9 Elements of a Person-Centered System: Culture

By Michael Smull, Bob Sattler, and Tanya Richmond

**Partners at Support Development Associates**
and NCAPPS Faculty

Becoming a person-centered organization requires a culture of power with rather than power over and a robust learning culture at every level of the organization. This means that what is working and not working in moving toward the vision is regularly reviewed and opportunities to address what is not working are sought. In too many change efforts, the dominant organizational culture quietly supports power over, kills the learning culture and minimizes success. These negative attributes of organizational culture include:

- Endemic power over practices.
- Blame culture (and its sibling, fear-based management)
- Pervasive cynical discontent
- Vision derision
- Excessive compliance culture
- Crisis culture

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Power over is present where there is tunnel vision focused on health and safety. In a person-centered culture, health and safety is addressed in the context of how the person wants to live. In a power over culture, health and safety determines the context for how the person will live. What matters to the person is addressed secondarily. Organizationally, power over can be present at all levels of the organization. It can be reflected in management practices and/or in individual interactions. It can vary from team to team.

A power over culture will prevent the development of a robust learning culture. It is difficult to establish and sustain psychological safety in an authoritarian, hierarchical structure.

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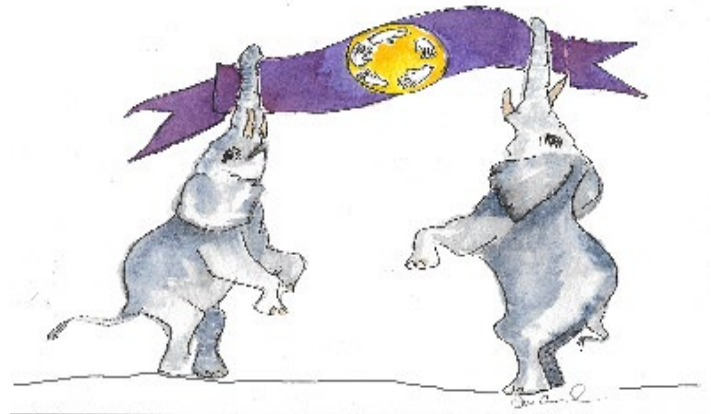
A learning culture depends on the presence of:

- Regular efforts to see what is working and not working with regard to:
  - Vision use
  - Psychological safety
  - Accountability
  - Partnership (which depends on the presence of respect and trust)

A robust learning culture is focused on movement toward the vision. It looks for effectiveness and efficiency. Effectiveness means that change efforts result in movement towards the vision. Efficiency means doing so with the fewest resources possible. There is an expectation that those doing the work will scan for opportunities that can be acted on immediately without asking permission from leadership. These opportunities, known as Level One Changes, are seen as positive but may or may not be successful. If successful, these initiatives provide strategies to build on and do more of, while those that aren't successful also provide valuable lessons.

A robust learning culture does not exist in isolation; a constellation of other attributes must be present. First among these is psychological safety. Inherent in a learning culture is the idea that you learn from what doesn't work as well as what does work. It must be safe to report on what doesn't work, and it must be safe to put forward ideas that may never work or need more effort to be successful. This also implies that those who are making the effort know where it is OK to try things and where it is not OK. This leads to a culture of accountability in which performance expectations are clear. There are core responsibilities that must be approached in a specific way where we're not looking for creativity, and there are responsibilities where judgment and creativity is encouraged to meet the required outcome. These distinctions must be clear. This also implies that the work is being done in a culture of partnership rooted in respect and trust.

What are the silent killers of change that undermine the necessary learning culture?

- **Blame culture** can be insidious and may not be noticed by those practicing it. Blame culture is present if the response to something going awry is to ask whose fault it is rather than why it happened. If everything is seen as a core responsibility and there is a lack of distinction between core responsibility and judgment and creativity, blame culture will take root.

- One of the drivers for change is discontent. But there are two kinds of discontent: optimistic and cynical. Optimistic discontent is present when people see the changes needed and expect they will happen. **Cynical discontent** is present when people believe that change is needed but also believe that it will not happen, or they have no ability to impact it. Where cynical discontent is dominant, change is stifled. Is the

vision seen as a compelling aspiration or as "pie in the sky"? Is it seen as a nice sentiment but not practical? "**Vision derision**" is a sign of cynical discontent.

- What is valued matters. If **compliance** has the highest value, there may not be opportunities to try things, or to make changes to see if they work. If new things are tried and disregarded or criticized because they do not fit within that compliance requirement, people will stop trying. The focus on excessive compliance kills the learning culture.

- A learning culture requires time for reflection. If the culture is one of chronic crisis, time is seen as a scarce commodity and reflection is seen as a luxury. A strong **crisis culture** does not provide the needed time for reflection. It becomes addictive and one feels at a loss if there is no crisis. The focus becomes the application of a quick fix and a rapid move on to the next crisis. Because little time is spent identifying the root cause of the crisis, it is not eliminated and will reappear. You then have a crisis cycle that is self-reinforcing.

Those who seek to change the culture need to keep in mind that culture is resilient. Where negative aspects of culture have been embedded and are part of the fabric of the organization, it takes a consistent and focused effort to replace them with new practices. Creating a culture of psychological safety requires a culture of trust that underlies the perception of safety. Trust is fragile and if broken, takes time and vigilance to be regained.

Leaders need to note that there is not only organizational culture but there's also team culture. The culture of teams is influenced by the culture of the organization, but it can be starkly different. Those who are assessing the culture of the organization must also look at the culture of individual teams and be prepared to address any issues that arise.

Finally, this culture needs to not only be established, but it needs to be sustained. This is especially true where there's high turnover. Those entering the organization may well have misperceptions of their role and responsibilities. Training in person-centered thinking and practices needs to be a central part of on-boarding. New staff need a mentor or coach who will model and explain the desired practices.