

ACTIVITY:

Identifying Elements of Organizational Culture¹

The purpose of this activity is to give students an opportunity to practice using elements of organizational culture to discuss and analyze an organization and for students to learn about a culture they already are a part of.

This activity takes place across two class periods or portions of two class periods. Students need to get directions and then have time to collect their elements to share with the class for discussion. Ask students to watch the video “Understanding Organizational Culture” to prepare. This will help students decide what to choose for the activity.

Prompt for students: Find an example of organizational culture for the college, department or newsroom (whichever organization should be the focus of the assignment) that you think represents that organization's culture. Take a picture of the artifact and send it/upload it to the instructor.

Process for activity: Once all the pictures are turned in, the instructor compiles the pictures into a shared document, typically a PowerPoint, Keynote or Google Slides document, with one image on each slide.² This slide deck is then shown to the entire class on the second day. Ask the class to reflect on the questions below individually as you show the slide deck at least two times through. After students have reflected individually, continue to run the slide deck (you can put it on automatic playthrough) while students share in small groups what they notice about the organizational culture as highlighted by the collected images.

As students view the slides, have them reflect on the following questions:

- What are the relationships being described in the images? Relationships between people, places, ideas? What do these relationships look like? Is anything missing? Not said? Left out?
- What language is being used in the images? Who gets to use the language? Everyone? Only some people? Is anything missing? Not said? Left out?
- What key stories, rituals, metaphors are being described in the images? Are there villains? Heroes? Is anything missing? Not said? Left out?
- What are the stated values? Is anything missing? Not said? Left out?
- As you look at our collected images, are there any that we as a class left out? Should have included? Why?

Once the smaller groups of students have had time to discuss together (15-20 minutes) then ask the groups to share with the entire class.

Use the questions above in the larger group to guide the conversation. The goal is to have each group and then the entire class analyze and assess the organizational culture such that they could talk about it with someone — introduce the culture to someone who didn't know anything about the organization.

Importantly, questions of what is not there are often the most insightful parts of the conversation. Additionally, sometimes there will be differences in how students have understood the same culture — often highlighting issues of diversity, inclusion, power and privilege. These can be important moments of insight for the entire group.

If there is time, initiate a conversation in which students identify two or three things they would like to see changed about the organization's culture, ending with ideas on how that change might happen and the role students can play.

¹ This activity was developed by Dr. Jennifer L. Jones Barbour as the basis of class discussion.

² See example activity documents for an idea of what the compiled pictures can look like.