The Memes Your Organization Already Runs On

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When we assess culture, we need to understand what people have learned about how the organization works. The values statement gives us something to work toward. An engagement survey can tell us how people experience their work. But we also need to pay attention to the language people use to explain what happens here and help others navigate it. Consider a new employee who is encouraged to take initiative, then hears a colleague say, "Run it past her first. Nothing moves without her approval." That advice gives the employee a practical rule to follow. If acting on it helps them get work done, they have a reason to pass it along.

This is where memetics becomes useful in understanding culture. A meme is a unit of culture that spreads through transmission and imitation. In an organization, it might take the form of a phrase, a story, or an unwritten rule. We can use these repeated ideas to explore what people believe and how those beliefs influence their behavior. Some help people collaborate and solve problems. Others teach them to protect themselves, avoid certain conversations, or wait for permission. Either way, the ideas people pass along deserve our attention because they can shape how a strategy gets interpreted and whether anyone feels able to act on it.

You can begin by listening for repetition. One person's comment is a starting point. Hearing the same idea from people in different parts of the organization gives you a reason to investigate further. The wording may change while the underlying belief remains consistent. Someone says that decisions always get reversed upstairs. Elsewhere, a colleague advises a new hire to wait until a director has weighed in before starting anything. Those statements may point to a shared belief about who really has authority. They could also describe different experiences. Repetition is a clue, and we need to understand the context before treating it as a finding about the whole organization.

Surveys and interviews can contribute to this work, especially when people have room to describe their experiences in their own words. The limitation comes when we reduce those responses to a score or summarize them so broadly that the original meaning disappears. “Lack of empowerment” tells us less about the situation than “I can make the decision, but I still have to get it approved.” The second statement gives us something specific to examine. We can look at the approval process, ask what happens when someone acts independently, and compare the authority people have on paper with the authority they believe they can exercise.

A useful place to start is where work passes between teams. During a handoff, listen to how people explain what the next team will need and what they expect to happen. A warning about legal review might reflect previous delays, a misunderstanding of legal's role, or a problem with the information being submitted. You cannot tell from the warning

alone. But you now have a place to look. Pay attention to the helpful advice, too. A team that routinely explains how to make another team's work easier may be passing along a belief about shared responsibility that you want to understand and support.

The conversations following an all-hands meeting offer another opportunity. People have to translate what leadership said into something they can use. That translation might reinforce the message, challenge its credibility, or expose a question the presentation never answered. Seniority affects what people feel comfortable saying, so an invitation to be candid may not be enough. Give people a way to share their interpretation without having to defend it in front of the person who delivered the announcement. Ask which statements they found credible and what they expect to happen next. Preserve their wording where possible, with enough context to understand it and without turning the exercise into a report on individual employees.

New hires can help us see practices we have stopped noticing. Ask what has surprised them, which advice has helped them get work done, and where their experience differs from what they were told during recruitment. Have these conversations while those impressions are still fresh, then revisit them as people gain experience. There is no reason to assume everyone stops noticing at the same point. Someone's early confusion may reveal an unclear process. Their later explanation of how they learned to work around it may tell you how that process continues despite the problems it creates.

Escalations and exit conversations deserve attention as well. When someone bypasses a manager, find out why that seemed necessary. Perhaps the decision exceeded the manager's authority. Perhaps previous requests went unanswered. The explanation helps you distinguish an appropriate escalation from a workaround people have learned to rely on. In an exit conversation, ask for examples behind broad statements about leadership or opportunity. An aside may open up a useful discussion, but it should not automatically carry more weight than the reason the person gives for leaving. Let them explain their experience before deciding what it means.

A structured assessment can take this further through stakeholder interviews, focus groups, and analysis of recurring language. Its value depends partly on whose experiences it includes. Listening only to people who already speak openly with leadership will give you a limited view. An outside facilitator may help people speak more freely, though trust still has to be established. Whether you lead the work internally or bring someone in, explain how comments will be used. People need to know that sharing an experience will not result in their words being circulated without context or used against them.

As you collect phrases, resist the temptation to force them into a predetermined list. There is no useful reason to decide in advance how many ideas hold your culture together. Some may be widespread. Others may belong to one team or a particular situation. Language repeated by leadership is worth examining, too, but its appearance in a presentation does not tell you whether employees believe it. Look for how people use an idea when making a decision or advising a colleague. Keep isolated comments available for follow-up. Something heard once may still describe a serious problem, even if you have no evidence that the belief is shared.

My concern is what happens when leaders move too quickly from hearing a phrase to trying to correct it. Imagine employees repeatedly saying, "Keep your head down until this one passes." It would be easy to label that resistance to change. It could also reflect experience with initiatives that lost sponsorship after people invested time in them. You need to find out. If the organization has taught people that waiting is safer than participating, asking them to be more positive leaves that experience unresolved. A credible response has to address what happened and what will be different this time.

That is the purpose of the *Memetics Frame Analysis* within our Discover work at Culture Design. We examine the beliefs underneath recurring language, including the experiences that shaped them and what people may risk by acting differently. Listening gives us material to investigate. Understanding it requires us to connect what people say with the conditions in which they work. A phrase may be outdated, protective, useful, or some combination of those. We cannot make that judgment responsibly from the words

alone, and changing the words will accomplish little if the experience that sustains them stays the same.

You can start with a simple comparison. Gather the commitments your organization has already made through its purpose, values, and stated behaviors. Then set aside two weeks as an initial listening period. Record recurring phrases as accurately as you can, along with the situations in which they arise. This is a starting exercise, not a deadline for understanding your culture. Compare what you hear with what the organization says it stands for. Include the places where they agree. Those examples may help you understand what already makes it possible for people to put the stated values into practice.

Bring that comparison to the people responsible for those commitments. Give them time to interpret it before offering your own explanation. Explore the decisions and experiences that could account for the differences, and identify what you still need to learn from the people doing the work. The aim is to understand why the advice employees give each other makes sense to them. Start this week with one handoff, listen to how people explain what happens next, and ask about the experience behind the advice.