

## Culture Is the Cop-Out Culprit

[Terry L. Mathis](#)

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Successful turnarounds don't focus on fixing the blame but rather on fixing the problem(s).

When a tragedy is caused by complex factors, experts tend to blame the culture. The Challenger disaster and the Texas City refinery explosion resulted in commissions finding fault with and making recommendations for improving the cultures. Even organizations assessing their own internal problems often turn to culture improvement initiatives to address their issues. Such findings are indicative of both a cop-out of responsibility and a basic misunderstanding of the nature of organizational cultures.

A recent (April 2016) Harvard Business Journal article points out this tendency to view culture as both the cause and the cure for organizational problems, from corporations to government bureaus to banks to police departments. The problem with this thinking at the surface level is that attempts to fix the culture seldom, if ever, result in a true turnaround of performance. Successful turnarounds don't focus on fixing the blame but rather on fixing the problem(s). Blaming culture is just that: blaming. And such blaming is often a blanketing of blame to shelter the true culprits. Cultures don't pull down organizations. Organizations pull down cultures.

This thinking is an offshoot of, among other things, root-cause analysis. Technical experts determined eons ago that fixing a mechanical or electrical failure without determining the cause of that failure was not a permanent solution. Procedures were developed and perfected to better determine root cause so it could be addressed. Problem solving at all levels followed this machine-and-circuit thinking: that all true solutions must address root cause. Lacking anything better, this model was applied to failures of human beings and groups of human beings. The direct applicability of this model to humans is at best questionable.

Human behaviors are influenced by multiple factors both internal to the individual and external (in the work or performance environment). Group behaviors have even more influences due to the interaction of individuals, processes and other factors. Determining which behaviors were responsible for performance failures and then determining the root cause of such behaviors is a formidable – if not impossible – task. Also, changing one of several influences on behavior is not a guarantee you permanently will change future behavior. The majority of human behavior is autonomic or subconscious (habitual). Changing influences on conscious behavior does not automatically change subconscious behavior.

Group behaviors that are common to the majority or whole of the group are an artifact of organizational culture. We often refer to them as “common practice.” Many have mistaken common practice for culture.

Sayings such as “Culture is what people do when you are not watching” assume this misconception. Culture is the set of reasons or influences WHY people do what they do when you are not watching. Such group behaviors are influenced by other individuals within the culture but also by multiple other factors. The “watching” by leaders or supervisors is one of these many influences that impact common practice. Remove the watching and the other influences tend to manifest.

## Why Blame Culture?

So, when organizations find themselves in crisis, why do they tend to blame the culture? Their first step often is influenced by root-cause thinking and they seldom find what they are looking for with that methodology. Failing to find a suitable scapegoat that can be labeled as the root cause, they search for other causation for the performance problems. More often than not, the problems are not isolated to one function, department or client relationship. Multiple causation tends to overload simplistic root-cause thinking.

Problems with people and cultures can be complex and may not have linear and simplistic causation. Default thinking tends toward blaming the whole organization for allowing these performance issues to exist without self-correcting. It must be the team who lost the game, not the coaches, the game plan or the competition.

Blaming the culture often is a way of avoiding blaming the leaders. Organizational leaders like to take credit for successes but seldom take blame for failures. True leaders steer their organizations in specific directions and the waters they sail into impact the morale and performance of the crew. Cultures are only stable when the organizations in which they reside are stable.

When performance goes wrong it almost always is influenced by organizational factors before cultural factors. Performance problems shape culture and culture sustains the status quo. Addressing the culture while ignoring the factors that influence it is a fruitless endeavor. Leaders should look at how their decisions impact the culture before examining how the culture influences problem performance.

## The Role of Culture

So, what is the role of culture and how should it be addressed? The answer depends on whether the issue is how to turn a good culture into a great culture, or how to address culture in an organizational crisis?

Organizations with good performance seeking to move toward higher levels of excellence often find their greatest opportunities for further progress lie within their cultures. Great cultures tend to tweak the performance of their members.

Directives from leaders get hands and feet moving, but the affiliation and teamwork of an excellent culture often get hearts and minds engaged. Such engagement elicits discretionary effort above and beyond what is required. Recent studies show an alarming dis-engagement of workers in many organizations, which results in loss of performance potential. Addressing culture addresses engagement.

Organizations seeking to turn around their problem performance should address culture as a last step. Successful turnarounds begin with strategy. Good strategy seeks to solve problems, establish good practice and then build in sustainability and continuous improvement of that good practice. Culture is to organizations what habit is to individuals: an autonomic practice that perpetuates itself with very little need for outside management.

Culture is the byproduct of the organization, not vice versa. Culture seldom, if ever, originates either excellence or crisis. It simply sustains what is shaped by other organizational factors. If your organization is good and wants to be great, work on perfecting your culture. If you have critical problems, blaming your culture won't fix them.

*Terry Mathis, founder and CEO of ProAct Safety, has served as a consultant and advisor for top organizations the world over. A respected strategist and thought leader in the industry, Mathis has*

*authored three books, numerous articles and blogs. EHS Today has named him one of the “50 People Who Most Influenced EHS” four consecutive times. He can be reached at [info@proactsafety.com](mailto:info@proactsafety.com) or 800-395-1347.*

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