a session on *Making Sense of Your Org’s Culture & the Complexities of Merging Two Cultures*. Marty McConnell, Appreciative Solutions Group, and Terra Winston, inTerract Consulting, led the session.

Blending organizational cultures can be a challenge in any merger. Sometimes conflicts can arise because the organizations are at different places in the continuum of things such as rules implementation and conflict resolution; other times conflicts might come from a divergence between stated values and actual practices. An accurate assessment of organizational culture and how it functions is important to planning how the cultures will combine. In discussing how to make this assessment and how cultures can blend, participants made the following points:

* Organizations are the product of many cultures, including the sector they work in, cultures tied to their geography, the cultures people in the organization bring with them, and the work and management styles of people in the organization. Sometimes these different layers of culture can lead to issues in communication and blending organizations.
* Organizations may state they have the same values but implement them in different ways. For example, two organizations may say they value collaboration, but one might have a culture of continuing discussions until consensus is reached, while another might get input from across the organization but have leaders make decisions at a certain point to reduce the time taken with discussion. When blending cultures, organizations need to be clear about how they express their values.
* When examining the culture of an organization, all levels need to be analyzed. If only the top levels are examined, decision-making might seem to be very collaborative. It could be, though, that collaborative decisions made at the top become orders that those below need to follow. What seems like a collaborative organization to some may appear to be much more hierarchical to others.
* Organizational assessments should also be based on reality rather than aspirations — goals are good, but culture blending needs to be based on how things are now, not how people want them to be.
* Many organizational cultures are valid, so an assumption that a certain way of functioning is inherently superior can build conflict. Looking at why specific cultures exist and how they express organizational values is more important than judging one culture to be better than another.
* One way of analyzing organizational culture is to provide a historic example of how an organization meets challenges to someone who is not in the organization, and then have the listener reflect back what they are hearing and what kind of culture they see in the example. This is based on the theory of appreciative inquiry, which assumes that important information lives within the stories of people within an organization.
* The way organizations handle a challenge is based in part on the people who are dealing with the problem and how they make decisions. The individuals are not the entire story, though; the culture of an organization might help determine how they channel their talents and abilities into addressing an issue. That means both people and the way the organization enables their contributions should be part of a culture analysis.
* Diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts might face challenges if merging organizations are at different points in addressing this issue. Making progress on DEI requires deliberate, long-term action. Connecting actions to ideals, following in the steps of leaders in the area, and giving clear steps to help people and organizations can move forward on this issue are some ways of better integrating DEI ideals in merging organizations.
* Culture norms are important but also tend to be established through relationships and activity, rather than through written statements. Talking to people in the organization and carrying out focus groups can help reflect the culture more than a written statement can.

**Three takeaways from this session:**

1. Organizations are the product of many cultures, including the sector they work in, cultures tied to their geography, the cultures people in the organization bring with them, and the work and management styles of people in the organization. Sometimes these different layers of culture can lead to issues in communication and blending organizations.
2. When examining the culture of an organization, all levels need to be analyzed. If only the top levels are examined, decision-making might seem to be very collaborative. It could be, though, that collaborative decisions made at the top become orders that those below need to follow, so what seems like a collaborative organization to some may appear to be much more hierarchical to others.
3. One way of analyzing organizational culture is to describe how an organization meets challenges to someone who is not in the organization, and then have the listener reflect back what they are hearing and what kind of culture they see in the account. This is based on the theory of appreciative inquiry, which assumes that important information lives within the stories of people within an organization.