

Turning belief into action: An exploratory case study applying the building belief model to an anonymous college in Ontario

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ABSTRACT

This case study tests a new model for corporate communications called Building Belief, which urges a firm to constantly live up to its stated character and values in order to motivate stakeholders to identify, support and promote them. Building on published theories and best practices related to culture, reputation, trust, relationship management, self-determination, employee engagement, leadership, storytelling and social media, an instrument was developed to test the model at an anonymous Ontario college. Its stakeholders were found to lack a strong sense of shared values and shared identity with the organization, but they were found to have the potential to act as ambassadors. The study recommends several measures to strengthen people's relationships with the institution, deepen levels of engagement and motivate them to advocacy. These include the co-creation of a culture code, involving employees in decision making and using stories that centre on student success to empower early influencers.

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Colleges in Ontario are facing a disruptive shift. Rapid advances in technology have altered research, teaching and learning, raised expectations for personalization, immediacy, and the decentralization of services, and contributed to a society in which colleges are preparing students for jobs that might not yet exist (Miner, 2010; Johnson, Adams Becker, Cummins, Estrada, Freeman & Ludgate, 2013). The added financial pressure of decreased operating grants (Colleges Ontario, 2012b) and an anticipated slowdown in enrolment growth (Drummond, 2012) has prompted legislators to

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introduce a new framework based on differentiation (MTCU, 2013b). The model forces institutions to focus on specified areas of strength to use their resources purposefully, avoid duplication, and help applicants determine which institution best serves their goals. While many institutions already promote the reputation of their niche programs to attract applicants, culture is not part of the differentiation framework despite the fact that it is important to students. In an online survey of 30,000 undergraduates from 107 colleges and universities in Canada, the top three attributes students consider when assessing future employers involve culture (Universum, 2014, p. 5).

To further set themselves apart from the competition, colleges have much to gain by examining how companies capitalize on their enviable characters. One such model, called *Building Belief: A New Model for Activating Corporate Character & Authentic Advocacy* answers this call (AWPS, 2012). It defines corporate character as the integration of an organization's culture and reputation and the embodiment of the beliefs, values and purpose that make it unique. When a person understands, accepts and identifies with a corporation's character, this is what engenders trust, deepens a person's relationship with the organization, and motivates a person to act in favour of the firm. The model also addresses a number of challenges that all organizations face today. These include growing expectations for transparency and authenticity in institutions (AWPS, 2007), strong feelings of identification with brands (Lin & Sung, 2014), the means to rapidly and widely share opinions (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2011), and diminishing levels of employee trust and engagement (Weber Shandwick & KRC, 2014) including rising levels of active disengagement (Aon Hewitt, 2013).

This exploratory, organizational case study assesses the readiness of one anonymous college in Ontario to adopt the *Building Belief* model. In so doing, it also strives to determine whether a corporate communications model has merit in this quasi-public sector. While colleges are not private enterprises, the concepts that underpin the model—culture, reputation, values, purpose, and stakeholders who can identify with and advocate for an organization—are applicable to colleges. Publicly supported colleges are regulated by the *Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act*, SO 2002, c 8, Sch F which states that every college established under this act is “a corporation” (at s. 2). Their legislated objective is to “offer a comprehensive program of career-oriented, post-secondary education and training to assist individuals in finding and keeping employment, to meet the needs of employers and the changing work environment” (at s. 2). If differentiation is the target, examining how to leverage one's culture, reputation and shared values to become more distinctive and inspire self-motivated advocacy is a worthwhile goal.

Research questions

Three research questions were posed to determine the extent to which the organization under review meets the conditions needed to enact the *Building Belief* model:

RQ1: How do employees of the organization perceive the institution's culture and reputation, characterize their relationship and sense of identification with the institution, and rate their ability to advocate on its behalf?

RQ2: How do advisory committee members of the organization perceive the institution's culture and reputation, characterize their relationship and sense of identification with the institution, and rate their ability to advocate on its behalf?

RQ3: To what extent do the organization's leaders shape the institution's character and create an environment that promotes trust, engagement and a sense of shared identity?

Review of literature

To better understand how the model can help an organization create believers and inspire commitment and cooperation, a number of disparate fields were explored. Each was selected because it was felt to be at the root of the model.

Building shared identity

Scott & Lane (2000) define organizational identity as the shared beliefs by top managers and stakeholders regarding an organization's characteristics that are central, enduring and distinctive. They suggest that identity is created through an iterative process and that visibility, inclusion and communications assist the process. They add that people identify with an organization when they perceive that its values align with their own and when they derive self-esteem, self-consistency, and self-distinctiveness from the association.

According to He and Brown (2013), organizational identification occurs when employees develop a sense of belonging and “oneness” with an organization (p. 12). They note that shared identity leads to the intention to stay at a firm, feelings of satisfaction and higher performance. Brickson (2005) contends that people seek shared identity because it creates consistency, answering employees’ psychological need to make sense of their organizations. This idea is shared by Ashforth, Harrison and Corley (2008) who write that “identifying with collectives and roles helps reduce the uncertainty associated with interacting in new environments” (p. 336).

Culture: What is it and why is it important?

Cameron and Quinn (2011) note that culture is the “social glue binding an organization together” (p. 18) or something that “conveys a sense of identity to employees” (p. 19). Denison, Hooijberg, Lane and Lief (2012) describe culture as “the code, the core logic” (p. 3) that organizes the behaviour of people. As Schein (2010) writes, “Culture is to a group what personality or character is to an individual” (p. 14). Both Dennison et al. (2012) and Cameron and Quinn (2011) present models for helping organizations diagnose and change culture. Their dimensions include leadership, management of employees, consistency (values, integration and agreement) involvement (empowerment, teamwork) and adaptability (customer focus and organizational learning).

Reputation: How it develops and why it matters

Fombrun and van Riel (2007) specify the six dimensions of this construct as: emotional appeal, products and services, financial performance, vision and leadership, workplace environment, and social responsibility. They add the companies with enviable reputations share five dimensions: visibility, transparency, distinctiveness, consistency, and authenticity. Much like culture, van Riel (2012) shows that reputation is based on an assessment of past performance and future expectations and that it lives in people’s hearts and minds. Simcic Brønn (2010) contends that good reputations are built on dialogue and stakeholder involvement while Dowling (2002) suggests that it depends on authenticity and integrity. Like Simcic Brønn, Watson (2010) stresses the crucial importance of relationships with stakeholders, noting that reputation “does not occur by chance” (p. 339). Eberl and Schwaiger (2004) argue that

reputation is imprecise and inimitable, giving those who possess it an advantage. MacMillan, Money, Downing and Hillenbrand (2005) posit that when people have a good experience with an organization, it influences positive feelings about a company and positive behaviours toward it. Cravens and Goad Oliver (2006) focus on the role of employees in creating and maintaining corporate reputation because they create a company's product or service, present its image and identity, and affect reputation through word-of-mouth and loyalty.

Trust: The foundation of relationships and cooperative behaviour

Hurley (2012) defines trust as "the degree of confidence you have that another party can be relied on to fulfill commitments, be fair, be transparent, and not take advantage of your vulnerability" (p. 1). His dimensions of trust are risk tolerance, adjustment, power, situational security, similarities, interests, benevolent concern, capability, predictability, integrity, and communication. These align with the findings of the Arthur W. Page Society/Business Roundtable Institute for Corporate Ethics (2009) report on trust in business which suggests that the three dynamics of trust are mutuality, balance of power, and trust safeguards.

Much like reputation and culture, trust is relational because it is built through "common values, overlaps in trusted networks, shared aspects of identity and other bonds of connectivity" (Hurley, 2012, p. 68). The joint Page Society/Business Roundtable report concurs, adding that the basis for trust depends on a perception of a relationship with "people like me" (AWPS, 2009, p. 28) and much like reputation and culture, trust depends on "expectations of future behavior" (p. 21). In her essay on creating corporate trust, Gower writes that, "truthfulness must be combined with transparency" (p. 94). Hurley, Gillespie, Ferrin and Dietz (2013) advise that trustworthiness must be embedded across an organization's infrastructure and processes to create consistency and authenticity.

Relationship management theory

Grunig and Huang (1999) determined that trust, control mutuality, relational commitment, and relational satisfaction are "the most essential and pertinent indicators representing the quality of organization-public

relationships” (p. 42). To measure these outcomes, they suggest that the best approach is to “ask one or both parties to describe the relationship features” (p. 47). To assist in this process, Hon and Grunig (1999) built a scale to measure the four relationship outcomes. They added the need to determine whether relationships are exchange-based or communal, suggesting the latter are of higher quality. These findings support those of Scott & Lane (2008) who showed that a lack of identification with an organization reduces trust and results in only exchange-based relationships.

Self-Determination theory

Self-determination theory is highly relevant to self-motivated advocacy. The theory states that humans have three innate psychological needs – *competence* (the need to feel capable and effective), *autonomy* (a sense of volition or control over one’s choices) and *relatedness* or the need to feel understood and connected to others (Baard, Deci & Ryan, 2004). The authors show that when these needs are met on the job, employees’ performance ratings and psychological well-being improve. They demonstrated that employees’ perceptions of how supportive managers are in creating an autonomy-supportive environment correlate with the feeling that their needs are being met. They add that to create such an environment, subordinates’ perspectives must be taken into account. They also proved that this theory held true in church organizations, suggesting it has merit outside the corporate sector. Graves and Luciano (2013) extended this work to show that high quality leader-employee relationships amplify the feeling that one’s innate needs are met, spurring autonomous motivation among employees, which prompts affective organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and vitality.

Employee engagement

The Gallup Q12 survey measures the conditions that support employee engagement and the ones that the managers have the capacity to change (Harter, Schmidt, Agrawal, & Plowman, 2013). These include knowing what is expected, receiving feedback and recognition, feeling as though one’s opinions matter and understanding the importance of one’s job to the success of the firm. Two of Aon Hewitt’s (2013) top five global drivers of engagement directly align with Building Belief: organizational reputation and communication.

Communication and leadership are the two top drivers identified in a study that examined how to motivate employee activists and target them based on their levels of engagement and propensity to act (Weber Shandwick & KRC Research, 2014). The study found that six in ten respondents defended the reputation of their employer to family or friends or on public forums such as a blog or website. While nearly nine in ten employees use at least one social media site for personal use and five in ten occasionally post content about their employers (p. 7), organizations are not doing enough to harness this potential. Only three in ten suggest they are deeply engaged (p. 6) and only four in ten could confidently explain what their employer does or what its goals are (p. 5). The study warns that focusing on champions is inadequate in an “always-on and super-enabled environment” (p. 23) because “employees are taking matters into their own hands and, left unattended for too long, will define their employers’ brands and reputations” (p. 23). It advises that “employers need to provide a culture of trust that is rooted at the leadership level . . . [and] communicate with employees in ways that are relevant to them” (p. 23).

Leadership

The strong link between leadership and culture is explained by Schein (2010) who suggests that a leader’s assumptions become more deeply embedded in an organization’s culture each time its primary purpose is accomplished. Hurley (2012) considers leadership and trust to be co-dependent. He writes that “when the leader is trustworthy and expects this behavior from others, trust cascades throughout the organization and can eventually become embedded in the culture” (2012, p. 91). He also views a leader as a company’s chief social engineer who helps people integrate their interests with those of the firm. According to Fombrun and van Riel (2007) vision and leadership are core drivers of reputation. The link between leadership and shared identity is expressed by Gray and Vander Wal (2012), who feel that leaders must have deep contextual awareness and create common purpose. According to Collins (2001), such leaders are able to take a company from good to great. He terms these individuals “Level 5” leaders, for their ability to combine deep personal humility (one of the attributes Hurley [2012] linked to trust in leadership) with intense professional will. Cuddy, Kohut and Neffinger (2013) suggest that when leaders project competence without warmth it can lead to a lack of trust, which prevents people from adopting the “values, culture, and mission of the organization in a sincere, lasting way” (p. 57). For Grenny, Maxfield and

Shimberg (2008), influence results from a combination of personal, social and structural sources. They add that motivation occurs when people “connect the changes to their deeply held values” as this “establishes a moral framework that shifts people’s experience of the new behaviors” (p. 49).

Storytelling

Gottschall (2012) shows how fiction fulfills an ancient function of reinforcing shared values and binding people together through common culture. He draws from biology, psychology and neurology to demonstrate that fiction influences our moral logic and shapes our beliefs, behaviours and ethics in subtle ways. He writes that “when we are absorbed in a story, we drop our intellectual guard” (p. 152) allowing our attitudes to change to accept ideas, making fiction more effective at altering beliefs than non-fiction, whose purpose is to persuade.

This point is echoed by Adamson, Pine, Van Steenhoven and Kroupa (2006) who outline the fundamental errors that executives make when they dictate corporate strategy and expect compliance. This approach arrogantly assumes that employees have the required context to understand what is being communicated, that they accept decisions that are made without their involvement, that they lack valid ideas of their own, and that the message or messenger are so important that they will be obeyed.

Forman (2013) suggests that for a business story to fulfill its potential to “capture attention, engage and influence people, create meaning, exemplify values and gain trust,” (p. 6) it must be authentic and fluent. For Denning (2011) who used storytelling to shift employees’ perceptions of the World Bank, the key was to use what he termed a “springboard” story (p. 82) that the listener builds upon to generate a parallel tale based on her experience, context or environment. In this way, Denning’s philosophy is congruent with self-determination theory. Much like Denning, Sachs (2012) suggests that audiences need to be co-opted as allies in storytelling rather than targets of it. He stresses the oral tradition of storytelling as paramount today because stories are owned and modified as they are shared digitally. Advocating for “empowerment marketing” (p. 113) he considers the most powerful stories to be the ones that make the audience the hero in pursuing the values they share with a company’s brand. These stories inspire action by providing audiences with “agency, a chance to decide . . . whether or not to set out on the adventure” (p. 150).

Social Media

As Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden (2011) explain, today's social media-driven business model is defined by "consumer connectivity and interactivity" (p. 266) and built on a culture in which consumers are "intelligent, organizing, and more trusting of their own opinions and the opinions of their peers" (p. 267). Kent (2010) advises that rather than using social media to push out one-way messages, the tools should solve problems and engage publics. Equally important is creating content that is worth sharing. Berger and Iyengar (2013) showed that to increase online discussion, products must be framed in an interesting, unexpected or surprising way, similar to Denning's (2011) notion of strangeness. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) found that the best way to deliver meaningful content is to first uncover stakeholders' interests and expectations. Hanna et al. (2011) argue that uniqueness and authenticity motivate engagement. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) add the need to be humble, honest and "unprofessional", or avoiding rhetoric. Stewarding digital relationships requires room for conflict and dissent (Fournier & Lee, 2009). As Booth and Matic (2011) assert: "Companies cannot control the conversations with social media, but they can influence them" (p. 186). They add that, "consumers are now the individuals broadcasting personal or second-hand stories to their social networks and the world. They are a brand's storytellers and the new brand ambassadors" (p. 185).

Methodology

Phase I invited the organization's 3,348 employees to participate in an online, anonymous survey asking 58 questions pertaining to culture, reputation, trust, relationship management, identification with the organization, and the ability to advocate. The survey yielded a response rate of 9.2% (n=309). Phase II invited the organization's 900 advisory committee members to participate in a second online, anonymous survey asking 46 questions pertaining to the same dimensions. A response rate of 20.6% (n=186) was achieved. Phase III consisted of qualitative interviews with a targeted convenience sample of 10 leaders - two people from each of the levels of Vice President, Director, Manager, Dean and Associate Dean. Each interview was one hour in length and involved 15 pre-determined questions about culture, leadership, and the organization's atmosphere. To control for bias and maintain confidentiality, a research assistant conducted the interviews and provided the investigator

with written transcripts, not identifiable to the interviewees.

Quantitative surveys were used to classify features, such as the organization's culture and to construct statistical evidence to help measure subjective concepts such as shared identification, belonging and involvement. Qualitative interviews were used to add depth, triangulate the evidence, and construct a more detailed description of how the different variables might impact the organization and to possibly uncover additional variables. All of the questions used were constructed based on findings in related literature.

Responses to close-ended survey questions in Phase I and II were compared to search for differences of perspective. While advisory committee members are not involved with the institution on a daily basis, their perspectives were sought to provide a point of comparison for evaluating employees' sentiments. For close-ended questions with a strong level of agreement, the findings are presented as is. For questions yielding a more even distribution of agreement and disagreement, the responses were cross-tabulated with demographic data to identify patterns and suggest future areas of research. For purposes of inter-coder reliability, two independent research assistants tagged, sorted and tallied the responses to the open-ended survey questions, the median of which is presented. The leaders' answers were summarized in a spreadsheet and reviewed together to seek patterns.

Results, Findings and Analysis

1. Neither employees nor advisory committee members have a strong, unifying interpretation of the organization's culture. The internal group views the culture less positively than does the external one.

Employees (n=210) used 586 words overall to describe the organization's culture (274 of which were unique), while advisory committee members (n=142) used 392 words (172 being unique). The top word among employees was "creative" (n=32) but this only represented 5.5% of the answers. For advisory committee members, the top word was "innovative" (n=25) representing 6.4% of the answers. The top 12 words used by both groups amount to between 1.0 and 6.4% of all words given.

Overall, words used by advisory committee members were more positive in tone than those used by employees. Top words such as "open" (n=22, 5.6%), "inclusive" (n=13, 3.3%), "collaborative" (n=16, 4.1%) and "respectful" (n=7, 1.8%) suggest mutuality in the relationship, which helps to create a sense

of trust, shared values and shared identity. For employees, words such as “top-down” (n=11, 1.9%) suggest a lesser ability to influence. Sentiments such as “bureaucratic” (n=7, 1.2%), “silos” (n=7, 1.2%) and “disconnected” (n=6, 1.0%) may reflect the nature of publicly-supported colleges in which people associate closely with their departments or faculties, and where hierarchical reporting structures exist.

2. Employees and advisory committee members believe that the organization has a good reputation.

Both groups were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with nine statements reflecting the dimensions that Fombrun and van Riel (2004) suggest are critical to an organization’s reputation. Advisory committee members admired the organization more so than did employees (82.8% compared to 64.1%). Both groups believed the programs were of high quality (79.1% for advisory committee members and 75.5% for employees). Advisory committee members were in stronger agreement that the organization has highly capable leaders (71.3% compared to 51.6% for employees). The one area where employees felt more positively than advisory committee members was the extent to which the organization has a clear vision for the future. While vision is important, one of the leaders astutely observed that “the vision is the easiest part.”

3. Employees and advisory committee members do not feel as strongly about their identification and relationship with the institution. Advisory committee members feel more engaged, connected and valued than do employees.

Building Belief asserts that shared identification manifests when people understand and accept an organization’s character because they believe its values mirror their own. For this reason, people were asked to articulate the values, beliefs or characteristics that guide daily decisions or help people bond. Employees used 244 terms to describe values (65 terms being unique), listing “student success” most often at 44 times (18.1%) and advisory committee members used 257 terms (77 of them being unique) citing “student success” most often at 30 times (11.7%). Among leaders interviewed, the notion of student success was also top-of-mind. As one said, “There’s a strong ethical connection to our job . . . we don’t come to work and make widgets, we come to work and transform people daily.”

Beyond this notion there was little consensus. The next most frequently

used term by employees was “don’t know/unsure” (8.6%, n=21), suggesting a lack of clarity regarding values and beliefs. For advisory committee members, the next top values were “ensuring program quality” (9.3%, n=24), “advancing the profession” (5.8%, n=15), and an even split between “respect” and “delivering the best graduates” (4.3%, n=11). Overall, 63.4% of advisory committee members compared to only 43.2% of employees agreed that the organization shared their values and beliefs. Moreover, 68.0% of advisory committee members and only 47.9% of employees felt that the organization’s interests coincided with their own.

Both groups were also asked about the dimensions that underpin relationships (Grunig & Huang, 1999; Hon & Grunig, 1999). Responses by employees are more indicative of transactional or exchange-based relationships than those provided by advisory board members.

Table 1: Gap Analysis of Relationship Drivers: Advisory Committee vs. Employee (Agree/Strongly Agree)

	Advisory Committee			Employee			Delta
	n	N	%	n	N	%	(% +/-)
Process is clear re: decisions affecting me	102	177	57.6	72	267	27.0	+30.6
My interests are considered re: decisions affecting me	98	177	55.4	51	267	19.1	+36.3
Org. treats me fairly and justly	141	176	80.1	123	266	46.2	+33.9
Org. can be relied on to keep promises	120	176	68.1	105	266	39.5	+28.6
Org. wants long term commitment w/ me	127	176	72.2	106	265	40.0	+32.2
I’m glad to work/volunteer w/ the org	152	176	86.3	202	265	76.2	+10.1
We both benefit from our relationship	135	176	76.7	193	265	72.8	+ 3.9
I feel important to the org.	105	176	59.7	147	265	55.5	+ 4.2

Note: The question posed was “The next series of questions ask you to rate how strongly you agree or disagree with statements that pertain to the nature and quality of your relationship with the organization.” Respondents were presented with a seven-point Likert scale that asked for their level of agreement with each statement listed in the table above and included an option for ‘don’t know’. As the number of responses changed per question asked, the total number of responses for each statement is shown through a line-by-line basis.

Given that trust is a key dimension of relationships, both groups were asked questions about trust. Once again, advisory committee members felt a stronger sense of mutuality and equality.

Table 2: Gap Analysis of Trust Drivers: Advisory Committee vs. Employees (Agree & Strongly Agree)

	Advisory Committee			Employee			Delta
	n	N	%	n	N	%	(% +/-)
Org. conducts business ethically/morally	137	178	77.0	168	280	60.0	+17.0
Org. values cooperation/collaboration	152	178	85.4	154	280	55.0	+30.4
Org. communicates with me openly	133	178	74.7	121	277	43.7	+31.0
Org. communicates with me consistently	107	178	60.1	144	277	51.6	+ 8.5
Org. can deliver on its commitments	126	177	71.2	141	272	51.8	+19.4
Org. engages in open dialogue	134	177	75.7	126	272	46.3	+29.4
Org. is honest	136	177	76.8	143	271	52.8	+24.0
Org. is predictable	93	177	52.5	129	271	47.6	+ 4.9

Note: The question posed was “The following questions ask you about factors that impact your sense of trust in the organization. Respondents were presented with a seven-point Likert scale that asked for their level of agreement with each statement listed in the table above and included an option for ‘don’t know’. As the number of responses changed per question asked, the total number of responses for each statement is shown through a line-by-line basis.

A similar, lukewarm level of agreement was shown by employees on two questions about inclusion that were only posed to their group, which is a dimension of trust. Only 40.0% (n=111, N=277) of employees agreed or strongly agreed that the organization is concerned with the interests of all its stakeholders. When asked if their areas are represented in institutional strategic planning, 55.0% (n=149, N=277) agreed or strongly agreed that they were.

4. Employees and advisory committee members identify more strongly with their teams, programs or industries than they do with the organization as whole.

In the words of one survey respondent, the institution can best be

described as, “a collection of tribes – with little holding [them] together in terms of culture.” This silo effect was also evident in the qualitative interviews. When asked to describe the relationship between different areas, one leader called it “cordial,” another described it as “contentious” due to “jockeying for resources” and a third described it as “victims and victors.”

While silos are apparent, employees feel a bond with their immediate teams. When asked to select from three choices about where one’s connection lies, the majority of employees (69.3%, $n=178$, $N=257$) chose “immediate team,” while only 17.5% ($n=45$) selected the institution as a whole and 13.2% ($n=34$) felt it was with larger units, departments or faculties. When asked if they trust the people they work with most closely, 67.5% of employees ($n=185$, $N=274$) agreed or strongly agreed that they did. There was agreement or strong agreement from 63.1% ($n=173$, $N=274$) that one’s supervisor is responsive to ideas or questions, and from 60.2% ($n=165$, $N=274$) that one’s supervisor is a trusted source of information. One employee wrote, “I value my immediate colleagues immensely and trust them totally. The administration is on a completely different track which seems unrelated to what I do.” Given employees’ weaker levels of connection with the institution or its senior leadership, it is perhaps these bonds that contributed to the positive sentiments expressed. When asked if they understood why their role matters, 75.1% ($n=193$, $N=257$) of employees agreed or strongly agreed they did. There was agreement or strong agreement from 70.5% ($n=194$, $N=275$) that they feel good about the organization and from 76.2% ($n=202$, $N=265$) that they were glad to be employed there.

5. People’s ability to share their knowledge about the organization with their networks can be improved.

Only 42.5% of advisory committee members and 45.6% of employees felt that people in the surrounding communities know a lot about the organization. Moreover, only 40.5% of employees and 66.9% of advisory committee members felt that the organization makes it easy for them to share their experiences or opinions about it with their personal networks. On a positive note, both groups agreed that they could act as ambassadors (61.1% of advisory committee members and 60.3% of employees).

6. Employees feel that leadership impacts culture – and not always positively.

On a forced choice question, employees were asked to rank the importance

of six variables that shape culture (students, programs, surroundings, leadership, employees, and mission/vision). True to the literature (Schein, 2010), leadership was felt to have the strongest impact, taking the top vote by 41.2% of employees (n=107, N=206) while only 5.0% (n=13) felt it was the least important factor. As a first choice response, employees felt that they only had more impact in shaping the culture than did the physical surroundings.

While employees felt that leadership most strongly shaped the culture, it was not always viewed positively. Recall that two of the words employees used most frequently to describe the culture were “top-down” and “divisive” (see Finding 1). One participant wrote, “Attempts to engage employees or give them a voice often amount to empty exercises which are tightly controlled by those managing them.” Another noted, “We have wonderful people and if the institution would intentionally try to harness that passion and add fuel to it the institution would gain a much stronger character than the one it tries to force from the top down.” When asked whether the organization had highly capable leaders, there was agreement or strong agreement from 71.3 % (n=129, N=181) of advisory committee members, but from only 51.9% of employees (n=150, N=289).

As for the leaders interviewed, each one felt that leadership plays a role in shaping the culture, though not the exclusive role. One spoke of a disconnect between leadership and the lower levels of the organization, suggesting that from the employee perspective there is “not a lot of that management by walking around... that’s definitely an opportunity for the institution and the senior leadership.”

7. The environment, which employees feel that leaders play a role in shaping, is not always conducive to building trust, engagement and shared identity.

When asked to describe the prevailing atmosphere of the organization, employees were almost evenly split between positive and negative sentiments. Of the 203 employees who answered, 37.9% (n=77) used positive words while 34.5% (n=70) expressed negative ones. On the whole there was little consensus: The top 12 words represent between 1.1% (n=7) and 4.4% (n=19) of all answers given. While the most common words were “positive” (n=19, 4.4%) and “excitement” (n=13, 3.0%), other most frequently used words include “fearful” (n=11, 2.5%), “uncertainty” (n=10, 2.3%) and “tense” (n=6, 1.4%). One of the leaders interviewed suggested, “This place has a special energy and a special magic associated with it. I think that the possibilities are endless... The people are good.” From the opposite perspective, another said, “the

frustrations are real and I think pose a really scary threat organizationally.”

The words used to describe culture in Finding 1 were further mined to determine whether the organization is conducive to building trust, engagement and shared identity. The list was put in alphabetical order and filtered for words that describe attributes that either support or detract from this goal. Among advisory committee members, 26.0% of the words used to describe the culture (n=102, N=392) relate to positive attributes for trust, engagement and shared identity, while only 10.2% of the words that employees used (n=60, N=586) did the same.

The same list of words was further mined to look for terms that suggest barriers to trust, engagement and shared identity. Only 1.8% of words used by advisory committee members (n=7, N=392) were fell into this category compared to 14.7 % of the words that employees used (n=86, N=586). Clearly, employees have a more negative tone than do advisory committee members.

Discussion and Recommendations

Based on the knowledge gleaned from the literature and the findings from the three data points, this study makes four recommendations.

1. Come to a consensus on character

The tremendous diversity of responses used to describe the organization’s culture and atmosphere suggest that a concerted effort is required to articulate the organization’s values. This would make it possible for stakeholders to determine if their values are congruent, which promotes shared identity and self-motivated advocacy. Inspiring employees to uphold the code would also depend on creating it in an inclusive manner. Since Netflix Founder and CEO Reed Hastings publicly released his company’s Culture Code on Slide Share (Hastings, 2009), many others have followed suit including educational institutions (NYU, 2013). These codes do not stress institutional values or vision statements that are typically found in strategic plans. Rather, they present the values and principles that are shared, believed, lived and recognized among the people who constitute an organization – the ones that are instinctively relied upon to guide daily decisions.

2. Find a way to involve employees and actively listen to them

Of all the questions on the survey, the two that elicited the lowest levels of agreement from employees pertained to decisions that are made that affect them (see Table 1). In commenting on the mechanisms that exist for employees to influence decisions or provide feedback, one leader stated, "I think there's a lot of mechanisms. I'm not sure if there's a lot of awareness of where those mechanisms are or how to do it."

The institution also must find a way to reach employees who choose to not speak publicly. One leader said, "people are intimidated by senior management and do not always say what they think when they have the opportunity." Another commented, "There's also a chain of command, which in some ways stops people from stepping up."

In the college sector, care must equally be taken to balance the expectation that faculty members may have for academic freedom, which may lead to the mindset that one is being controlled by the daily decisions imposed by management. Novel ways to elicit feedback and involve employees in decision making outside of anonymous surveys should be explored. Recall that only 9.2% of employees (N=309) participated in this study. Such efforts might include creating a place to post anonymous questions or suggestions on an intranet, the responses to which could come from anyone in the organization and could prompt discussion. This repository has the potential to become a source of new ideas and a vehicle for engagement if it were accompanied by a commitment from senior leadership to critically review the ideas that garner the greatest traction, implement the ones that have merit, and be open and honest about the ones that do not. The intranet could also be used to break down traditional silos by introducing auxiliary features (such as an institutional Kijiji-style market or forums) that help people make connections or self-organize around topics of shared interest. It could further be used for recognition and rewards, allowing employees to recognize each other for a job well done.

3. Find, engage and support the early influencers

Many positive sentiments were used by those surveyed to describe the atmosphere and culture. Approximately 60% of both employees and advisory committee members also felt that they could be ambassadors. This suggests that there are people who could be self-motivated to advocate. Both groups feel more strongly connected to their immediate teams, programs or areas than with the institution. Employees also expressed a strong level of trust with their immediate supervisors and direct co-workers. If the institution mined these connections, early advocates could spread their beliefs not just among

their external networks, but also among their work teams.

Given that less than half of the employees (40.5%) and only two-thirds of advisory committee members (66.9%) suggested that the organization makes it easy for them to share their experiences, an audit is required to uncover the obstacles. The formal channels of communication must be made clear and must be easy to find and use. Content should be created that is relevant, timely and interesting and given to people who wish to share it. The institution should consider offering free tutorials in using social media to help stakeholders feel confident in their ability to do so.

4. Embrace storytelling, especially the “springboard” type

For all of its potential to equalize, inspire, involve and engage, the organization should embrace storytelling. Given people’s strong sense of identification with the notion of student success, this is an ideal starting point for the development of springboard stories as outlined by Denning (2011). Such ‘starter’ stories could be housed on an institutional blog that allows for comments from readers. Each story could feature the role that one faculty member, staff person or advisory committee member played in making a positive, yet unexpected difference in a student’s life. Given that the powerful part of the story comes when it is internalized and extended by the listener, this approach also supports the need for self-determination, which is critical in academic settings.

Limitations

As no published research was found that has tested the *Building Belief* model, this case study is limited by its relative newness and a lack of published evidence and knowledge upon which to build. The questions used warrant further testing before this study could be replicated on a larger scale.

Survey answers that elicited a fairly even distribution of levels of agreement were cross-tabulated with demographic data to look for patterns. These efforts suggest a need to further probe the effect of campus association on shared values, the effect of years of service on perceptions of fair treatment by the organization, and the effect of position type on shared values.

Conclusions

Based on the evidence, *RQ1* and *RQ2* were answered. It is clear that employees and advisory committee members have disparate notions of culture, which hampers efforts to create shared identity. The results also proved that culture is perceptual, given the variety of answers provided and the low level of consensus reached. Without this common base, the institution's character cannot be fully activated, as it would be hard for people to see their values reflected in it. Both groups surveyed had positive impressions of the organization's reputation but less positive feelings about their relationship with the institution. Employees felt that their strongest sense of connection is with their immediate teams. They also felt negatively about the extent to which the organization engages them and considers their interests in its decision-making. Advisory committee members had more positive feelings about shared identity and engagement than did employees, although the data suggests that advisory committee members responded from the mindset of their specific areas and not the entire institution. Both groups indicated that they do have the opportunity to advocate on behalf of the institution.

Based on the data collected, *RQ3* was also answered. Employees felt strongly that leaders impact the culture but felt less certain about the capability of the leaders and their personal sense of connection to them. Employees also felt there were more attributes that impede rather than facilitate a climate that supports the building of belief. By extension, this could suggest that employees do not feel that leaders create an environment that strongly promotes trust, engagement and shared identity.

This case study concludes that it is important to mind the gap that exists in people's sense of identification with the organization under review. It recommends the creation of opportunities for people to become involved in decision-making to strengthen people's relationships and sense of trust and engagement. The organization should find, engage, and empower the early influencers who can help lead the way. The process should begin with storytelling, based on the concept of student success, to engage people's hearts and minds, generate involvement, and inspire people to own the stories that they can then proudly share with their networks. Only then can a common definition of culture and shared values be reached. These shared values should be articulated in a formal culture code that the organization creates with its stakeholders.

Finally, this study does have the potential to serve as a representative case. Even though the cultures, reputations, values and purposes may be

distinct at different institutions, the study's general tenets and findings may prove useful as factors to consider for the many institutions who seek to inspire their stakeholders to build a sense of shared identification with their organization and advocate on its behalf. It is hoped that this study will prompt further research, such as the application of this model to other post-secondary institutions or the testing and refinement of the survey instruments used.

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Appendix A: Employee Survey Instrument

Thank you for participating in this voluntary, anonymous survey. It is part of a study that investigates the role that corporate culture plays in inspiring individuals to feel connected to their organization and to want to share stories about it with their personal networks.

The results of this survey will help me to determine whether a corporate communications model that was created for private enterprise can be applied to public, postsecondary institutions in Ontario. The study will help me to complete my Major Research Paper (MRP) a core requirement for the completion of my Master's degree. This study has not been commissioned by [name of institution]. No one at [name of institution] will know whether you participate or not, unless you choose to tell them.

The survey closes on Sunday November 10 at 11:59 P.M. It should take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.

Your participation is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,
Christine Szustaczek, B.A. (Hon.)
Masters Candidate in Communications Management
McMaster University

and Dr. Laurence B. Mussio
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of Humanities, McMaster University
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The first series of questions ask you about factors that impact an organization's reputation. Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. There are 18 questions in total for this section.

1. I respect my organization

Strongly agree
Agree
Somewhat agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat disagree
Disagree

Strongly disagree
Don't know

2. I admire my organization
3. I feel like I belong at my organization
4. The programs we offer are high quality
5. The programs we offer are innovative
6. The programs we offer provide good value
7. The organization is a good place to work
8. The organization cares about its employees
9. The organization rewards its employees fairly
10. The organization manages its finances effectively
11. The organization responds well to market opportunities
12. The organization is well positioned for future financial security
13. The organization has a clear vision for the future
14. The organization has highly capable leaders
15. The organization responds well to external trends
16. The organization is well respected by its peers
17. The organization is a good citizen in the communities in which it operates
18. People in the surrounding communities know a lot about the organization

The following questions ask you about factors that impact your sense of trust in the organization. Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements (the same seven-point likert scale was provided). There are 15 questions in total for this section.

19. The organization conducts its business in an ethical and/or morally just way
20. The organization values cooperation and/or collaboration
21. The organization is concerned with the interests of all of its stakeholders
22. When the organization undergoes strategic planning, my area of the institution is represented
23. The organization communicates with me openly
24. The organization communicates with me consistently
25. I feel secure in my position in the organization
26. I feel good about the organization I work for
27. My supervisor is a trusted source of information about what is going on at the organization
28. My supervisor is responsive to employee ideas or questions
29. I trust the people that I work with most closely at the organization
30. The organization is capable of delivering on its commitments
31. The organization engages in open dialogue
32. The organization is honest
33. The organization is predictable

The next series of questions ask you to rate how strongly you agree or disagree with statements that pertain to the nature and quality of your relationship with the institution (the same seven-point likert scale provided). There are 8 questions in this section.

- 34. When the organization makes decisions that affect me, the process is transparent and clear
- 35. When the organization makes decisions that affect me, my interests are taken into account
- 36. The organization treats me fairly and justly
- 37. This organization can be relied upon to keep its promises
- 38. I feel that this organization is trying to maintain a long term commitment with me
- 39. I am glad that I work for this organization
- 40. Both the organization and I benefit from our relationship
- 41. I feel that I am important to this organization

The next question asks you to rank the importance of several factors that shape the institution's culture. There is only 1 question in this section.

42. Please rank the following factors in terms of their importance in shaping the corporate culture at the institution. Please select '1' for the most important factor and '6' for the least important factor.

Corporate Culture

Leadership

Programs

Employees

Mission/Vision/Values

Students

Physical Environment/Facilities

The next series of questions ask you to rate how strongly you agree or disagree with statements that pertain to your sense of identification with the organization (the same seven-point likert scale provided). There are 6 questions in this section.

- 43. The organization shares my values and/or my beliefs
- 44. The organization's interests coincide with mine

45. Where does your sense of connection lie within the organization? Please select 1 for the area where your sense of connection is the strongest and 3 for the area where your sense of connection is the weakest.

My sense of connection is with the institution as whole

My sense of connection is with my immediate team

My sense of connection is with my larger unit/Department/Faculty

- 46. I understand why my role in this organization matters (the same seven-point likert was provided scale).
- 47. Employees at my organization have the opportunity to act as ambassadors for the institution
- 48. The organization makes it easy for me to share my opinion or experiences about my organization with my personal network

The following five open-ended questions invite you to elaborate on the organization's culture and character.

- 49. When you think about the organization's culture, what words come to mind?
- 50. How would you describe the prevailing atmosphere at the organization?
- 51. What are some of the rituals, routines or practices that help define the institution?
- 52. What are the values, beliefs, or characteristics that guide daily decisions at this institution or help people bond together?
- 53. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

The last five questions gather demographic data about individuals who participated in the survey.

- 54. How many years in total (not necessarily cumulatively) have you been employed by the institution, regardless of whether working full time or less than full time?

- 0-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- 21-25
- 26-30
- 31+

Don't know

Demographic Information

- 55. At which campus are you based?

- Campus 1
- Campus 2
- Campus 3
- Campus 4
- Don't know

- 56. What is your employment status?

- Full time faculty
- Part time faculty

Partial load faculty
Part time support staff
Full time support staff
Part time administrative staff
Full time administrative staff
Other
Don't know

57. What is your gender?

Male
Female
Other

58. What is your age?

16-25
26-35
36-45
46-55
56-65
66+
Other

Appendix B: Advisory Committee Member Survey Instrument

Thank you for participating in this voluntary, anonymous survey. It is part of a study that investigates the role that corporate culture plays in inspiring individuals to feel connected to an organization and to want to share stories about the organization with their personal networks.

The questions in this survey ask you about the organization where you volunteer as [an advisory committee member]. The results of this survey will help me to determine whether a corporate communications model that was created for private enterprise can be applied to a public, postsecondary institution in Ontario.

The study will help me to complete my Major Research Paper (MRP) a core requirement for the completion of my Master's degree. This study has not been commissioned by [name of institution]. No one at [name of institution] will know whether

you participate or not, unless you choose to tell them. [Name of institution] will not be named in the final report.

The survey closes on November 24 at 11:45 P.M. It should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,
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Masters Candidate in Communications Management
McMaster University

and Dr. Laurence B. Mussio
Assistant Professor, Department of Communication Studies and Multimedia, Faculty
of Humanities, McMaster University
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The first series of questions ask you about factors that impact an organization's reputation. Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements about the organization where you volunteer. There are 17 questions in total for this section.

1. I respect the organization

Strongly agree

Agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Don't know

2. I admire the organization (same seven-point likert scale provided)

3. I feel like I belong at the organization

4. The programs offered at the organization are high quality

5. The programs offered at the organization are innovative

6. The programs offered at the organization provide good value

7. The organization is a good place to volunteer

8. The organization cares about its volunteers

9. The organization manages its finances effectively

10. The organization responds well to market opportunities

11. The organization is well positioned for future financial security

12. The organization has a clear vision for the future

13. The organization has highly capable leaders

14. The organization responds well to external trends

15. The organization is well respected by its peers
16. The organization is a good citizen in the communities in which it operates
17. People in the surrounding communities know a lot about the organization

The following questions ask you about factors that impact your sense of trust in the organization where you volunteer. Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. There are 9 questions in total for this section (same seven-point likert scale provided).

18. The organization conducts its business in an ethical and/or morally just way
19. The organization values cooperation and/or collaboration
20. The organization communicates with me openly
21. The organization communicates with me consistently
22. I feel good about the organization I volunteer for
23. The organization is capable of delivering on its commitments
24. The organization engages in open dialogue
25. The organization is honest
26. The organization is predictable

The next series of questions ask you to rate how strongly you agree or disagree with statements that pertain to the nature and quality of your relationship with the organization where you volunteer. There are 8 questions in this section (same seven-point likert scale provided).

27. When the organization makes decisions that affect me, the process is transparent and clear
28. When the organization makes decisions that affect me, my interests are taken into account
29. The organization treats me fairly and justly
30. The organization can be relied upon to keep its promises
31. I feel that this organization is trying to maintain a long term commitment with me
32. I am glad that I volunteer for this organization
33. Both the organization and I benefit from our relationship
34. I feel that I am important to the organization

The next series of questions ask you to rate how strongly you agree or disagree with statements that pertain to your sense of identification with the organization where you volunteer. There are 5 questions in this section (same seven-point likert scale provided).

35. The organization shares my values and/or my beliefs
36. The organization's interests coincide with mine
37. I understand why my role with the organization matters
38. I have the opportunity to act as an ambassador for the organization

39. The organization makes it easy for me to share my opinion or experiences about the organization with my personal network

The following 3 open-ended questions invite you to elaborate on the organization's culture and character.

40. When you think about the organization's culture, what words come to mind?

41. What are the values, beliefs, or characteristics that guide decisions made by your group or that help it bond together?

42. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

The last 4 questions gather demographic data about individuals who participated in the survey.

43. How many years in total (not necessarily cumulatively) have you volunteered at the organization?

0-5

6-10

11-15

16-20

21-25

26-30

31+

Don't know

44. At which campus is the program for which you volunteer?

Campus 1

Campus 2

Campus 3

Campus 4

I am not based at a particular campus

Don't know

45. What is your gender?

Male

Female

Other

46. What is your age?

16-25
26-35
36-45
46-55
56-65
66+
Other

Appendix C: Questions – Leadership Interviews

1. What are the strong cultural values or beliefs that guide the daily decisions that are made at this organization?
2. How and to what extent do employees look to the leadership of this organization to set the tone or the example to follow here?
3. How and to what extent do leaders here shape the culture of the institution?
4. How would you describe the relationship between various operating groups (such as Departments, Faculties or Campuses)?
5. When you are involved in hiring decisions, how much emphasis do you place on cultural fit with the team, Department/Faculty, or organization?
6. What skills, behaviours, or performance measures are rewarded at this organization?
7. To what extent are people held accountable for their actions at this organization?
8. Do you feel that the leadership of the institution acts with integrity, humility, empathy or concern for others? Can you provide an example to demonstrate this behaviour?
9. To what extent does the organization value dialogue, listening, or hearing new ideas? How do you know?
10. To what extent do mechanisms exist for employees to influence policies, decisions, or strategic planning, or to provide feedback to the organization?

11. To what extent does management serve stakeholder interests before their own?
12. Are there any factors that keep the current culture in place and make change less likely?
13. What are the most frequent trust issues you encounter at work?
14. Are there any common stories or lore about this organization?
15. Is there anything that makes you proud to work for this organization? If so, what is it?