

Introduction & Background

I remember the first time I walked in to the Ohio Shared Services (OSS) office building. I think I was there for a meeting, or maybe it was specifically to take a tour. OSS had only just recently launched, and other state agencies were watching to see how things went. At this point in my career, I was (if I remember correctly) working as a Training Program Manager for the Ohio Department of Administrative Services.

As I walked in, I was struck by how un-state-like it was. The floorplan was vast and open – cubicles were arranged with low walls so that everybody could see into everybody else's workspace. I recall hearing at the time that there were no offices – not even the director sat behind closed doors. I remember seeing what were, at the time, state of the art flat screen monitors all around with metrics and data being displayed – the number of calls in queue, the average time of the calls, etc. Another unique concept being implemented at OSS was that of utilizing self-directed work teams. Leads, coaches, and more were available to help the front-line associates, but the idea was that the teams would manage themselves and their work. The incentive? A form of merit based pay for the teams that performed the best. This was also unique to Ohio's state government, as far as I can recall. OSS had been built from the ground up in an effort to centralize common state accounting functions such as paying bills.

With such a unique layout and mindset shaping the culture, I remember wondering how people were adjusting to life at OSS. The workforce of Shared Services Associates (SSAs) came from other state agencies which are traditionally much more hierarchical and formal than what I was seeing at OSS. I remember thinking what a tremendous change it must have been for the employees – what a “culture shock” that they might experience. These memories make the recent organizational culture assessment of OSS that I performed all the more interesting to me. Through my good fortune of now being a director of training in the agency which oversees OSS,

I was able to assess their culture and will be sharing the results with their management team and staff members soon.

Assessment Implementation

In order to complete the assessment, I first explored utilizing the CultureActive.com tool that we reviewed in class. My proposal to explore utilizing it was accepted, although was lukewarm. The focus on international culture as opposed to organizational culture was difficult for me to explain and I believe this contributed to it not being as well received as it could have been. However, as it turned out, CultureActive.com ended up being cost-prohibitive and so I sought another alternative.

Having been exposed to the Competing Values Framework while working as a Senior HR Specialist at the Ohio Housing Finance Agency, I was delighted when Professor Bairatchnyi told me about the Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument (OCAI) online tool that utilizes the Competing Values Framework as its foundation. Upon learning that a student discount was available, I felt that the price coupled with my familiarity of the Competing Values Framework made OCAI my assessment tool of choice.

Upon proposing the idea of assessing the culture of OSS to members of its leadership (proposal attached), I was met with resounding enthusiasm. The team was grateful to have my assistance in assessing their culture. They have undergone several changes in key leadership positions recently, and the new director is making a very positive impact already. She saw this as an opportunity to learn even more about the division. The timing was also good because our agency had just completed an employee engagement survey within the past six months. We were able to tie this assessment into that survey as a way to demonstrate to employees that we are still interested in their engagement and their happiness at work.

After receiving approval to proceed from OSS leadership, I made a presentation at the division's April 5, 2016 town hall meeting (attached). During that presentation, leadership voiced their support and I presented on a few key aspects related to organizational culture and OCAI. Specifically, I used the "iceberg" metaphor we covered in class to explain how organizational culture has both observed and tacit components.



Figure 1. Matthew Dyer uses the "iceberg" metaphor of organizational culture at OSS Town Hall meeting.

In talking about the OCAI instrument, I repeated several times that the results would be kept confidential in order to calm any potential fears employees might have had about taking the assessment. I received and answered, in conjunction with OSS leadership, many questions from staff who seemed interested and eager to take the assessment.



Figure 2. Matthew Dyer explains about organizational culture.

After my presentation, the division director asked me to investigate whether or not a separate assessment could be created for the 12 members of leadership in addition to the assessment for the entire division. For her, it was very important to see if there was overlap or incongruence between where leadership wants to head and where employees want to head. Given that the director was essentially my client, I wanted to deliver a product that she would be able to utilize in the manner she had requested. After contacting OCAI, they allowed me to purchase a second assessment to use for OSS leadership. While I purchased the first one out-of-pocket, OSS paid for the second assessment.

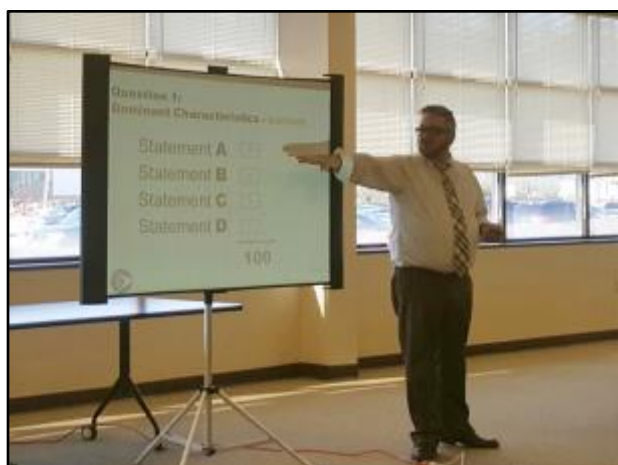


Figure 3. Matthew Dyer explains how the OCAI assessment is completed.

I opened the assessment on Monday, April 11, 2016 and planned to keep it open for one week. I sent one mid-week reminder on the 13th and forwarded a few images that could serve as reminders to take the assessment – the images would be placed on the flat screen monitors throughout the building.

By Monday, April 18th, 28 non-leadership employees had responded to the survey, representing an approximate 53% completion rate. After discussing it with OSS leadership and obtaining approval from our agency legal department, I sent one more email to the employees stating that a \$25 gift card would be awarded to three randomly selected employees if we reached a 90%

completion rate by the end of the week. Initially I wanted to offer a single gift card to a random participant of \$75, but (ironically) state government culture and Ohio Ethics Law wouldn't allow me to make such an offering.

I left the survey open for the rest of the week and on Friday, April 22 I had received two additional responses. I relayed my thanks to the employees thanking those who had participated, and stated that unfortunately since a 90% completion rate had not been achieved, no incentive would be provided.

In addition to the 30 people who completed the non-leadership assessment, 11/12 members of leadership completed it using a separate assessment link. This was a very nice participation rate. I'm grateful that the division's director, Sherri Lowe, requested that we have the two separate surveys – the results are quite interesting.

Results

The results from the OCAI assessment were interesting, but not entirely surprising. Overall, the general consensus was that the organization is too focused on hierarchy. Non-supervisory staff would like to see a substantial shift in focus to more of a clan culture. Leadership would also like to lessen the focus on hierarchy, but wants the organization to become a more balanced culture with no stronger focus in any of the four areas.

Following is a copy of the collective results that will be shared with the employees in the coming weeks.

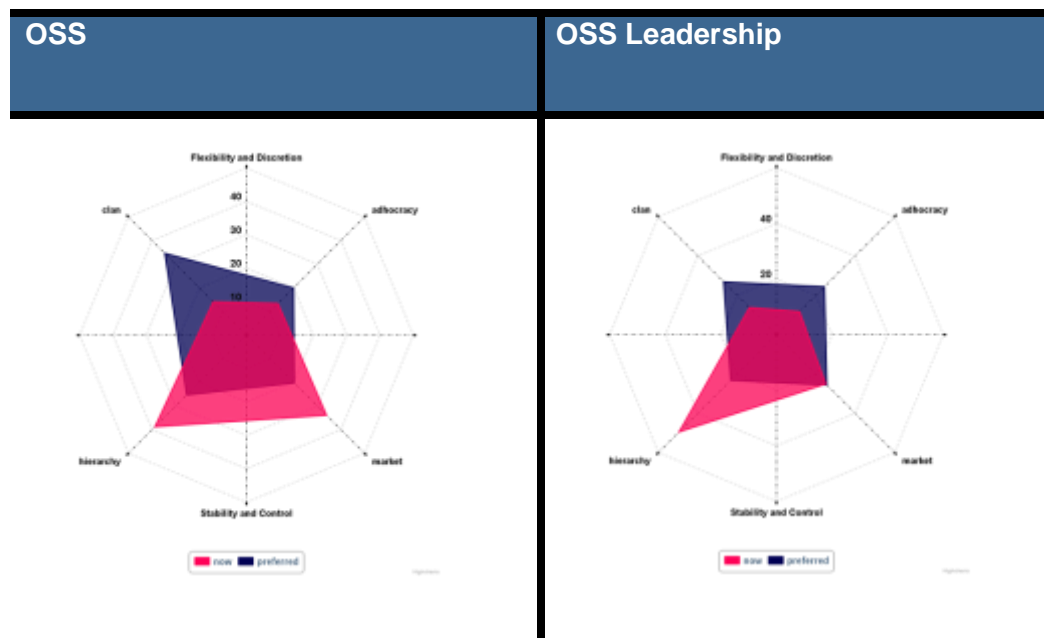


Figure 4. Overview of results from OCAI assessment administered at Ohio Shared Services.

Of course as you are probably already aware, the OCAI assesses six components of organizational culture: dominant characteristics, organizational leadership, management of employees, organizational glue, strategic emphasis, and criteria of success. This paper will not go into the detailed overview of each component for the sake of brevity.

A few things stood out to me in reviewing the assessment results. First, yes the organizational culture has a hierarchical focus. This is unsurprising to me because the associates – the front line employees doing the work, are rated on how well they follow procedures when processing their work. If they don't follow the instructions exactly as written, they become ineligible for performance incentives being offered. This rigid approach is useful when all of the work being done is the same, but each agency who submits work to OSS does things just a little bit differently from each other. The associates currently aren't allowed to think on their feet or make adjustments, even if it would result in a happier customer. From my perception, this is why the focus is so much on control.

The center was designed with collaboration in mind, according to an article from 2011 which stated, “The center was built to encourage collaboration and interchangeability. It has an open floor plan, low walls and cubicles that have an atypical 120-degree bend” (Williams).

Collaboration is a key aspect of clan culture, yet the center is assessed as representing a hierarchical culture. I do find it interesting that even with the physical design of the space, the organizational culture fought back and is winning with its hierarchical focus.

Knowing what I do about OSS, I think it’s interesting that they’re utilizing a self-directed work team model, yet they’re so focused on production and hierarchy at the same time. I think they will need to find a balance between rules and procedures and allowing employees the freedom to be truly more self-directed before the cultural perceptions will align more closely.

The next thing that stood out, which I believe to be a strength that could be leveraged, is that there is some level of agreement between leadership and non-supervisory staff. Being able to present this kind of data to the department so they can see they’re “on the same page” about where the organization should head could be very useful. I thought it was interesting that the leadership perception of how much of a hierarchy focus there is was stronger than the non-supervisory perception. I would imagine employees will be happy to see this. The results should act as a validating mechanism and reassure people that they’re all perceiving things in a similar way.

I found it interesting that leadership thinks they’re right where they need to be when it comes to market culture, but non-supervisory employees want to reign in that focus. This tells me management has some work to do – it’s one area where the perceptions aren’t lining up. If management thinks they’re right where they need to be, they’ll need to make some decisions about how to proceed so that employees understand their rationale.

Recommendations and Conclusion

As I was completing this report, I came across the following quotation, which seemed particularly salient: “Technology made the Ohio Shared Services possible, but overhauling culture was what made it work” (Williams, 2011). Even when OSS was just starting out, conversations were being had about the culture and how this division would be different than any other state agency. However, all of the employees, all of them, came from state agencies. State agencies are typically very focused on hierarchy – the chain of command rules. People who can align themselves to this culture are the ones who typically succeed. To create a new culture using people who were embedded in an old culture – I always wondered how well that would work out. As we’ve learned in this course, it might have been wise to conduct this type of organizational culture assessment closer to the very beginning of OSS so that people could see and understand what they were getting into. That said, to be conducting this kind of assessment now, particularly after some key leadership turnover has occurred, may be the most perfect of timings.

As I told the leadership team, for the purposes of my school report I had what I needed to write the report and could consider this project closed. However, I am certainly willing to continue having conversations about organizational culture. We will likely make collaborative decisions on how to proceed with these results. We’ve scheduled one meeting to review them more closely. At that time, we will talk about next steps and work together to create an action plan. The OCAI action planning tools are rather sparse and ultimately suggest identifying what the organization will do less of, and what it will do more of, in each of the four quadrants of the Competing Values Framework. This makes sense, but we will have to identify what those actions will be.

I am scheduled to return to OSS to present the results to all staff in two weeks. I would not be surprised to see focus groups and continuing conversations occur as a result of this assessment. Sherri, the division director, made a suggestion of forming a committee to continue the work. I like that suggestion and I think that would be a great way to demonstrate to staff that leadership not just listening to feedback, but acting upon it as well.

The one additional recommendation I have would be to make sure we revisit this assessment in two to five years to see what, if anything, has changed. This will allow for continuity, and will also keep the conversation going. I said in my original presentation that nobody should expect broad, sweeping changes to occur overnight. However, not doing anything with these results could do more harm than good. Knowing the personalities involved, I am confident OSS will continue to have conversations about and around organizational culture. I am honored to have had a part in helping to surface some of the “hidden” components of its culture, and I look forward to seeing the changes that occur within the next several years.

References

Williams, M. (2011). Ronn Kolbash. Retrieved from <http://www.govtech.com/top-25/Ronn-Kolbash-030111.html>.

Williams, M. & Collins, H. (2010, September). Share & share alike. *Government Technology*, 23(9), 21-25.