Building A Healthy Information Culture – Practical Tips For Managers
By Ulla de Stricker, De Stricker & Associates

Source: Competia Online Magazine
Published Date: November 2005

Every organization containing more than one person has a culture -- and an information culture. The former encompasses all the activities and behaviors manifested in the course of operations -- and thus answers the question "what's it like to work here?" The latter includes those activities and behaviors associated in some way with knowledge, communication, information, and data -- we could say it answers the question "how does anyone find out about stuff around here?" Given the information intensive nature of most enterprises, it is no surprise information culture plays a major role in the success of their operations.

Of course, some environments provide for more "solitary labor" than most. In general, though, I believe it is safe to say that a culture promoting the lively exchange of information and discovery also promotes productivity and success.

The goal, therefore, is to build a strong and productive information culture that maximizes the effectiveness of the processes employees use to store, find, and communicate information. A strong and productive information culture is based on the appropriate tools (for example a document repository) and policies (for example a practice of posting project summaries in a shared corporate memory repository), but it needs much more: A pervasive understanding that :

> (1) good information behaviors are paramount;
> (2) such behaviors are everyone's responsibility;
> (3) they make everyone's work lives easier.

A recognition that good information behaviors can increase job satisfaction (for starters, by reducing wasted time) wouldn't hurt either.

So what's a manager to do? Culture building is a subtle art very different from that of, say, bringing technical projects in on time and budget. Different organizations will have different challenges to address, and each manager must stay true to his or her personal style. (If one is perceived to be "out of character" when addressing information behaviors, or to be saying one thing and doing another, credibility is compromised.)

Complex and intangible though it may be, information culture can be built and managed through simple (sometimes embarrassingly simple) means. In the following, I offer some practical tips for managers concerned about nurturing a good culture.

1.*Start at home by examining your own track record:* Have I, up till now, signaled that good information practices matter to me? Work consciously to ensure employees hear a consistent message: I, the manager, care about having a healthy information culture. I believe fundamentally that it is vital, and I will support the necessary efforts and involve everyone. In other words, my concern is not a passing infatuation with the latest fad, and I will not impose solutions that are inappropriate for the department.

2. *Then examine the overall information situation in the department or organization by undertaking an Information Audit so as to understand what is already working well and what needs attention (a previous article has discussed the Information Audit* [See linked article below]). Share the results frankly with the relevant individuals, and make it known you will act on the findings. Make sure the audit is repeated at suitable intervals so that improvements and new challenges can be tracked ("how, exactly, did information exchange practices evolve once the privacy policy was introduced?").

3. *If a position with responsibility for information policy isn't already in place, consider establishing one (not to be confused with a Chief Information Officer role focused on IT)*. The position's purpose is to support employees by providing guidance with respect to "best information practices" and to plan and implement the appropriate tools. Ensure the position is not perceived as an annoying "information police" but rather as the "place to go for help". Moreover, ensure the incumbent is included in project teams so that all projects have the benefit of professional input when it comes to the research and ongoing intelligence they need.

4. *Have employee teams determine whether some form of user advisory group would be appropriate for major tools such as the Intranet and a document management system*. Advisory groups can strengthen the sense that, for example, the Intranet is meant to meet the needs of all employees and is not the exclusive domain of the IT department. In addition, advisory groups can deliver considerable value in soliciting ideas and input and translating the feedback into recommendations for the Intranet team.

5. *Have employee teams work with the "information chief" -- so as to foster a sense of ownership and avoid a perception that you are imposing rules* -- to define a set of easy-to-understand and easy-to-follow practical and specific guidelines, including templates to support consistency. It is impossible, for example, to "share knowledge" if one does not know what that looks like -- am I being asked to send more emails or spend more time over coffee with colleagues, or what? Make sure the guidelines allow some form of measure so that it can be shown what the results were "since we started using the new document repository". The following illustrations are intended to show that the guidelines need not be complex or onerous:

- Before launching work on a project, be sure to establish who in the department or organization should be consulted. It is not an imposition to poll colleagues asking "who knows something about X or has previously been involved with Y".
- Keep detailed notes of contacts, conversations, action items. Keep a trigger file so that you know exactly when to follow up on an item.
- Bookmark the following "news" sites within the Intranet: … You don't want to miss out on what's going on!
- Stay professionally aware. Arrange for literature alerts relevant to your discipline. See [the information chief, the information centre, library, or other entity capable of offering such a service].
- Be certain you are an expert user of the document management system, and that you understand the principles for making documents easily findable by others. For help here, see so-and-so. Examples:
    - Use meaningful subject related words early in a title. "2005 Dairy Consumption Statistics: Market Research Report, Preliminary Draft" is a much better title than "Preliminary Draft of the 2005 Statistical Market Research Report on Dairy Consumption".
    - Insert a "key words" paragraph into every document you prepare, and put in it terms you believe others would use as search words if they were looking for the document in question.

- Organize emails into project or topic related folders and archive older emails appropriately. For help with that, see so-and-so.
- To enhance clarity and effectiveness of emails, follow this structure:
    - Clear and meaningful subject line
    - Introductory sentence stating upfront the purpose of the message and what the reader is asked to do, by when
    - Concise expression of the "body of the message"
    - Indication of what will happen if no reply is received by a certain time
    - Supporting information or documentation as an "appendix"

6. *Give "points" for silo breaking behaviors*. Notice it and comment positively on it when, for example, someone makes an effort to eat lunch with colleagues from different departments (as opposed to sitting with the same group every day -- or worse yet, eating lunch at his or her desk).

7. *Similarly, reward supervisors who encourage cross-communication instead of acting as gatekeepers*. If an employee in Department A has a question to ask of someone in Department B, it should not be necessary to have the communication travel up the ranks in A for permission before it can go "back down" in B. (Of course, there may be concerns about rampant blanket-email, but appropriate habits can be taught.)

8. *Make it OK for people to 'pop in' to each others' cubicles and offices*. To reduce concerns about interruptions, consider "quiet hours" or simple signs to let employees request peace.

9. *Ensure that new employees go through "information boot camp" so that they get trained thoroughly in the use of information tools and get in-depth insight into information related practices*. It is important for new arrivals not only to become proficient in using e.g. the document management system, but also to be told explicitly, for example, "around here, we talk to each other".

10. *Establish a standard that all presentations, proposals, business case documents, and reports contain a section entitled "Research and Consultations"*. Such a section would not only spell out what formal sources (e.g. the relevant literature) were checked, but emphasize who was approached to provide input. It should be relatively straightforward to spot any omissions in a list of colleagues who were consulted ("you forgot the Intranet team"), and the mandatory document section should help drive home the point that involving colleagues widely in discussion is standard practice.

11*. Identify the "information stars" by incorporating in performance reviews a question such as* "Please list five colleagues who, in your opinion, are doing the best jobs making sure information gets to the right people and who support the work of the department through communicating their knowledge". Then go look closely at what the "stars" are doing -- and satisfy yourself that there is a reasonable explanation if certain employees are never mentioned by colleagues as being helpful in terms of information sharing. Much has been said about the human tendency to keep close to the chest expert information perceived to bolster job security; that tendency is real, and it is up to managers to be aware of it and to encourage a sense of safety when it comes to letting others benefit from experience.

12. *Keep in mind that people readily adopt new behaviors when they can clearly see the benefit to themselves*. Change is inherently difficult for humans; work on embedding the benefits message in any initiative you launch, and look for "ambassadors" who can tell the story to their colleagues ("that new project reports repository is really useful - it saved us weeks of reinventing the wheel").

Alright, we'll make it a baker's dozen:

13. *Publicly, consistently, and meaningfully reward those who walk the walk*. If it's not obvious what type of recognition is perceived as "meaningful", ask around! Keep in mind that individuals differ in terms of what they strive for, and spend the necessary time to figure out what type of reward will be effective and professionally appropriate for each person in your environment.

About The Author:

Ulla de Stricker is a seasoned expert in information and knowledge management. Her consulting practice undertakes assignments across a wide range of organizational challenges associated with business intelligence, knowledge sharing, corporate memory, document management, and communication. Ulla speaks frequently at information industry conferences internationally and contributes regularly to the professional literature.

Ulla can be reached at **www.destricker.com**