

Culture in the Workplace

SUBMITTED BY: Knowledge@Wharton Summer Educator

SUBJECT(S): Management

GRADE LEVEL(S): 10, 11, 12

≡ OVERVIEW:

This lesson is intended to help students understand the importance of culture in the workplace and to dispel myths about the under-representation of minorities on the basis of qualifications alone. The lesson will demonstrate that the degree to which one is aligned with the dominant culture of an organization, greatly impacts his or her chances of advancement to decision-making positions. This lesson may be used as a standalone exercise; however, it also serves as a good follow-up session to an introductory lesson on diversity.

≡ NBEA STANDARD(S):

- Management, IV. Personal Management Skills
- Management, VI. Human Resource Management

≡ RELATED ARTICLES:

- [“Robots Advance: Automation in Burger Flipping and Beyond”](#)
- [“Laying the Framework for a Successful Startup”](#)
- [“Is Bossy the Other “B” Word?”](#)
- [“How the Gig Economy Fits into the Future of Work”](#)
- [“Educator Toolkit: Diversity and Inclusion in Life and Work”](#)

Common Core Standard(s):

- CCR Standard for Reading Informational Text: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- CCR Standard for Reading Informational Text: Determine a central idea of a text and provide an objective summary of the text
- CCR Standard for Reading Informational Text: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text.

Objectives/Purposes:

- Students will be able to define the term corporate culture.
- Students will be able to think about corporate culture as an important part of the job-person fit.
- Students will learn how cultural differences rather than a lack of actual skill and ability can inhibit career opportunities for under-represented groups.
- Students will understand the role of corporate diversity offices as multifaceted in that they not only promote the hiring of diverse candidates, but also provide education and training to minimize barriers caused by cultural differences.
- Students will learn about the challenges experienced by Asians in corporate America.

Knowledge@Wharton Article: [The ‘Masculine’ and ‘Feminine’ Sides of Leadership and Culture: Perception vs. Reality](#)

Other Resources/Materials: [Asian-Americans Hit ‘bamboo ceiling’ for Top Management Posts](#)
(Posted July 20, 2011 in The Kansas City Star at KansasCity.com, Author: Diane Stafford)

Vocabulary Spotlight:

- **Corporate Culture:** The ways of thinking, being, saying and doing that businesses and organizations value. These expectations are communicated explicitly through mechanisms such as mission statements and company handbooks, and implicitly through the ways in which rewards and negative consequences occur.
- **Bamboo Ceiling:** The exclusion of Asian-descendants from executive and managerial roles on the basis of subjective factors such as “lack of leadership potential” or “inferior communication ability” where the East Asian-descendants candidate has superior objective credentials such as education in high-prestige universities (in comparison to their white counterparts with only lower-prestige university credentials).[54] For example,

research shows that there are a decent number of partners at [leading prestigious law firms](#) in the United States who did not attend top notch law schools. However, you will seldom find an East Asian American partner of a leading law firm who did not attend a “[Top 16 Law School](#)” (according to the US News ranking). (Taken from Wikipedia’s Glass Ceiling page: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glass_ceiling)

Activities:

- 1) Inform students that they will be learning about corporate culture. Ask students if they have ever heard of the term and if anyone can describe what corporate culture is.
 - a. Write the students responses on the board to return to later.

In the Knowledge@Wharton article: “The ‘Masculine’ and ‘Feminine’ Sides of Leadership and Culture: Perception vs. Reality,” have students read the sections titled “Role Congruity” and “The Power of Culture: Mary Kay.” (8 mins)

- b. Although the article focuses on gender differences in leadership, the notion of corporate culture is the part they should focus on.
 - 2) Engage students in discussing their reactions to what they read in the article.
 - a. What were the major points presented about the difficulties faced by women in getting ahead?
 - b. How does the author describe corporate culture? An iceberg is used as a metaphor to describe corporate culture. Spend a few minutes talking about this description. Does it differ from the definition the students came up with earlier? Unpack and clarify what is meant by values and beliefs — the backbone of corporate culture. Have the class generate ideas of what this looks like in relation to their own school.
 - c. You can post an official definition of corporate culture on the overhead projector as a final note (see vocabulary spotlight section for definition).
 - 3) Next, students are going to look at a case study that exemplifies the significance of corporate culture on our lives as workers. Distribute The Kansas City Star article about the ‘bamboo ceiling’ phenomenon experienced by Asian Americans.
 - 4) Regroup students to discuss their reactions to the article.

5) Wrap up by summarizing that although hardcore qualifications such as education and experience are often offered as the reason why we don't see diversity in upper management, the reality is that subjective characteristics also play a big role in why people are overlooked for senior positions (as indicated in both articles). In the Kansas City Star article, the author remarks how some corporations have taken an active role in training people, through mentoring, about the implicit values needed to succeed in their environments. Hence, as students consider their future employment options, they should pay a great deal of attention to learning about the values and beliefs of the organizations they are interested in.

Tying It All Together: As an optional assignment, have students search the Internet for information about a company that they might consider working for, to learn about the values and beliefs that guide its corporate culture. Direct students to write a one-page summary of what they liked or disliked about what they learned. If time permits, students can share-out their research.

What Worked and What I Would Do Differently: The students absolutely loved The Kansas City Star's article about the under-representation of Asians in management. This article was great in pulling out the topic of diversity from its usual rut. Further, it made clear how the issue of culture can be a real challenge for those who do not necessarily share the same beliefs and values as found in the dominant culture of a workplace. The classes in which I facilitated this lesson were very diverse in student representation, which made the discussions around this issue all the more enjoyable for me as an instructor. The students brought in examples from home as well as information gathered from other readings on the issue. A final note was made about what these cultural differences will mean in a globalized business world. In today's job market, American employees may increasingly find themselves trying to fit into someone else's way of thinking rather than the American way.

As for the article, you should create a graphic of the iceberg metaphor for corporate culture. Additionally, it would be good to come up with a real world example to bring alive the iceberg metaphor (e.g., Carl Greene's running of the Philadelphia Housing Authority, ENRON, Wal-mart).

☺