

By Dr. Francis Marie  
Thraikill, OSU  
*President,*  
*College of Mount St. Joseph*  
*Cincinnati, Ohio*

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## **Changing the Campus Climate**

### **Proof that a college needn't suffer a crisis to transform its way of working**

**L**ike many organizations, colleges find their cultures embedded in their mission, sponsorship, historical conditions, and prevailing attitudes about the nature of the “industry” in which their institutions operate. So pervasive are these roots that culture influences nearly every aspect of organizational life, especially the processes by which institutions accomplish their work.

Put another way, the manner in which an organization functions — from democratic to autocratic—s directly related to its cultural norms. In the case of colleges (and probably all organizations), dissonance between the culture of a campus and the actions of its leaders and other individuals can result in alienation, gridlock, and crisis (as well as votes of no confidence). Conversely, leaders have an enormous influence on the ways in which culture evolves.

Of course, a given culture is neither good nor bad. Cultural differences may cause organizations with nearly identical missions to approach and accomplish objectives in fundamentally different ways, yet with equal success. Consequently, a culture's utility depends upon organizational needs, resources, and environmental conditions.

Nevertheless, some attributes of culture appear hazardous to organizational health. Principal among these is culture's predisposition toward the status quo. In other words, while culture can unite people and set the rules for engagement, it can also limit options and actions in the name of conformity to existing practices and goals. Because of its dependence on historical precedent, culture can be a major obstacle to organizational change and, as such, can induce crisis.

The College of Mount St. Joseph has faced several crises in its history, most notably in the 1970s. At that time, several challenges nearly led the Mount to financial ruin. These included declining interest in women's colleges, changes in congregational sponsorship, and a preference for the existing campus culture (namely, a passive management style, an attachment to introspection in the face of external threats, and a reliance on a relatively closed hierarchy for decision-making).

Although this crisis necessitated action by my newly appointed predecessor in 1977, the action's costs were considerable. As I began my presidency at the Mount in 1987, I was convinced that crises were not a desirable way to adapt organizational culture to new realities. Moreover, I was equally confident that culture—the behavioral norms and attitudes by which institutions operate—could be changed without a precipitating crisis and the attending negative side effects.

With the possible exception of well-endowed colleges, most institutions have faced some version of the preceding crisis, usually fostered by a culture that is out of sync with the external environment. And while many of my colleagues agree that it is preferable to undertake organizational change without suffering through a crisis, few have been able to adapt their cultures in advance of financial trouble.

Despite this lack of successful models, it seemed to me that the Mount provided an excellent opportunity to test whether a moderately stable college could intentionally

transform its culture and forestall future crises, overcome external challenges, and value change. After 10 years of experimentation, I have found that indeed it can.

## Leadership and the roots of change

In 1987, the Mount's prevailing culture was like that of many organizations that had survived a major economic (enrollment) challenge. During an initial period of swift and painful reorganization, the cultural norms at the root of the crisis were suppressed and replaced by a new paradigm that encouraged fiscal discipline and entrepreneurship. This cultural shift redefined the college's mission to include new services and populations (including the introduction of coeducation and adult learners).

As the crisis subsided, many faculty and staff who had understood the need for immediate action wished to return to a more traditional collegiate culture that featured wider participation in decision-making, the protection of existing initiatives, and incremental change rather than large-scale reengineering. Despite these rising expectations, regular reinforcement of the new norms by institutional leaders (with the support of trustees and the sponsoring congregation) kept the college on a course of outreach and economic restraint.

By the time I interviewed for the Mount's presidency, it was clear that the campus was searching for a leader who could continue the march toward fiscal strength, avoid the behaviors that had fueled the college's earlier financial woes, and improve collegiality. In essence, the community had grown weary of a crisis-management model that emphasized financial security and limited consultation in the name of responsiveness. Faculty, in particular, were anxious to play a greater role in governance; some staff still longed for the protective atmosphere that characterized the college's pre-crisis environment. These competing visions, along with the advent of greater financial stability, made the conditions right for a return to the very same cultural model that prompted the earlier crisis. Interestingly, members of the campus community recognized this dilemma.

Trustees and other campus leaders were more specific about what they wanted the new president to achieve. They, too, knew that a crisis culture could not be sustained and that the college's long-term success depended on a new approach. Because of their experiences in business, health care, and other fields, trustees were especially sensitive to the need for flexibility and a culture that invigorated institutional development without relying on the all-too-common cycle of growth, complacency, crisis, remediation, and recovery.

At this relatively stable moment in institutional history, trustees charged me, as the new president, with this new agenda. Their commission included the development of a new strategic plan, the creation of a more participatory governance structure, and the introduction of a change culture that balanced quality with attentiveness to the marketplace.

The preceding background is designed to highlight a crucial (perhaps obvious) insight about organizational culture. Regardless of external and internal conditions, the foundation of a successful cultural transformation is the commitment of the leadership (most notably trustees and senior management) to the process.

For decades, organizational experts have recognized that institutions change in response to crises or intensive educational activities (such as mentoring). In this case, the Mount's board recognized the need to move beyond crisis management, build upon the institution's

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hard-earned stability, and prevent a reversal of financial fortune. Although faculty and staff shared different opinions about the nature of the college's environment and future (a common challenge in higher education), trustee unanimity gave credibility and authority to the change agenda and influenced the board's selection of and mandate to me as the new president. Consequently, I believe that a strong, independent, and challenging board is essential to any revision of organizational culture.

Similarly, presidential communications skills—the ability to inform trustees about the unique dimensions of the collegiate organization—are equally critical.

### **Moving forward: understanding the environment**

**T**ime and again, organizational leaders have attempted to establish a new culture without understanding the dynamics of the prevailing campus environment. My experiences, and those of other presidents with whom I am familiar, tell me that you cannot get where you want to go if you don't know where you are. This simple maxim is often ignored in the rush to act, particularly among new CEOs who want to take advantage of the presidential "honeymoon" period.

Despite the appeal of an abbreviated timetable for introducing change, it is desirable to provide the community with ample opportunities to investigate challenges, understand organizational conditions, and come to appreciate the benefits of a continuous-improvement approach that avoids crisis-driven change. This gift of time is especially important to faculty who are suspicious of initiatives that seem to generate predetermined outcomes or, in the absence of crisis, limit dialogue.

For the Mount, the new strategic planning process provided an ideal way to identify the college's strengths and weaknesses and examine its cultural values. Over a 12-month period, we sought input from all our constituencies regarding the institution's mission and goals. In addition, we shared a great deal of information with the community on a range of topics (external conditions, management, enrollment, finances, technology, etc.). The process involved engaging people across institutional constituencies—that is, mingling trustees, members of the sponsoring congregation, faculty, administrators, staff, alumni, and civic leaders.

The plan that emerged from these deliberations—known as Vision 2000—provided the framework for a permanent migration from the former crisis-response model to continuous improvement. In addition to providing specific directives, the plan sanctioned an ongoing exploration of the campus's approach to service and management.

The steps outlined above sound remarkably straightforward. Be assured they are not. In many cases, only the hard reality of institutional survival tempered the ingenious, and sometimes impractical, ideas generated by the planning process. In addition, because individuals who had adapted to or flourished in the earlier management cultures recognized that Vision 2000's goals threatened the existing order, they worked to oppose the plan's endorsement of cultural redesign and more rigorous assessment. Amid these competing forces, the value of time, information, and interaction between diverse groups proved vital to building consensus and overcoming objections.

## From adoption to implementation: challenges and changes

With Vision 2000's adoption, the campus agreed to explore the Mount's cultural identity, organizational effectiveness, and governance system. However, just as theory can be confounded by practice, gaining approval for these transformation principles proved easier than implementing them.

Early in the Vision 2000 planning process, it became apparent that trust (or lack thereof) was a major obstacle to institutional change. While most employees were enthusiastic about the Vision 2000 process, many remained skeptical about the long-term viability of a more collegial governance model and the motives of administrators. The college's history of hierarchical decision-making, combined with several unfortunate and unrelated personnel problems, led some faculty to wonder if a collegial model would remain in place only so long as it was convenient. Also, a number of persons dubious about the new cultural direction were quick to raise concerns, both real and imagined, in an attempt to discredit it.

Very quickly, it became clear that efforts to gain broad-based acceptance for a change culture would require the Mount to build trust between members of the campus community. And since the trust issue was rooted in the practice of governance, the creation of a new governance structure—a project mandated in the Vision 2000 plan — became the first order of business.

As with the Vision 2000 plan, widespread involvement characterized the process. In addition to using teams to manage the development of the governance plan's various elements, regular and repetitive feedback was sought from all campus constituencies so as to respond to concerns and maximize participation. The process took about two years to complete but produced two outstanding results:

- a change-friendly model for managing institutional decision-making that recognized levels of authority, roles, and responsibilities; and
- a dramatic improvement in trust levels, as evidenced by a near-unanimous vote in favor of the plan. Ninety percent or more of the employees in every constituency approved the handbook.

## Extending the culture of change

Once the redesign of the governance model was complete, the campus community possessed the tools it needed to guide institutional development and relationships. Particularly important was the recognition that change would be an ongoing feature of organizational life, information was the basis of good policy, and different campus constituencies were accountable for certain aspects of campus operations and decision-making. Put another way, the Mount agreed to routinely assess its viability and the needs of the surrounding environment in order to adapt the college to emerging realities prior to the onset of crisis.

While the notion of a transformational culture seemed sensible, the ramifications associated with implementing it were less clear. The uncertainty inherent in a change culture caused discomfort among many faculty and staff, who worried about the lack of personal security that often accompanies a sensitivity to the marketplace.

Although we made efforts to ease these anxieties, it seemed that the time was right to openly confirm what most people knew and feared: No program, service, function, or

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individual job was beyond the reach of transformation. This cold reality was tempered by memories of the staff reductions that followed the earlier institutional crisis. In effect, many people hoped that the negative results of a pre-emptive reorganization would be less disruptive and comprehensive than those generated during crisis.

However, traditional barriers between departments seemed to limit opportunities for dialogue. Despite the gains achieved through the planning and governance initiatives, many staff seemed focused on their own departments and detached from institution-wide issues. The resulting operational silos appeared to protect departmental interests but, instead, served to isolate people from each other. The need to engage the community in change across departmental lines became critical to progress. (Some would argue that this issue was an extension of the trust problem.)

To overcome the self-protection bias and examine the advantages of short-term, strategic adjustments over wide-ranging, crisis-driven changes, we held a series of campus forums. Fortunately, at about this time the nationally acclaimed Higher Education Roundtable (sponsored by the Pew Trusts and now funded by the Knight Foundation) was launched. The Mount joined the project's second round. From 1992 through 1995, employees from across campus met in retreat-like gatherings to focus on the relationships between the Mount's mission, goals, and values and the challenges of external realities. An independent moderator, along with a set of environmental data (internal and external benchmarks), gave balance and perspective to the discussions. And while the first roundtable featured a selected group of campus leaders, subsequent sessions were open to anyone interested in the dialogue.

By the time the Pew Roundtable program was completed, more than half of the campus community had participated. Although the Pew name added luster to the process, these gatherings would have been just as effective without it. The key ingredients were that an independent moderator was engaged, credible information about institutional conditions was distributed, and the participants agreed to be citizens of the college rather than representatives of their own interests. Some members of the community continued to be skeptical about the process, but most found the conversations refreshing, enlightening, and purposeful. In addition, consensus emerged around the notions that even stable institutions face challenges and an ounce of prevention is truly worth a pound of cure.

As of the publication date of this monograph, the Mount has used this model to further strengthen its change culture and to address a range of institutional issues. These include the development of the college's first institutional marketing plan, a revision of the standards for faculty promotion, a new general-education curriculum, and improvements to a variety of student services. Also, the Mount's next strategic plan (to be called, fittingly enough, "Shaping Tomorrow") will be a product of this process.

But perhaps most exciting has been the steady—albeit slow—evolution of the college away from an environment of self-protection and mistrust to one that embraces change as the surest means to achieve long-term security.

For some, this transformation was so stressful that they chose to leave the college. Other staff who were part of programs or functions no longer deemed effective or relevant (financially or programmatically) have also moved on to new assignments both on and off campus. None of these changes was easy. But most were accomplished with less heartache and more compassion than is possible during times of crisis.

And the positive effects have been spectacular. Over the past decade, the Mount has enjoyed record enrollments, fund-raising, and black ink. It has improved its image as measured by the quality of entering freshmen, retention, and graduation rates. Ten years ago, it would have been unthinkable that *U.S. News & World Report* or *Money* magazine would include the Mount among their lists of best colleges. Today, the Mount is a regular on those lists.

## Summary of lessons learned

Just as the Scarecrow questioned Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*, it is fair to ask what we have learned. The lessons, both good and bad, have been considerable. They include:

- The commitment of the trustees and administration to the process must be unanimous and strong. To that end, regularly engage the board in conversations with faculty and staff.
- Moments of strategic planning are ideal times to consider culture.
- You must understand your current culture before you attempt to establish a new one.
- Regardless of how much the staff becomes accustomed to a change culture, the need to reinforce those values is constant.
- Even though you must allow ample time to develop and perpetuate cultural transformation, you must also include specific timelines for completing individual objectives within the process.
- It is vital to openly develop and share accurate information (especially financial data) as a means to build confidence in the process and trust among employees.
- You must be honest about the threats that confront both your institution and its individuals.
- Dialogue should take place in neutral settings and across campus constituencies.
- Finally, quality management theory is right in at least one respect: Change is a continuous initiative, and the task of transformation is never complete.

**Francis Marie Thrailkill, OSU**, is president of the College of Mount St. Joseph, a Catholic institution of 2,300 students in Cincinnati, Ohio. ■