

Module Overview: Understanding and changing organizational culture¹

Journalists are often thought of and think of themselves as the “squeaky wheel,” people whose job it is to shine a light on the people and places in our communities that don’t meet expectations. Indeed, public culture is full of examples where journalists were able to tell the truth about a problem in society and, through that telling, make change happen. And while efforts to speak truth to power from a newsroom are valorized, some of those very same newsrooms villainize those who speak up about their own toxic work environments that don’t just tolerate bullies but normalize and celebrate that behavior as great journalism. The disconnect between the ethical creation of news content and the unethical culture in which that news content is created has led to an increasing number of “young women and young people of color leaving the news industry at disproportionate numbers after facing ill treatment, a lack of respect or worse.”² If we don’t change our newsrooms’ cultures, this continued exodus will have a profound impact on the long-term efficacy of the news industry.

Understanding how organizational culture is created and sustained offers a valuable tool kit for us as we think about the communities in which we do our work. Organizations with a strong culture of supporting diversity and inclusion and valuing ethical leadership and followership are workplaces where everyone, from editor to beat reporter, can do their best work. Organizations with a strong culture of supporting toxic behaviors and valuing unethical leaders are workplaces that celebrate power and privilege over doing good work.

So, how do you know? How can you tell if an organization you are joining will be a supportive culture or a toxic work culture? And as leaders and followers, how do we change an organization’s culture into one where ethical leadership and followership are valued and supported?

The purposes of this module are multiple:

- To introduce students to concepts of organizational culture including the primary and secondary mechanisms by which organizational culture is created, circulated, upheld and/or changed.
- To help students understand the role that organizational culture has in how work is accomplished within organizations.
- To prompt students to think about how they might use elements of organizational culture to assess an organization and make sense of whether that culture will be one that is potentially supportive or one that is potentially dysfunctional and/or destructive.
- To prompt students to think about what it takes to change an organization’s culture and what role they can play in that change.

This module illustrates the concepts of organizational culture through a case study using a New York Times article that discusses the problems found at WYNC; a custom produced video describing the concept of organizational culture, a video of an interview with Dr. Robert Sutton, professor of management science and engineering and organizational behavior at Stanford University, in which he describes the impact that organizational culture can have on people in their workplace and how culture can be shaped and changed; a video of an interview with Debbie Hiott, general manager at KUT, the NPR station of Austin, Texas, in which she describes how she worked to change the organizational culture at the station; a video of a facilitated discussion with news leaders on what specifically organizations can do to change their culture and advance gender equity in the news, and a variety of supplementary materials.³

Module Content

Case and Teaching Note

The case, “Understanding and Changing Organizational Culture” using the article “It’s Media’s ‘Mean-Too’ Moment,” ties the module together. The case asks students to apply the concepts of organizational culture to better understand why WYNC has continued to face challenges in terms of its work culture. Additionally, the case prompts students to generate ways in which the culture of WNYC could be changed and how they (if they were working at WNYC) might be a part of that change.

The module and case teaching notes provide guidance for leading an in-class discussion of the case and the related materials and offer suggestions for a multiple-day course plan for teaching about organizational culture.

Shaping Organizational Culture

A custom-produced video by Dr. Jennifer L. Jones Barbour, “Understanding Organizational Culture,” describes what organizational culture is, the primary and secondary mechanisms by which organizational culture is created and sustained, and what are artifacts of organizational culture.

“Shaping Organizational Culture,” a custom-produced interview with Dr. Robert Sutton, professor of management science and engineering and organizational behavior at Stanford University, describes how organizations and leaders can shape their organization’s culture and what someone potentially joining an organization can look for when deciding whether to join an organization.

Organizational Culture Activity

This in-class activity is designed to give students practice in finding and examining artifacts of an organization's culture.

Changing Organizational Culture Activity

This in-class activity is designed to give students an introduction to the policies and practices that organizations can use to change a toxic culture and/or sustain a fair and safe organizational culture.

Accounts of Journalists

In the video “Debbie Hiott of KUT on Leading Organizational Change,” Dr. Joe Cutbirth interviews Hiott, general manager of KUT, about the work she did to understand the existing organizational culture when she took over at KUT’ and her efforts to change the organization's culture.

In “What Works: From Good Intentions to Effective Action,” a video recording of a facilitated presentation and discussion, journalist Katie Couric and Siri Chilazi of the Women and Public Policy Forum lead a discussion on what organizations can do to mitigate things such as implicit bias and create real change in journalism to advance gender equality.

Supplementary Materials

This article defines organizational culture and applies the concepts to the experiences of female managers in professional sports. The article focuses on the ways that an organization's culture can be toxic and how individuals navigate that toxicity.

- Lauren C. Hindman and Nefertiti A. Walker. "Sexism in Professional Sports: How Women Managers Experience and Survive Sport Organizational Culture." *Journal of Sport Management* 34, no. 1 (2020): 64-76

This article describes the role that leaders play in the creation and maintenance of an organization's culture. The article describes the ways that leaders can change an organization's culture.

- D.D. Warrick and Donald G. Gardner. "Leaders Build Cultures: Action Steps for Leaders to Build Successful Organizational Cultures." *Journal of Leadership Accountability and Ethics* vol. 18 (2021): 1

This article describes organizational culture and offers insights and suggestions for how leaders within organizations can pay attention to and change organizational culture.

- Boris Groysberg, Jeremiah Lee, Jesse Price and J. Cheng. "The leader's guide to corporate culture." *Harvard Business Review* 96, no. 1 (2018): 44-52

This report gathers the work of professors in psychology, sociology and the behavioral sciences as well as business leaders and strategists to examine evidence-based ideas for promoting diversity, equity and inclusion in workplaces.

- ["What Works"](#)

This video gives a brief introduction to implicit bias and the role it can play in an organization's hiring and promotion practices.

- [Ethics Unwrapped on Implicit Bias](#)

¹ This module overview was written by Dr. Jennifer L. Jones Barbour for the purposes of facilitating the teaching of the module on Organizational Culture.

² Minette Drumwright, Kathleen McElroy and Carolyn McGourty Supple, "Colleges Can't Wait for Newsrooms to Fix Themselves," *Poynter*, Sept. 2, 2020.

³ Ben Smith, "It's the Media's 'Mean-Too' Moment. Stop Yelling and Go to Human Resources," *New York Times*, May 23, 2021.