

Leading the Cultivation of Organizational Culture and Climate to Advance Equity in LA County

Introduction

On July 21, 2020, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors launched a comprehensive initiative to create and implement a Countywide anti-racist agenda for ending racism in all its expressions throughout LA County and advancing equity. The stated end-in-mind is systemic change with demonstrated outcomes in the lived experiences of LA County residents and the workplace experiences of County employees. The unanimously approved motion affirms that the called-for transformation requires ongoing, effective attention to making equity the norm in every County department. (Ridley-Thomas, 2020)

In her article published by the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Mary-Frances Winters acknowledges that many organizations are deliberate about seeking to prevent or correct the destructive impact of racism and inequity. She observes that most organizations attempt to do what is needed with programs such as training, affinity groups, and diversity councils. In Winters' view, such programmatic efforts are commendable but inadequate. She states that "to truly address systemic racism; enhance the experience of equity, belonging, and inclusion.... organizations need to view [this priority] not as a checkbox, but as a continuous process of examination and change to organizational culture." (Winters, 2020, October)

The programmatic efforts that Winters commends and the changes she calls for include elements of both Organizational Culture and Climate. This document offers some framing and suggestions for leading the needed examination and change. It is organized to address 3 major questions:

- What is Equity?
- How are Organizational Culture and Climate Related to Equity?
- How Do We Cultivate Organizational Cultures and Climates to Support and Advance Equity?

What is Equity?

Leaders, those who engage others as collaborators for change, who wish to influence the advance of Equity need a clear understanding of what Equity is.

Equity can be understood in terms of what is not and what is. From the perspective of what is not, Equity has been described as the absence of disparities in life outcomes among different populations because distribution of benefits, resources, burdens, and penalties cannot be predicted by identity characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity, culture, and sexual orientation, or persistent conditions such as caste and disability. From the perspective of what is, Equity is when all groups thrive because they all have fair access to benefits and resources for positive life outcomes. (Potapchuk, Leiderman, Jones, & Butler, 2020; Blackwell, Kramer, Vaidyanathan, Iyer, & Kirschenbaum, 2017; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014; Nelson, Spokane, Ross, & Deng; Aspen Institute;

Race Forward; Wilkerson, 2020; Equity in the Center, 2020; Harvard Business Review Analytic Services, 2021)

In addition to just outcome, Equity also is fair process. Beyond positive outcomes, Equity means that all groups are fully engaged, fully included, with shared power for and opportunity to participate in design and distribution of benefits and resources. Sharing power with impacted populations enables crucial attention to historical inequities and their ongoing consequences. (Blackwell, Kramer, Vaidyanathan, Iyer, & Kirschenbaum, 2017; Race Forward; Potapchuk, Leiderman, Jones, & Butler, 2020; Equity in the Center, 2020; Harvard Business Review Analytic Services, 2021)

To fully understand Equity it also is necessary that LA County leaders distinguish it from equality. Equity is treating everyone fairly. Equality is treating everyone the same. Equality is fair only when everyone is the same. However, when the conditions and situations of some people are more or less protected, positive, prosperous, privileged, or powerful than others, treating everyone the same is not fair. (Race Forward; Livingston, 2020; Nelson, Spokane, Ross, & Deng; Nieto & Bode, 2008)

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

The recognition that treating everyone the same is not always fair influences many activities and practices. Examples in sports include golf handicaps, minor and major leagues, weighting horse racing jockeys, and spacing out starting lines for runners in longer track events. An example in public policy is different tax rates for different income levels. An example from the field of human resources is the practice of workplace accommodations being paid for by employers only for workers with substantiated challenges. An example in the field of education is the expectation that students with different conditions, proficiencies, or learning styles will be treated differently. Educators are trained to and commended for customizing their teaching to different student needs to support scholastic success for all.

Bringing these various elements together, we can describe *Equity* as *just outcome and fair process*. *In terms of just outcome, Equity is distribution of benefits, resources, burdens, and penalties that cannot be predicted by life characteristics or persistent conditions so that all groups are thriving. In terms of fair process, Equity is the full engagement and inclusion of all impacted groups with shared power and opportunity to participate in design and distribution of benefits and resources and removal of historical barriers and their ongoing consequences.*

How are Organizational Culture and Climate Related to Equity?

In the article referenced in the Introduction of this document, Mary-Frances Winters asserts that advancing Equity requires deliberate effort to shape Organizational Culture. Shaping Organizational Culture to advance Equity is an indispensable priority for leaders in an organization, regardless of position or title (Harvard Business Review Analytic Services, 2021; Groyberg, Lee, Price, & Cheng, 2018; BambooHR, 2019; see also Leddin & Moon, 2018; Schein, 1992; and O'Toole, 1995). Effective attention to this priority requires that LA County leaders understand what Organizational Culture, and

Climate, have to do with Equity. To address this question, we need to be clear about what Organizational Culture and Climate are and what Features of Organizational Culture and Climate advance Equity.

Organizational Culture and Climate

For more than a hundred years, academic professionals and organization specialists have examined, described, and critiqued workplace atmosphere and environments. The term “climate” for organizational life was introduced formally about sixty years ago by those examining it from the field of psychology. The term “culture” in reference to organizational life became widespread beginning about forty years ago, emerging from the field of anthropology. Some have used the terms interchangeably. It is useful, though, to understand them as two closely related yet distinct foundational facets of organizations. (Ostroff, Kinicki, & Muhammad, 2013; Coalition, 2021; Schneider & Barbera, 2014)

Cultures have emerged, flourished, and disappeared since before the dawn of recorded history. For hundreds of years a curious and intrepid few carefully observed and recorded distinctive features of different cultures. Within the last two hundred years the field of anthropology developed as the formal study of peoples and their ways of life. (National Geographic Society, 2012) Anthropologists define culture in many different ways. Some focus on what and how people think which then is expressed in communication and behavior. Others want to include behavior in the definition so that culture refers to how a distinctive group lives, including the values and ideas that shape them as well as their distinctive ways of communicating. (Bailey & Peoples, 2002)

The two different approaches in anthropology to defining Culture are reflected in differences among Organizational Culture specialists. For example, two pioneers in the field, Stanley Davis and Edgar Schein, focus on foundational values and ideas that produce distinct behavior. Davis refers to “corporate culture” which he defines as “the pattern of shared beliefs and values that give the members of an institution meaning, and provide them with the rules of behavior” (Davis, 1984). Schein speaks explicitly to Organizational Culture and defines Culture as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions” developed by a group in addressing problems and “taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel” (Schein, 1992). An example of the broader view is in Leddin and Moon’s book on Culture in government organizations where it is defined as “the collective behavior of your people...the language and relationships...and the...values, norms, and systems at work” (Leddin & Moon, 2018). The attitudes and behaviors that make up an organization’s Culture are primary influences on performance, including efficiency and effectiveness (Ostroff, Kinicki, & Muhammad, 2013; BambooHR, 2019). (see also Coalition, 2021; Cameron & Quinn, 2006; Groysberg, Lee, Price, & Cheng, 2018; Bolman & Deal, 2021; Schneider & Barbera, 2014; Guley & Reznik, 2019; and Gallup, 2018)

Rather than choosing one emphasis and discarding another we can blend the important elements of underlying beliefs, language, and behavior. Taking this

approach, we can view *Organizational Culture as the foundational conclusions, distinctive code, and characteristic customs that govern what an operational unit does, how, and why, and distinguish the unit from others.*

With this view, conclusions include beliefs, assumptions, values, and priorities – what an organization has concluded about itself, its mission, its environment, its norms, and its people. Conclusions include not only what a group believes is good, right, and worthwhile, but also how one determines or measures those ideals. Code includes the ways a group communicates its conclusions and interacts within them with distinctive symbols, vernacular (terminology, jargon), gestures, and stories. Customs are the rituals, traditions, processes, procedures, and routines by which a group expresses and with which a group executes its foundational conclusions.

If Organizational Culture consists of what groups collectively believe, say, and do, Organizational Climate is what individuals experience in that Culture. Climate is what happens, and Culture is why.

Climate is more variable, and Culture is more durable, usually learned over time. Climate is the perceived reality of an organization’s Culture, what people see and feel as employees, stakeholders, and clients or customers. Climate is the immediate and daily experience of the various ways an organization’s underlying Culture is expressed in structure, policies, and practices. People experience an organization’s Climate by the feel of interpersonal

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

The idea that Climate comes from Culture may seem backwards to some. In human societies culture is largely an adaptive response to many environmental factors including a region’s climate. But natural climate is not the same as what is referred to as Organizational Climate. Natural climate consists of a region’s durable daily weather patterns which are largely the result of elements of the external environment of a culture’s location such as latitude, elevation, prevailing winds, and proximity to and characteristics of ocean currents (National Geographic Society, 2022). It is possible, though, to contrast the internal atmosphere of different Cultures, how those Cultures feel to members and visitors. Organization analysts call this internal atmosphere Organizational Climate.

interactions and by physical appearance and layout of work sites. (Ostroff, Kinicki, & Muhammad, 2013; Coalition, 2021; Schneider & Barbera, 2014; see also Cameron & Quinn, 2006; Davis, 1984; and Schein, 1992)

Different organizations may feel more or less welcoming, vividly expressive, or fast-paced, for example. Specialists refer to how an organization feels as Organizational Climate, the broader patterns of daily “weather” that individuals experience. An organization’s Climate may be influenced by the external environment, but is primarily shaped by the organization’s expression and execution of its Culture. It is important for LA County leaders to recognize, though, that the influence goes both ways. An organization’s Climate not only reflects its Culture; it also feeds and reinforces that Culture (Ostroff, Kinicki, & Muhammad, 2013; Schneider & Barbera, 2019).

Features of Organizational Culture and Climate that Advance Equity

To be effective in advancing Equity, LA County leaders need to know: a) the distinctive characteristics of a Climate of Equity, how employees and partners, and constituents and clients, experience Equity, including how it feels and b) the essential characteristics of a Culture of Equity, what it must include in order to engender a Climate of Equity.

The **characteristics of a Climate of Equity** are the ways people experience just outcomes and fair process. For employees and partners, just outcomes mean there are no disparities among different groups in assignment, affirmation, and advancement. Just outcomes for constituents and clients mean there are no disparities in access to and acquisition of benefits, resources, and services. A Climate characterized by just outcomes feels like **Opportunity**, keeping in mind that Opportunity in this sense exists when impacted groups experience its full benefit, not merely when persons with formal authority intend it to be available. Fair process for employees, partners, constituents, and clients means they are fully engaged and empowered to participate in decisions and actions that affect them. A Climate characterized by fair process feels like **Belonging**, the sense that one is fully welcomed to bring their identity and experience to the work because their perspectives and ideas are greatly valued. In Climates of Equity people feel both trusting and trusted. And they feel safe to engage in constructive, candid conversations to explore challenging issues and express differing views. (Winters, 2020, October; Blackwell, Kramer, Vaidyanathan, Iyer, & Kirschenbaum, 2017; Harvard Business Review Analytic Services, 2021; Herway, 2017; Winters, 2020; Dressel, Kelly, & Belton, 2009; Clark, 2020)

The **characteristics of a Culture of Equity** are the ways an organization uses its conclusions, code, and customs to emphasize and execute a Climate of Equity that fosters experiences of Opportunity and Belonging. Cultures that nurture a Climate of Equity emphasize and execute **Parity** in just outcomes. They craft and hold to vision with explicit values and related guidelines for just representation in their workforce at all stages and in all processes, including hiring and contracting, assignment, evaluation, promotion and advancement, and retention. They also craft and hold to vision with explicit values and related guidelines for just representation in the distributions of benefits and resources among different groups of constituents and clients. They constantly communicate vision and values for Parity and continuously collect and analyze data and establish ongoing processes to quickly eliminate disparities. Cultures that nurture a Climate of Equity also emphasize and execute **Inclusiveness** in fair process. Their visions and values insist that diversity is an asset and every voice is prized. They produce and disseminate messaging that celebrates difference. In their daily interactions and performance they apply principles of shared power, psychological safety, effective collaboration, and constructive, candid conversations. (Winters, 2020, October; Asare, 2020; Dressel, Kelly, & Belton, 2009; Blackwell, Kramer, Vaidyanathan, Iyer, & Kirschenbaum, 2017; Groysberg, Lee, Price, & Cheng, 2018; Cameron & Quinn, 2006)

How Do We Cultivate Organizational Cultures and Climates to Support and Advance Equity?

Departments, divisions, and teams who recognize that Opportunity and Belonging are not what substantial portions of our employees, partners, constituents, and clients experience with the County of Los Angeles can take action to change this current reality by cultivating Organizational Cultures that support and advance Equity through Parity and Inclusiveness. Cultures characterized by Parity and Inclusiveness produce Climates in which participants experience Opportunity and Belonging. Though challenging and protracted, Organizational Culture change is possible with ongoing investment of effective attention and effort. Attention and effort need to be invested

in cycles of Enlistment, Vision, Assessment, Planning, Implementation, Evaluation, and Revision. (Race Forward; Beckhard & Harris, 1987; Burke, 1987; Equity in the Center, 2020; Harvard Business Review Analytic Services, 2021; Bolman & Deal, 2021; Connor, Lake, & Stackman, 2003; Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Schein, 1992; Ostroff & Muhammad, 2013; BambooHR, 2019; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016)

Enlistment. Those who are ready to help lead Organizational Culture change to advance Equity can expect that they are not alone. The first step is Enlistment of collaborators for the effort. Identify persons who already see the need and want to take action. This coalition needs to include partners from impacted groups, whether the workforce or communities. Be sure to include people with expertise, credibility, influence, and necessary authority. (Kotter, 2012; White, 2022; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014; Equity in the Center, 2020; Cameron & Quinn, 2006; Dressel, Kelly, & Belton, 2009; Herway, 2017; Rogers, 2003)

Vision. Vision rallies engagement in and fuels change. It briefly, clearly, and persuasively describes what conditions will be like in the future when Parity is producing Opportunity and Inclusiveness is producing Belonging. (Nelson, Spokane, Ross, & Deng; Kotter, 2012; Jana & Mejias, 2018; Equity in the Center, 2020; Guley & Reznik, 2019; Leddin & Moon, 2018; Groysberg, Lee, Price, & Cheng, 2018; Gallup, 2018; Coyle, 2018; Kouzes & Posner, 2017)

Assessment. Assess if and where Opportunity and Belonging are present in the current experiences of employees, partners, constituents, and clients. Identify insufficiencies that need to be resolved. Assess Parity and Inclusiveness to identify disparities that

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Often, when managers consider how to make changes, they think in terms of directives and mandates. Perhaps because clarifying and implementing mandates can seem more efficient. In the long run, though, any energy not expended in initiating change is required in much, much greater volume and intensity to accomplish and sustain change. A different approach to organization change is diffusion. With a diffusion approach, change is caught as individuals and teams influence one another, not demanded “from the top”. Change by diffusion takes longer to accomplish, but is much more efficient to maintain because people are engaged in change from commitment rather than for mere compliance. (Rogers, 2003; Bolman & Deal, 2021)

need to be eliminated. Base assessment on data and other information to ensure it accurately appraises actual conditions and impact rather than merely stated aims and intentions. In addition to formal metrics, include surveys, town halls, and round table discussions. Analyze data and other information to find root causes of insufficiencies and disparities. (Rogers, 2003; Jana & Diaz, 2018; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014; Nelson, Spokane, Ross, & Deng; Equity in the Center, 2020; Cameron & Quinn, 2006; Coalition, 2021; Guley & Reznik, 2019; Groysberg, Lee, Price, & Cheng, 2018; Dressel, Kelly, & Belton, 2009; Gallup, 2018; White, 2022; Herway, 2017)

Planning. Detail change plans for what will be done, how, by whom, and by when to address root causes for resolution of insufficiencies in Opportunity and Belonging by establishing Parity and implementing Inclusiveness. Consider the following elements for inclusion in the plans:

- Foundational conclusions, including values and guiding principles that express explicit prioritization of Opportunity from Parity and Belonging from Inclusiveness
- Specific goals for metrics to track progress
- Training for new awareness and attitudes
- Coaching for new abilities
- Engaging code, including slogans, symbols, stories, and shared definitions, to communicate vision for, and progress in, advancing Equity
- Equity impact assessment of current policies, procedures, and practices
- New customs, including rituals, policies, procedures, practices, and events, for supporting, reinforcing, and sustaining changes that:
 - Acknowledge historical injustice and ongoing consequences
 - Address root causes of acknowledged injustice and consequences
 - Engage impacted groups with shared power in planning, execution, evaluation, and revision; including accommodating and compensating nonemployees
 - Host regular and frequent discussions about insufficiencies, disparities, and change efforts
 - Eliminate disparities in Opportunity by advancing Equity in Organizational Culture through Parity
 - Revise procedures to address lack of representation of some groups among contractors and in positions with different levels of authority
 - Control the influence of bias by removing assumptions and making criteria for decisions as explicit as possible
 - Mentor and sponsor members of historically excluded groups
 - Resolve insufficiencies in Belonging by advancing Equity in Organizational Culture through Inclusiveness
 - Build trust
 - Create and sustain psychological safety for all voices
 - Encourage constructive, open conversations for exploring diverse ideas and perspectives
 - Encourage the formation of affinity groups that include in their activities discussions and appraisals of Opportunity and Belonging
 - Empower experimentation and innovation
 - Eliminate gendered pronouns

- Streamline decision-making and approval processes
- Provide for necessary resources, including personnel, time, access, information, funding, equipment, and space
- Weaken resistance and strengthen support
- Activate action learning teams to work on specific challenges that need to be addressed
- Incorporate support for and engagement in changes in performance goals and evaluation
- Sequence changes for what feasibly can be done sooner and what needs to be done later
- Highlight and celebrate early successes
- Integrate changes into organization routines

(Jana & Diaz, 2018; White, 2022; Asare, 2020; Groyberg, Lee, Price, & Cheng, 2018; Ostroff, Kinicki, & Muhammad, 2013; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014; Brown, 2019; Cameron & Quinn, 2006; Dressel, Kelly, & Belton, 2009; Nelson, Spokane, Ross, & Deng; Gallup, 2018; Equity in the Center, 2020; Coalition, 2021; Herway, 2017; Winters, 2020; Kotter, 2012; Clark, 2020; Rogers, 2003; Minson & Gino, 2022; Leddin & Moon, 2018; Connor, Lake, & Stackman, 2003; Coyle, 2018; Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Bolman & Deal, 2021; Guley & Reznik, 2019; Davis, 1984; Schein, 1992; O’Toole, 1995)

Implementation. Implement planned changes. Keep in mind that long-term, sustained change requires commitment based on internal motivation rather than compliance based on external pressures. And for some people, commitment takes time as they process the need for change and witness successful results. In addition, many operational units do best when they focus on one or a few major initiatives at a time. For these reasons, it often is most effective to implement changes in stages in order to engage increasing numbers of participants over time. (Rogers, 2003; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014; Race Forward; Leddin & Moon, 2018; Connor, Lake, & Stackman, 2003)



Evaluation. Use data and other information employed in Assessment to monitor improvement in Opportunity, Belonging, Parity, and Inclusiveness. Establish a rhythm of accountability in which people are regularly updated on progress, or the lack of it. Recognize and reward progress. (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014; Rogers, 2003; Leddin & Moon, 2018; Connor, Lake, & Stackman, 2003)

Revision. Based on Evaluation, revise, correct, enhance, and strengthen implemented changes. (Jana & Diaz, 2018; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014; Gallup, 2018; Connor, Lake, & Stackman, 2003; Davis, 1984)

Conclusion

The Board of Supervisors' action in July, 2020 acknowledged that Equity is not, and has not been, the reality with far too many of our communities and for far too many of our employees. The motion issued a clarion call to end this state of affairs now with "actions and outcomes that...produce real systemic change" (Ridley-Thomas, 2020). While revision to existing policies and practices and creation of new ones is crucial to the effort, attention to policies and practices is not nearly sufficient. Foundational, comprehensive organizational change requires transformation of Organizational Cultures to engender Organizational Climates of Equity. The intent of this document is to offer suggestions to support those who want to help lead that transformation.

To be sure, the work of Organizational Culture transformation is daunting. Not doing the work, however, means that current realities will be the future realities. Jennifer Brown spoke to this in the final chapter, titled "Stay Committed to the Journey", of her book on cultivating Organizational Culture that advances equity: "If you only remember one thing..., remember that...you need to do something. Good intentions are not enough. Change is about action. And if you aren't taking action, your silence is a passive acceptance of the status quo, which further perpetuates the problem" (Brown, 2019). As someone who is choosing to step up and take action rather than passively accept the status quo in silence, know that you are not alone. The drive to advance Equity by transforming the daily experiences of our employees and communities in LA County has begun. Thank you for being part of the movement!

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