

TEACHING NOTE:

# Understanding and Changing Organizational Culture<sup>1</sup>

## Case Synopsis

This case study uses an article written by Ben Smith, published in The New York Times on May 23, 2021.<sup>2</sup> In the article, Smith recounts ongoing and emerging problems that have plagued WNYC, one of the biggest, if not the most famous, radio station in the United States. Described as either an epidemic of bullying or an epidemic of whining, Smith paints a picture of a dysfunctional organizational culture where several individuals at WNYC have been allowed to behave in ways that create a challenging (at the very least) work environment. The article describes elements of organizational culture that demonstrate the dysfunctional culture at WNYC as well as some efforts to change organizational culture by leadership at the station. This case study raises issues related to organizational culture: how to recognize elements of organizational culture and use them to examine a specific newsroom's culture, the role of leadership in creating and changing organizational culture and the role of individual power and structural policy in creating and sustaining an organization's culture. The article sets the stage for a discussion of how to identify, examine and change organizational culture.

## Teaching Objectives

- 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.

## Supporting Materials

Have students read the article by Ben Smith published in The New York Times on May 23, 2021 in preparation for class discussion.

Students could also watch "Shaping Organizational Culture," an interview with Dr. Robert Sutton, for discussion after the case study discussion.

See "Module Overview: Understanding and Changing Organizational Culture" for a full list of supporting materials that can be used with this case.

### Assignment Questions for Students

1. How is organizational culture at WNYC described throughout the article? What elements are used to illustrate/illuminate the culture?
2. What are the challenges of describing the organizational culture at WNYC as either bullying or whining?
3. Smith suggests that at least in part the problem is with the structures of the newsroom — what does that mean?
4. Evaluate how Audrey Cooper did as a new leader who wanted to lead positive change in the culture at WNYC. What did she do well, and what did she do poorly?
5. What can newsroom leaders and followers do to create a more supportive and ethical organizational culture?

### Teaching the case

We recommend beginning the module by teaching the case to raise a variety of issues related to organizational culture in a complex and compelling way, and then follow up with more in-depth discussions and/or lectures related to organizational culture and creating organizational change. This approach enables students to think about a number of issues themselves in an engaging way. An alternative approach would be to begin with lecture/discussions about organizational culture and creating organizational change and then use the case as a capstone discussion/illustration. The case also raises themes that will be addressed in more depth in the module “Giving Voice to Values.” Additionally, the module “Creating a Safe and Fair Newsroom,” particularly the discussion of networks of complicity, expands on the themes of toxic organizational culture and the very real impact that toxic organizational culture can have on people.

#### 1. How is the organizational culture at WNYC described throughout the article? What elements are used to illustrate/illuminate the culture?

Perhaps the best way to describe the organizational culture at WNYC is toxic. Regardless of whether it is in fact bullying or whining, neither makes for a pleasant place to work.

The article describes multiple examples of coworkers disagreeing by yelling/screaming, using strong language and hanging up on one another. Many of the behaviors, by many individuals, speak to an organizational culture where clear, effective, professional, competent communication is not the norm. Instead, banter, sarcasm and yelling are used in lieu of actual communication. Perhaps even more telling is the overall lack of value placed on listening that is detailed in the article: one on-air host dismissing a story about the media's overlooking of minorities in coverage of climate change “with a barnyard epithet”; a listening tour that was seemingly unproductive; previous work practices and feedback on hiring decisions being ignored. When leaders were told this was happening, this feedback was ignored as well. An organization's culture reflects the values of the organization, and those values direct individual behavior including policies and practices for the organization (such as hiring, firing, review and promotion, training, etc). In this case, the lack of value placed on effective communication and productive listening pervades every level of the WNYC organizational culture. There are several elements of organizational culture described in the article, but one key piece is the reference to the emerging challenges of 2017 as described by those at the station as “The Troubles.” Stories are one of the most important parts of an organization's culture. Stories are easily shared both within and outside an organization and serve as teaching tools to highlight what is important about an organization and what is expected from those who work there.<sup>3</sup> This story at WNYC even has a title, indicating the degree to which it is shared over and over again.

## **2. What are the challenges of describing the organizational culture at WNYC as either bullying or whining?**

Describing the culture at WNYC as either bullying or whining focuses attention on individual behaviors. In this way, the culture of the organization is allowed to continue despite efforts to remove/fire individuals who have engaged in bad behavior. One key detail that highlights the challenges of focusing on individual behavior instead of organizational culture is that despite the exit of top leaders at the station after accusations of inappropriate conduct against three prominent male hosts, the time that follows is called "The Troubles," indicating that things didn't change. Additionally, the article stresses the number of times individuals have reported bad behavior to HR with seemingly little result. This all demonstrates that leaders at WNYC have ignored the very real effect of their organization's culture on the behavior of individuals. Organizational culture has many dimensions, including beliefs, values, assumptions, ways of interacting within the organization and symbols used within an organization.<sup>4</sup> Removing one or two or even more "bad apples" will not change a culture without sustained efforts at all levels within the organization. Leaders must pay attention to the organizational culture that is creating, sustaining and supporting particular individual behaviors and make underlying assumptions explicit. In this way, culture that needs to be changed can be changed, and culture that needs to be sustained can be uplifted.

To say, as Smith does in framing the story of WNYC, it is just about bullying or just about whining or just about yelling misses the very hard work that leaders and followers must engage in to change culture through their actions and behaviors and through policies and practices.

## **3. Smith suggests that at least in part the problem is with the structures of the newsroom — what does that mean?**

Organizational culture includes the policies and practices that guide work within an organization. In the case of newsrooms, these policies and practices can be particularly challenging. For example, the article discusses the structural challenges associated with how audio production work happens. These structures (for example, a white male host supported by a large anonymous and underpaid staff) have historically served to formalize power imbalances that lead to toxic work cultures. The article also touches on several additional internal challenges to newsrooms, including increasing pressures for news content to generate revenue and diversity and inclusion efforts meeting with stiff resistance across newsrooms, as well as external challenges to the reputation of news media in general. None of these are easy structural changes/challenges to address, and Smith describes WNYC in this way: "It's hard to look outward when you're at war with yourself."

## **4. Evaluate how Audrey Cooper did as a new leader who wanted to lead positive change in the culture at WNYC. What did she do well, and what did she do poorly?**

The instructor could begin the discussion by asking a question such as, "What grade would you give Ms. Cooper ("A" to "F") on her efforts to lead positive cultural change, and why?" As students offer their assessments, encourage them to give higher or lower grades than the previous student and a justification. A discussion like this would enable students to give a full critique of Cooper as a leader, using specifics from the article. Cooper's efforts to change the culture at WNYC have not been effective. The simplest answer as to why not is that the efforts haven't really worked to understand the culture as it is, analyze it systematically and work to change those parts of the culture that are problematic. For example, the goal of turning WNYC into the news source of record, as a way to address the challenges WNYC is facing, isn't about culture; it is about the product. In this way, the efforts have actually worked to formalize the very aspects of the organizational culture at WNYC that are toxic.

## 5. What can newsroom leaders and followers do to create a more supportive and ethical organizational culture?

First, leaders and followers need to understand the organizational culture as it exists. For example, paying attention to the different elements that already circulate within a culture can help leaders and followers identify what needs to be changed and what can be sustained. These elements include the many different symbols used by an organization such as language choice, stories and myths, and office decor and layout. Additionally, leaders and followers must understand the beliefs, assumptions and values within an organization, which are often unstated. In order to make sense of these driving forces within an organization's culture, leaders could engage in focus group listening, open-ended anonymous surveys and consultant-led information gathering. Once identified, these dimensions of organizational culture need to be critically evaluated to determine which are problematic and need to be changed and which might be bolstered. Change is hard — all the research about organizational culture points to that reality. But it can be done. Leaders can change culture through their own actions and behaviors as well as through policies and practices. For example, hiring and promotion practices are particularly valuable to leaders seeking to change culture. Ensuring that those hired or promoted are people who can contribute to an ethical, functional culture is vital to the success of efforts at changing organizational culture.

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<sup>1</sup> This teaching note was written by Dr. Jennifer L. Jones Barbour for the purpose of aiding instructors.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Smith, "It's the Media's 'Mean-Too' Moment. Stop Yelling and Go to Human Resources," *New York Times*, May 23, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> William A. Wines and J.B. Hamilton III, "On Changing Organizational Cultures by Injecting New Ideologies: The Power of Stories," *Journal of Business Ethics*, 89 (2009): 433-447, DOI 10.1007/s10551-008-0009-5

<sup>4</sup> 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 (2020): 64-76, DOI 10.1123/jsm.2018-0331.