> "Culture is deep. If you treat it as a superficial phenomenon, if you assume that you can manipulate it and change it at will, you are sure to fail."
>
> **Ed Schein**

Mergers – Fail rate is high, culture is key

Studies consistently show that 60-80% of mergers do not produce expected results whether those results are defined as profit, cost-savings, service improvements, or competitive positioning.   Similarly, the consistent theme in the press and academic research is that people issues are a, if not *the*, major obstacle to success.   For example, "cultural incompatibility" was noted as the top cause of merger failure by 57% of leaders in a Towers & Perrins survey (2003). Ninety two percent of execs surveyed by McKinsey & Company in 2009 believe their recent mergers would have benefited from greater cultural understanding; 72% admitted that too little effort is focused on culture during integration. More recently, a study by Marsh, Mercer, and Kroll (2013) concludes that organizational culture and human capital are the most pivotal issues impacting merger successes today.

Consolidations of fire departments, while not sharing all of the characteristics of for-profit organizations, do share the common threads of people and culture. Regardless of financial, political, or structural differences, the blending of two or more groups of human beings brings similar challenges around power, identity, self-esteem, purpose/meaning, and belonging.   Who am I now? What is my value? How do I fit into this new organization? These are questions that are ubiquitous in any "coming together" of groups. Culturally, questions of purpose, norms, authority, communication, and roles are common to any "We." Who is really in charge now? Who matters most? What matters most? What values drive our decisions and actions? If these issues are not directly and overtly addressed, conflict and confusion go underground and quickly become toxic.

Emphasis on efficiency in operational alignment short cuts cultural alignment which later emerges as ineffectiveness and inefficiencies – ultimately undermining success in realizing your strategic goals.

Culture – Getting beneath the surface

The particular challenge with culture is that so much of it is already underground – much of culture is intangible, unspoken, and resides in taken-for-granted assumptions about "how we do things around here." Like an iceberg, much of it is out of sight.

Ed Schein, in his classic work on organizational culture, describes several levels of culture only two of which are readily observable:
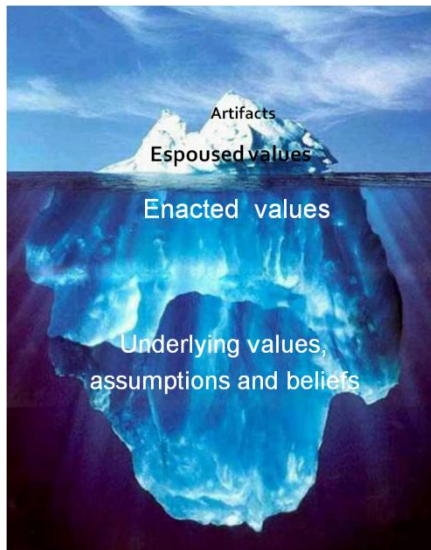
Artifacts – visible objects, superficial behaviors, or "climate" that is easy to measure

Espoused Values – what we say we stand for, written mission and vision statements
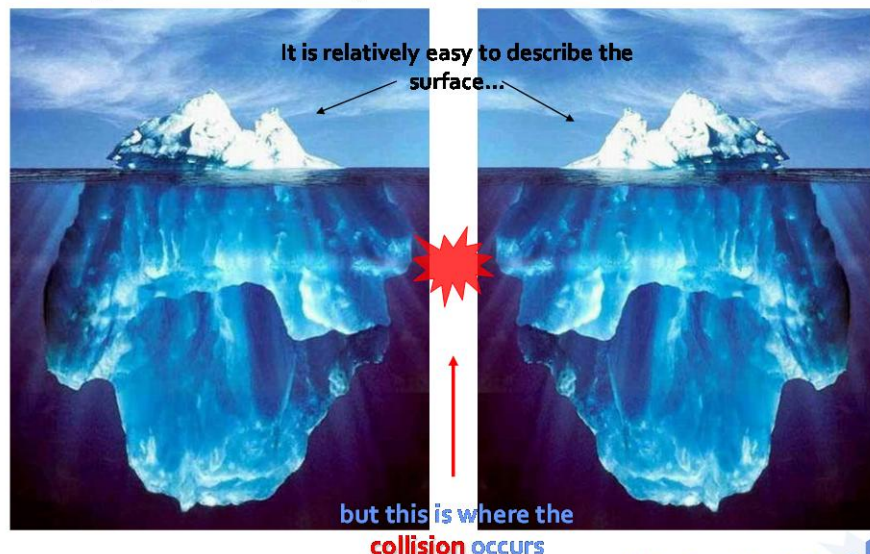
Enacted Values – what our behavior says we stand for, "taken for granted" patterns that demonstrate what really matters

Underlying Values, Assumptions, Beliefs – shared, usually unspoken (tacit) views of the world, what success is, what matters, who matters, and why

Surface behaviors and overt compliance can be aligned with new ways but mask true motives and attitudes. The gap between espoused (what we say) and enacted (what we do) can be quite wide – this is one reason for the popularity of the comic "Dilbert." How many offices have inspirational posters of Vision and Values on one wall with Dilbert cartoons plastered on the wall across the hall? If reality is not in line with rhetoric, the new "We" is doomed to fail. More so, if toxic attitudes/behaviors of the old ways are unintentionally brought into the new organization, it will be difficult to create a healthy consolidated entity. It is critical to understand the deep culture of both groups to identify where alignment and achievement of the new culture is most at risk.

What you see on the surface only hints at what is really going on and where the risks are. It wasn't the tip of the iceberg that sank the Titanic.

Danger in the Depths

It is relatively easy to describe the surface...

but this is where the collision occurs

©Sikora Associates, LLC
Helping Organizations Understand

Firefighter identity - A foundation for common ground

> **"There's no difference on calls. It's like you flip a switch: the differences disappear."**
> Pacific Northwest Firefighter

Our recent research with over 100 firefighters reveals much common ground on the ground: the firefighter identity is remarkably consistent across departments and service environments. Firefighters are united in their dedication to serving their community and devoted to the safety of themselves, their peers, and their customers.   However, engagement or identification with their department can be threatened if organizational culture and leadership are experienced as out of sync with key elements of the firefighter identity.

 For example, firefighters value their autonomy and want to be in control or in charge on calls. If departmental culture revolves around micromanagement or if the culture does not support active training and skill improvement, firefighters can become emotionally disconnected from the organization.   Firefighters remain strongly committed to doing the best job possible on the ground, but cynicism or passive aggression takes over the stations as the gap between "who we want to be" and "who we have to be" widens.

In mergers or consolidations, values can clash around being "too laid back" or "too uptight" in the station. Firefighters coming from a "good old boy" culture may take some time to assimilate to a culture that holds all individuals accountable for their actions. If there are gaps between department cultures as well as gaps within each department (between firefighter identity and organizational culture), mergers can get messy. Everything looks great on paper, but psychological and cultural dynamics are working at cross purposes to operational integration.

> **"The values pieces are most challenging - *what's really most important?* If there is no commonality there, we have problems."**
> Pacific Northwest Firefighter

**Alignment of identity, culture and leadership - Keep the wheels turning**

Leaders up and down the chain are crucial to creating and demonstrating a strong organizational culture. While culture is usually articulated by top administrators, captains and battalion commanders have significant influence on how the day-to-day culture *feels* at the station level. There can be a large gap between the writings on your walls and the living in your halls: espoused culture in the form of vision and values statements may not be in sync with the culture expressed daily in the stations.

 Firefighters often note there can be as much variability in culture across stations and even shifts as there is between departments.   If leaders are not aligned in a shared understanding of "who we are" or are inconsistent in "walking the talk" personnel become confused about what matters and how they are to act in and out of the station. Who are we really? Worst case, if the gap between firefighter identity and leader enactment of culture becomes too wide, leaders become "them:" antagonism and resistance flare and can undermine efforts to create win-win relationships between labor and management.
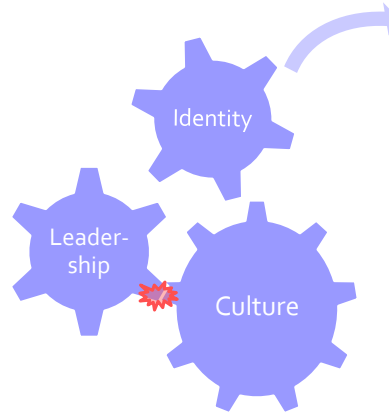
Identity, Culture, and Leadership are Tightly Intertwined

When Leadership Aligns with Culture and Identity, Wheels Stay in Motion, Individuals are Engaged
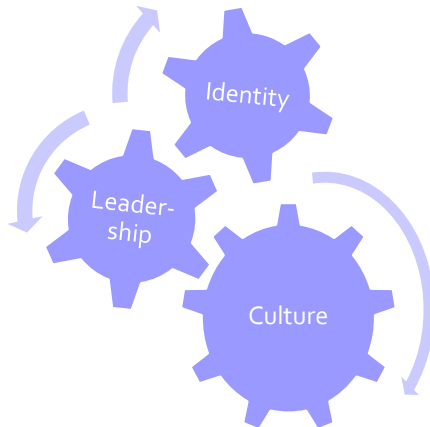
When Leadership Conflicts with Culture, Progress Stalls and Individuals Becomes Disengaged

Identity

Leader-ship

Culture

Identity

Leader-ship

Culture

All officers need to consistently express desired cultural values to align with firefighter identity and build engagement.

© *Sikora Associates, LLC*
Helping Organizations Understand…

Surfacing culture – Facilitating deep understanding for smoother consolidation

It's pretty hard to see under the water if you're standing on the iceberg. At Sikora Associates, we are skilled at getting beneath the surface and helping you see and understand how deeper dynamics may be keeping you stuck or why you are feeling "something isn't quite right." You and your team are better equipped to make decisions about who you want to be as an organization and what needs to happen to become a unified, efficient, and effective department.

Please contact me, Patricia (Pat) Sikora, Ph.D. at pat@sikora-research.com or 303 499-5723 to talk more about how we might help you navigate the waters of change.

SIKORA ASSOCIATES, LLC
Helping Organizations Understand…
www.sikora-research.com