Organisational Culture and Westrum's Typology

"Culture Eats Strategy for Breakfast" — Peter Drucker

An organisation is made of people, and people create culture. If strategy consists of the rules of the game, culture will determine how the game is played.

Measuring culture can be difficult, however in 2003 Dr. Ron Westrum wrote about *The Typologies of Organisational Cultures* that reflect how information flows through an organisation. He wrote: "*organisational culture bears a predictive relationship with safety and that particular kinds of organisational culture improve safety…*" That is to say, because information flow is influential and indicative of other aspects of culture, it can be used to predict how organisations or parts of them will behave when problems arise.

Westrum's Organisational Typologies

See the table below for Westrum's organisational typology model. Each column describes a broad cultural typology: *Pathological*, *Bureaucratic*, or *Generative*, and six aspects of those cultures.

The Generative culture that Westrum describes is a broadly psychologically safe culture where team members cooperate, share their fears, admit failure and continually improve.

By surveying your teams, you can establish the broad typology in which your organisational culture sits, and identify measures to improve.

Pathological	Bureaucratic	Generative
Power oriented	Rule oriented	Performance oriented
Low cooperation	Modest cooperation	High cooperation
Messengers "shot"	Messengers neglected	Messengers trained
Responsibilities shirked	Narrow responsibilities	Risks are shared
Bridging discouraged	Bridging tolerated	Bridging encouraged
Failure leads to scapegoating	Failure leads to justice	Failure leads to inquiry
Novelty crushed	Novelty leads to problems	Novelty implemented

The Westrum organisational typology model: How organizations process information (Ron Westrum, "A typology of organisation culture)," BMJ Quality & Safety 13, no. 2 (2004), doi:10.1136/qshc.2003.009522.)

Simply from reading the table above, you may be able to determine what type of culture your organisation aligns with, but ask your team to select the most applicable characteristics in the table above to build a more solid understanding. Ask the same question of colleagues outside your teams and in different parts of the organisation in order to build a more holistic view of organisational typology.

To more quantitatively test your organisation, you can run a very simple survey asking groups in different teams across your organisation to rate how well they identify with these six statements:

On my team, information is actively sought.
On my team, failures are learning opportunities, and messengers of them are not punished.
On my team, responsibilities are shared.
On my team, cross-functional collaboration is encouraged and rewarded.
On my team, failure causes enquiry.
On my team, new ideas are welcomed.

What you may find is that your team possesses a culture that is more towards the generative end of the spectrum than the rest of the organisation, or of course it may be the reverse. If the wider organisation possesses a less generative, or even towards pathological typology than your team, this causes a steep "safety gradient" at the team/organisation boundary.

Intra-Organisational Psychological Safety

Your influence or authority may not extend very far outside of your team, and as a result, you may decide to build a high-performing, psychologically safe team within an environment of much lower psychological safety. This is one of the most difficult places to be as a leader.

Maintaining a psychologically safe, generative team culture within a pathological or bureaucratic organisation results in a very steep safety gradient, and this boundary can be very hard to maintain as the strong leader of a high performing team.

One strategy to deal with this scenario is to lead by example from within the organisation, and try to ensure that your high-performing, psychologically safe team highlights good practice, and combined with a degree of evangelicalism and support, you can change the wider organisational culture from "bottom-up", not "top-down".

Combine this strategy with lobbying, persuading and influencing senior management with hard data and a business case for psychological safety that demonstrates the competitive advantage that it can bring. Bring on "champions" for psychological safety, and gather data on team performance to demonstrate the results it can bring.