

## What is a Project Culture?

*by Tom Richert, Principal, Lean Project Consulting, Inc.*

Culture is the shared identity among all the members of a group. Just as the word *identity* can define who an individual is in terms of their values, beliefs, and practices in addition to their physical characteristics, the word can apply to groups. In this context the word 'group' refers to those people who work together regularly, recognizing that some people may belong to more than one group. Even when our individual values and beliefs, our personal identity, differ from those of our group, our practices when in that group tend to conform to the values and beliefs of its shared identity.

Depending upon the group a shared identity is allowed to happen accidentally, imposed by a leader, or deliberately cultivated. In the case of accidental formation, the shared identity may not have a clear set of values and beliefs. The identity may suffer from a lack of clarity, oscillating as different ideas compete for dominance. Initiatives initially thrive, and then die as attention turns elsewhere. Priorities frequently shift. There can appear to be little structure to the work, and therefore little reliability resulting in low productivity, tension and unhealthy relationships.

A way to address accidental cultures is for project leaders to impose a shared identity as a set of values and beliefs about group identity. Along with a meaningful purpose this shared identity is dictated with the expectation that practices throughout the project align. In the case of a large project, whether several dozen or several hundred people, this is necessary. It is critical that this shared identity, while specific, allows for alignment with the individual personal identities of the group members.



*Core Group Designing a Project Learning Culture*

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This alignment is important. Each of us has a personal core identity that is an expression of how we best contribute to others. When we are in groups where our identity aligns approximately with that of the group, we can be comfortable contributing from a place of personal power. When we are out of alignment, either intermittently in an accidental culture or continuously in either an accidental or imposed culture, we use a lot of energy pretending to be only a part of what we can bring to the group. There is a part we feel is not allowed by the culture.

Culture needs to be cultivated at least at two levels. In project work there needs to be a full project culture, and then individual component group team cultures, of which there may be thirty to forty during the life of a project. Each of these component team cultures needs to have alignment with, while not being identical to the project team culture. A similar dynamic holds in non-project enterprises. There is a clear shared identity for the entire enterprise, aligned with shared identities with each of the groups within.

For effective work, we need to deliberately cultivate the shared identities we create with our project team colleagues. We also need to be cognizant of the shared identity of the broader project. Doing each allows us to have open conversations about how we can best contribute to our groups, so they work as high-performance teams serving a purpose common to all on the project team.

### **Why focus on project team culture?**

Our observation is that when project teams fail to have alignment around a shared purpose and identity, they experience resistance and a lack of diligence when implementing lean design and construction. When they have healthy cultures they readily adopt and sustain lean practices. As one of our clients observes, this *“results in reduced project costs, shorter project durations, reduced risk, and as important healthier relationships.”*

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