

Guide to the *New Readers* Culture Report

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Here is a short guide to definitions, must-see sections and key findings in the culture report, http://www.readership.org/new_readers/data/industry_culture.pdf which covers 48 newspapers and 6,600 respondents.

1. What do you mean by culture?

At its heart, the culture of an organization is about shared values, assumptions and beliefs. The surveys we used in the *New Readers* study measure the expectations that these values give rise to – how people are expected to behave in order to fit into the organization.

Note that these behaviors are purposely described in generic terms. They are relevant and applicable to anyone who is a member of an organization; they are not specific to jobs and functions, such as the culture of reporters, or the culture of sales representatives.

2. How did you measure culture?

We partnered with Robert Cooke, professor of management at the University of Illinois, Chicago, and a principal in Human Synergistics/Center for Applied Research, Inc. Through his work with hundreds of organizations over the last two decades, Cooke has developed and tested surveys that measure behavior expectations and management practices.

We worked with each *New Readers* newspaper to randomly select a representative sample of employees at all levels and in all departments. Each participant anonymously completed two detailed, related questionnaires.

One survey, the OCI (Organizational Culture Inventory,) measures how people perceive they are expected to behave; the other, the OEI (Organizational Effectiveness Inventory,) measures the effects on people and identifies practices that managers can adopt to change culture.

3. So what does the culture of the newspapers in this study look like?

This is dealt with in Tab 3 of the report. On page 13 you'll see the aggregated results for all 48 newspapers. They are shown in a graphic called a circumplex, which is really a bar chart bent into a circle. It measures 12 general styles; four each belong to constructive, aggressive or defensive clusters.

In any organization, all behaviors are present. What matters is the degree to which they exist, and how strongly people agree those behaviors are expected.

When you look at the graphic, identify which styles spike up, and which are at low levels. Ideally, you want to have strong constructive styles, weaker aggressive styles and very weak passive styles.

The composite portrait of *New Readers* newspapers is **aggressive defensive**. What this means is that people are expected to act in ways that protect their status and security.

An especially strong behavior in this culture is **perfectionism**, which means that people are expected to pay attention to detail, never make a mistake and never fail. The upside of perfectionism is obvious; the downside, if perfectionism goes too far, is that the organization is slow to adapt to change; it may focus its perfectionistic efforts on the wrong things; and it may strive for the unattainable.

A second strong behavior is **oppositional**, where people are expected to look for and point out mistakes, question everything and strive for objectivity. Again, the value of these qualities in some degree is obvious. But if there is too much, the organization may resist change and new ideas for the sake of being resistant.

Notice that passive defensive behaviors are very much present, too. If aggressive cultures are low-risk environments, passive ones are no-risk.

Constructive behaviors are least present. Those styles are associated with organizations that have a high commitment from and to employees, and to customers. They tend to be more collaborative internally, and in the case of newspapers, have higher readership.

(For more information on the 12 styles, look at pages 9-11 in Tab 3. Pages 19-30 in Tab 3 show the individual items on the questionnaire that relate to each style.)

Something that cannot be shown graphically on the circumplex but is important to know if you are thinking about culture change is how intense agreement is among employees about the kind of behavior that is expected. (See chart on page 14.)

Weak agreement indicates the behaviors are less firmly embedded, and you will see this is true for the *New Readers* newspapers. While culture change is never easy (or quick), having weak intensity of agreement especially on the defensive styles is an encouraging sign.

Pages 31-49 in Tab 3 show culture by department, age, race/ethnicity, gender and position in the organization. Overall, there isn't much difference by race, age or gender. What does make a difference is what department you're in and where you are in the hierarchy.

Highlights:

By department: Advertising, circulation and the newsroom are aggressive defensive, while production and “other” (this includes administration, IT, HR, marketing, online – see list in Appendix, Tab 6) are passive defensive.

By age: Aggressive defensive for all groups with the exception of 50-60 (passive defensive.)

By race/ethnicity: White non-Hispanics, African-Americans and Hispanics/Latinos experience the culture as aggressive defensive, while it is passive defensive for Asian and Pacific Islanders.

By gender: No difference – aggressive defensive

By position in the organization: Non-management employees experience the culture as passive defensive, while line and middle management report the expectations as aggressive defensive. Upper management, on the other hand, perceive the expectations as constructive – the only group in this analysis to see things that way.

Before leaving Tab 3, look at the Ideal culture and compare it with the current culture. (Pages 13–18.) The Ideal profile was derived from the 2000 *Impact* study. It asked respondents about behaviors that should be expected to make the newspaper more effective and whether those expectations were realistic. Not surprisingly – professor Cooke’s research has shown consistent results across all types of organizations – the results showed a preference for a strongly constructive culture, with the greatest spikes in humanistic and achievement (people are expected to be high performers and to support and encourage their colleagues).

Because the results of the Ideal diagnostics are predictable, the survey was not repeated in *New Readers* and we use the *Impact* Ideal as a proxy.

4. This is a picture of all the *New Readers* newspapers but I’m not sure how relevant it is to me -- I’m sure my newspaper is different.

There are some differences, but we found in both the *Impact* and the *New Readers* studies that newspaper cultures are very similar, regardless of size or location. Almost all newspapers in the *New Readers* study had a defensive culture of some sort (aggressive defensive, passive defensive or a mix of aggressive and passive defensive.) Only five had a constructive culture and none of those was moderately or strongly constructive.

It is possible to have a constructive department, or sub-department within an overall defensive organization.

5. Isn't it possible to be successful with a defensive culture? After all, most newspapers have this kind of culture, and newspapers could hardly be considered unsuccessful businesses.

True. But, the question we would ask is, will this culture enable newspapers to deal with its readership challenges?

Consider the following facts from the research. In both *Impact* and *New Readers* we found that as constructive norms strengthened, so did readership. We saw that newspapers that had stronger constructive norms also tended to be more reader-oriented – they were focused on understanding and responding to changes in their market. They also tended to have more engaged employees. And constructive cultures put a strong emphasis on what the organization accomplishes for customers, as well as what the individual achieves for himself or herself.

To explore that last point in more detail, look at the material in Tab 4, which is about the outcomes or effects of culture on individuals and the organization. The bar chart on page 52 shows the areas where newspapers are stronger and weaker than other organizations. On the plus side, *New Readers* newspaper employees report greater motivation and intention to stay and less stress. But a major weakness is inter-unit coordination, followed by job insecurity, poor teamwork and cooperation *within* the work unit, and quality of service at the organizational level. Three of the four significant weaknesses have to do with how well people interact for a common cause.

Pages 59-64 show the results broken down by department.

6. How do we identify practices that can help change culture?

Tab 5, levers for change, offers some insight into management practices and other aspects of work life that that can help alter culture. The bar chart on page 69 shows the levers on which newspapers already perform above average and those on which they are sub-par. You will see the latter outnumbers the former by about two to one.

We would suggest focusing on the far right of the scale, with the greatest negative gaps. Look for practices that are related to each other (pages 73-86) and how they cluster into bigger categories. As an example, we note that every item under supervisory/managerial leadership is a large opportunity for improvement: interaction facilitation (which is a long way of saying “coaching”), task facilitation (team-building), goal emphasis and consideration.