

# To Create an Intentional Culture, Ask These Questions



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**You can't leave culture to chance—it takes deliberate care and feeding. The answers to six important questions can help you develop a healthy organizational culture that ensures inclusion and**

# accountability and supports success in achieving your mission.

“Every organization has a culture. It’s either by design or default, and too often it’s by default,” says American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) CEO Arlene Pietranton, PhD, CAE.

The case for intentionally building and managing culture is strong. A 2016 Deloitte study demonstrated the **impact of culture on results**. Studies across a variety of industries and types of organizations **support that finding**.

To learn whether your association is managing culture in a purposeful way, ask these six questions:

**1. Are you managing your culture, or is it managing you?** If you’re not doing the following, you may be too passive about culture.

- You reward behaviors that reflect the best aspects of your culture.
- You note and redirect behaviors that are counter to the cultural norms.
- You consider cultural “fit” when making hiring and promotion decisions.
- You include **core competency evaluation** in your formal review process that supports the culture.

**2. What is your current culture *really* like?** Don’t guess. Start with a **culture audit**. Look for the presence of core values, such as **trust** and integrity, that form the basis of every strong culture, as well as others unique to your organization.



**Culture is the sum total of how people behave in an organization, and therefore it is always changing as people change, act, and react. You are either moving closer to or farther away from your desired state.**

**3. How does your culture affect the members you serve?** Look for ways that culture can be extended to members. Meetings are rich opportunities. Make sure that you promote a culture of respect for attendees, that your speakers reflect diversity and inclusion, and that your meeting is accessible.

**4. Is your culture inclusive, and does it reflect the diversity of your workforce and the people you serve?** Research shows that organizations with greater diversity **perform better**. Ask yourself whether building inclusion is intentional in your culture. At the American Academy of Hospice and Palliative

Medicine (AAHPM), staff created an “I am” wall for members and other conference participants to express who they are. AAHPM also offers educational sessions on cultural awareness or unconscious bias and creates ways for people to connect based on interests instead of job function.

**5. How do you change culture?** Changing culture can be difficult, particularly in an organization with long-time leaders or employees and dearly held practices. Here are a few places to start:

- Continually challenge the mindset that says, “We have always done it this way.”
- Recognize that cultural change is both “bottom up and top down.” It must be informed by the diversity of people who work in the organization, and leaders need to model it and hold everyone accountable.
- Focus on continuous, incremental improvement, and celebrate small wins.
- Think carefully about “what you encourage and what you allow,” advises Karen Burgess, MBA, CAE, executive director at the Michigan Dental Association.

**6. What are the special challenges for organizational culture posed by the governance structure of associations?** Steve Smith, CAE, executive director and CEO at AAHPM, says his association thinks of culture as “how we work with each other—volunteers and staff—working together on the mission.”

One way to reinforce culture is to create a Code of Conduct for the organization, giving everyone the same set of expectations. (In 2011, ASAE adopted Standards of Conduct for members.) Less formally, encourage and remind employees to exhibit the desired cultural behaviors with volunteers and board members to help culture migrate from employees to members over time.

Finally, culture is not static. It is the sum total of how people behave in an organization, and therefore it is always changing as people change, act, and react. You are either moving closer to or farther away from your desired state.

“Culture trumps it all,” ASHA’s Pietranton notes. “You can have lots of really talented folks, a great strategic plan, and can be really well resourced, but the opportunity to undermine intentionally or unintentionally can derail your likelihood of success.”

In the end, she notes, “what you accomplish is certainly important, and how you go about it matters.”

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