JOURNAL OF ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01608061.2016.1200512

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Integrating Organizational-Cultural Values With Performance Management

Carl Binder

The Performance Thinking Network, Bainbridge Island, Washington, USA

ABSTRACT
Early analyses of organizational culture used and an approach derived from cultural anthropology to provide guidance for leaders, managers, and employees, but lacked units of analysis congruent with behavior science. More recent approaches identify values and practices, the latter being behavior which can be analyzed. However, the abstract language of this approach limits our ability to set specific performance expectations and relies on post-hoc recognition and reinforcement. This article outlines an approach that anchors performance analysis in the valuable work outputs (accomplishments) produced by behavior, and uses value statements to adjust expectations for work outputs and behavior. With this approach we can define how specific values apply to specific work outputs and behavior, and set clear performance expectations. The author proposes that performance analysis anchored in work outputs may improve our ability to set expectations and arrange conditions for optimizing values-driven performance in organizational or societal contexts.

KEYWORDS
Organizational culture; values; performance improvement

Introduction

The recent special issue of *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management* on leadership and culture change (Houmanfar & Mattaini, 2015) covered topics and perspectives related to how we define, strengthen, lead, change, and contribute to culture—whether in societies at large or within specific organizations. Many contributors to the field of organizational behavior management (OBM) have become involved personally or professionally in efforts to contribute to society; to change things for the better; and to address pressing societal issues, such as environmental sustainability, poverty, and so on.

At the same time, those interested in leadership and culture change have sought to define the repertoires of leaders needed to drive change in organizations and communities. Thus, the discussion of culture applies to specific companies and nonbusiness organizations in which cultural values such as *focus on the customer*, *environmental sustainability*, *innovation*, or *diversity*

CONTACT Carl Binder carlbinder@sixboxes.com The Performance Thinking Network, 281 Shepard Way NW, Bainbridge Island, WA 98110, USA.

© 2016 Taylor & Francis

are often stated and sometimes lived. It also applies to communities and societies as a whole, in which shifts in cultural values can contribute to or obstruct progress toward societal or environmental goals or visions. This article describes a recently emerging approach for integrating cultural values (whether societal or organizational) into descriptions of specific performance to set expectations for leaders, managers, and those being managed or led.

Previous approaches to organizational culture

In their classic treatment of organizational culture, Deal and Kennedy (1982) approached organizations as social anthropologists. Identifying values, legends, rituals, heroes, and other elements of traditional culture analysis, the authors encouraged readers to be aware of these cultural factors as key contributors to organizational effectiveness and results. They offered descriptions and examples following this anthropological analysis with recommendations for those entering, seeking to understand, and hoping to survive and thrive in organizations. They proposed that leaders examine their organizations with these factors in mind and take advantage of them while adjusting them in ways to optimize performance.

Although this approach was interesting and novel at the time, it was not as actionable as an organizational performance improvement professional might like. Nonetheless, such anthropological analyses, language, and metaphors continued in the business literature for some time and are still sometimes part of the vocabulary of those concerned about understanding and managing variables that drive organizational performance.

The emerging attention to culture alerted leaders and consultants to the fact that there is more to overall organizational success than straightforward operational efficiency and productivity or financial management. Culture, which has often been described as “how we do things around here,” was recognized as a critical success factor, in some cases more important than the relatively cut and dried operational influences per se. Case studies highlighting different cultural values and their impact on organizational performance and employee satisfaction described how leaders and employees behave in different types of organizations and profiled cultures as reflecting degrees of risk taking, individualism, pace of activity, and so on (Deal & Kennedy, 1982).

Much like competency models used by human resources professionals in the current era (Teodorescu & Binder, 2004), these general descriptors were useful up to a point for analysis and description. But they ultimately fell short of the specificity or precision needed for systematic performance management. These high-level, abstract descriptions of cultural characteristics were difficult to apply precisely in day-to-day operations.

There have been various treatments of organizational culture in the general business literature since 1982, and discussion among behavior analysts about culture aligned with contingencies and metacontingencies of reinforcement for decades (e.g., Glenn, 2004; Houmanfar, Alavosius, Morford, Herbst, & Reimer, 2105; Skinner, 1956). An immediate precursor for the current article, however, was a model advanced by Tosti and Jackson (1994, 1997a), two thought leaders in the International Society for Performance Improvement. Both Tosti and Jackson had been active in early applications of behavior science to instructional design and development and over time had become involved at more strategic levels in organizations, working with executives and their teams to improve performance from the top down. Their analysis, similar to that in the present article, was less technically behavior analytic and more pragmatic, using terminology often found among business stakeholders rather than at the level of analysis applied by OBM scholars and practitioners.

Their organizational alignment model (Tosti & Jackson, 1994) depicted how operational performance should be aligned with organizational culture. They claimed that organizational culture could sometimes account for more than half of the variance in performance among companies. They engaged stakeholders at the highest levels and across entire organizations in the analysis, clarification, and modification of organizational culture.

Tosti and Jackson (1994) identified *values* and *practices* as key elements for analyzing and improving organizational culture. They did not define values in the ways in which previously cited behavior analysts have done, focused on a functional analysis of consequences to determine value. Rather, they identified *values*, or *value statements*, as words or phrases that describe generally how people are expected to work; what they should prioritize; and how they should behave in relation to one another, customers, and society at large. In other words, they attempted to put the words and phrases so commonly posted on the walls of large organizations, listed in company literature and on websites, and referenced in training and management gatherings into practice through the day-to-day behavior of employees. They defined *practices* as the habitual or routine forms of behavior that put values into action, the types of behavior that characterize “how we do things around here.” This is similar to, but not precisely the same as, Glenn’s (2004) description of organizational practices as macrobehavior.

Tosti (Tosti & Jackson, 1997a) often cited an engagement with British Airways in which he and his colleagues worked from the top down in the organization to install the value of *openness* with a key practice for application in daily activities. The airline was suffering in comparison to its competitors from a lack of agility in the marketplace and too little innovation or adaptation in the competitive landscape. Analysis determined that the company lacked *openness* in its culture and that employees were often restrained and less than forthcoming in their communications with one another. Such behavior was consistent with, and perhaps an extreme form of, the British national culture at the time. This obstruction to free communication was thought to slow down operational processes and change. Thus, the value of *openness* was selected as a focus for strategic reasons.

The consultants worked in a series of workshops to gain agreement from the top to the bottom of the organization for the practice *openness* in 1:1 or group. Using an elegantly printed "openness card" supplied to everyone for immediate access in their pockets, the leadership encouraged employees to "pull the openness card" in meetings by reciting text on the card that read, "In the spirit of openness I'd appreciate your hearing me out and giving me your full considered opinion" (Tosti & Jackson, 1997b).With agreement established to comply with the protocol and thank those who followed the practice, the behavior of freely exchanging information became a widespread practice in the organization, with a culture scan some months later indicating a change in this general category of behavior. Eventually people misplaced their cards and simply used approximations of the language. But over time this new practice took hold and was sustained. It was judged by the executive leadership and through employee surveys to have led to acceleration of innovation and problem solving across the company.

When my colleagues and I first learned about this approach from Tosti and Jackson in the early 1990s, we were impressed by how they had been able to identify an antidote to a behavioral problem (constrained communication) and establish a widespread form of behavior in conversations and meetings designed to change "how we do things around here" on a daily basis. This was a significant change in culture, accomplished in relatively short order. Combined with Tosti's observation that much of organizational performance depends on culture, this approach was compelling and actionable, framed as a type of organizational development intervention.

We began to seek opportunities for this kind of project, even discussing with Tosti possible partnering with him and his team. Over time, however, we realized that opportunities for this type of work are rare. Such projects are typically restricted to consultants working at the top of large organizations, senior executives themselves, or those able to work with smaller organizations in which the entire management team is accessible for and interested in the effort. In other words, we learned that despite the seeming power of the approach, it might not be as easy to implement as we had originally thought. We began to recognize other, more technical challenges as well.

Working with culture: Challenges and opportunities

As we sought opportunities to address cultural issues or define and strengthen culture in organizations, the problem of finding the right level of generality became a challenge. That is, the problem with words and phrases that describe organization-wide (or societal) values is that they must by definition refer to very wide arrays of specific situations in order to be useful. In that respect such value statements resemble poorly defined concepts, with large sloppy sets of examples and nonexamples used to define and teach recognition and application. Although British Airways was fortunate to find a pervasive issue to address with a specific but broadly applicable practice (i.e., following the openness protocol in virtually every meeting with others), it is not always easy to identify behavior that will have so much leverage across a wide range of operational performance situations.

Often value statements such as *focus on the customer* or *quality first* read well on posters and presentation slides but are not so easy to pin down for all of the people and situations in the organization where they might apply. They likely require different specific behavior in different job roles or in the execution of different processes. A symptom of this problem of using abstract words and phrases (generalizations) to pinpoint different forms of behavior is that it can resemble the infamous film censors who said about pornography, “I can’t tell you what it is. But I know it when I see it.”

To identify and recognize exemplary practice of values across entire organizations, leaders and human resources professionals often design interventions that include the following:

- Communicating value statements and engaging leaders and managers as models and evangelists
- Illustrating values and teaching practices with examples and nonexamples, testimonials, readings, and so on
- Identifying exemplary instances of practicing the values post hoc, using awards, video testimonials, and descriptions about how people behaved in particular situations to serve as models and encouragement for others

The challenge is to provide a sufficient range of models, or expectations, for performance. Although we can identify exemplary cases in retrospect, doing so is a slow process likely to illustrate only some possible types of values-based practice. Such efforts are likely to lose momentum over time unless continuously reinforced and refined. Many cultural initiatives either fade away with the impression that they have helped or continue in forms that resemble employee-of-the-month award programs, offering little or no reinforcement for most people’s practice of the values. This is not a formula for rapid behavior change.

Additional challenges beyond the problem of abstraction or generality include the likely necessity of implementing across whole organizations at once. Even if there is an attempt at multiple-baseline implementation and evaluation across business units or departments, cultural interventions of the

Tosti and Jackson variety are likely to require the attention of senior leadership and will tend to bleed from one part of the company to others, not always effectively or with great fidelity. This means that an organization must devote significant high-level executive and management attention and allocate significant resources for consulting or internal staff work. In most cases, we would expect challenges related to the level of generality in the language of value statements and the inability to crisply characterize what the value looks like as it is practiced across different job roles, teams, processes, and so on.

Even in the example of openness cited by Tosti and Jackson, implementation was preceded by months of high-level alignment meetings, departmental discussions, and related activities to be sure that everyone was on board. For most value statements, there will be greater variety in the types of behavior needed to practice the values than in the case of openness in meetings. Does *focus on the customer* look the same in customer service as it does in product development? Of course it does not. Use of abstract terms to describe behavior leaves application open to wide interpretation for any individual, team, department, or process.

A technical solution to the level of generality problem

A key to addressing these challenges lies in anchoring analyses and descriptions of human performance on the products of behavior rather than starting with descriptions of behavior itself. There are many reasons to appreciate the contributions of Thomas F. Gilbert (1978) and his colleagues. One of Gilbert's most important contributions was his critique of the "cult of behavior" (Gilbert, 1978, p. 7) and his efforts to shift our focus in the analysis of performance from behavior to what he called *accomplishments*. Accomplishments, in Gilbert's terms, are the *valuable products of behavior*. To be clear, his reference to accomplishments (what I call *work outputs*) did not necessarily mean that for the individuals or groups producing them the accomplishments were reinforcers, technically defined. Rather, he meant that accomplishments were valuable to the organization to the extent that they contributed to organizational or business results.

Thus, he distinguished between accomplishments and incentives, which might or might not be the same, and listed incentives as one of the variables in his behavior engineering model that influence behavior (Gilbert, 1978), not assuming that accomplishments themselves would be functional consequences for those who produce them. Reinforcement of behavior might come from other sources, including social consequences or incentives arranged by the organization. Gilbert pointed out that in organizations, the value we create or pass on resides in the products of behavior, not in the behavior itself. He criticized the cult of behavior as the mistaken belief that behavior should be the focus of performance improvement, in contrast to his view that behavior is valuable only to the extent that it produces valuable accomplishments.

Organizationally, financially, and even metabolically speaking, behavior is *costly*, whereas accomplishments are *valuable*. Gilbert described the worth of a performance intervention as being equal to the value of the incremental accomplishments it produces divided by the cost of establishing and supporting the behavior that produces the accomplishments, these days often described as return on investment. This assertion can be tested against any number of scenarios, for example, the value of an important decision versus the cost of the behavior to produce it, or the value of a new product prototype versus the cost for behavior to produce it. We see this in our personal lives as well, in which we invest significant amounts of our behavior into relationships that we seek to establish and maintain. Viewed through the lens of performance analysis, those relationships are accomplishments (work outputs) that either do or do not meet implicit criteria for "good." Examples abound in the business world, where the work outputs that people deliver to the organization are what enable it to succeed (see Figure 1).

Based on this insight from Gilbert, we (Binder, 2005) developed a model called the *Performance Chain*, which delineates the elements of performance and their sequential dependencies as simply as possible. As part of developing the model, we labeled it with plain English words and phrases that virtually anyone can understand and apply. *Behavior influences* are the variables that enable or obstruct behavior. *Behavior* includes the tasks and tactics—the activities, whether overt or covert—that produce work outputs. *Work outputs* are the products of behavior, what Gilbert called *accomplishments*. And *business results* are the organization-level outcomes that define the success of the organization or business in relation to its mission and goals. In operation, each element of the chain affects the element to its right, while we analyze and plan from right to left.

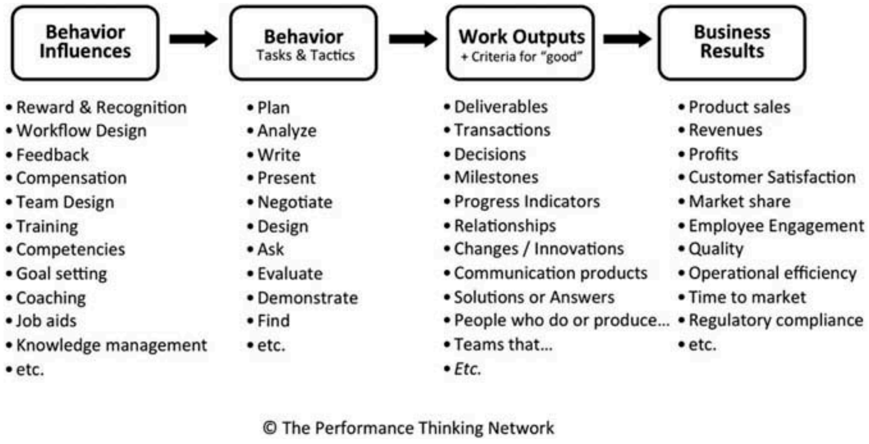
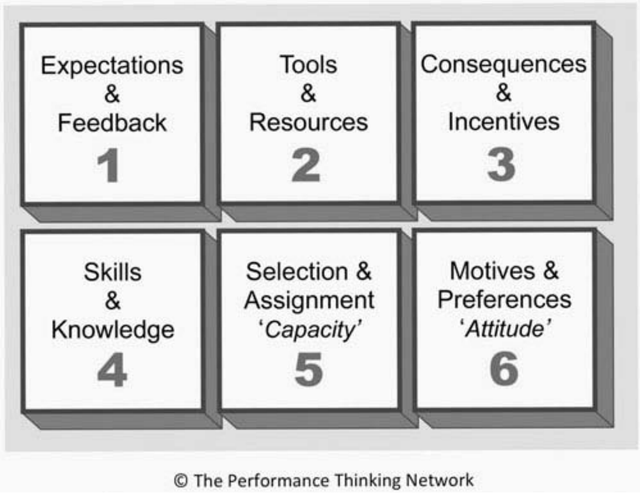

Behavior Influences
Behavior
Tasks & Tactics
Work Outputs
+ Criteria for "good"
Business Results
• Reward & Recognition
• Workflow Design
• Feedback
• Compensation
• Team Design
• Training
• Competencies
• Goal setting
• Coaching
• Job aids
• Knowledge management
• etc.
• Plan
• Analyze
• Write
• Present
• Negotiate
• Design
• Ask
• Evaluate
• Demonstrate
• Find
• etc.
• Deliverables
• Transactions
• Decisions
• Milestones
• Progress Indicators
• Relationships
• Changes / Innovations
• Communication products
• Solutions or Answers
• People who do or produce…
• Teams that…
• Etc.
• Product sales
• Revenues
• Profits
• Customer Satisfaction
• Market share
• Employee Engagement
• Quality
• Operational efficiency
• Time to market
• Regulatory compliance
• etc.
© The Performance Thinking Network

Figure 1. The Performance Chain.


Expectations & Feedback 1
Tools & Resources 2
Consequences & Incentives 3
Skills & Knowledge 4
Selection & Assignment *'Capacity'* 5
Motives & Preferences *'Attitude'* 6

© The Performance Thinking Network

Figure 2. The Six Boxes® Model.

The Performance Chain model defines the performance to which we apply the variables identified in the Six Boxes® Model of behavior influence (Binder, 1998). The Six Boxes Model is a descendent of Gilbert's behavior engineering model, improving on his model with user-tested plain English labels to accelerate learning, communication, and application. This model, developed in the mid-1980s in response to stakeholder confusion about Gilbert's behavior engineering model terminology, enables analysis and communication among stakeholders at all levels in organizations about the factors that influence behavior (see Figure 2).

Although we do not teach our clients the intricacies or terminology of functional behavior analysis, the Six Boxes Model provides a framework in which skilled behavior analysts can apply what they know about the contingencies of reinforcement in the context of other variables such as existing employee repertoires (skills and knowledge), tools and resources, employee selection factors, and the identification of individual and group preferences. We can also use the Six Boxes Model as a framework for *teaching* more precise application of the findings and concepts of behavior science. Our claim, which has proven so far to be true, is that any variable one can identify that influences behavior can fit into one of the cells of this model, or relationships among the cells (e.g., expectations aligned with consequences). Although a detailed description of that formulation is beyond the scope of this article, the reader can refer to white papers and publications at the website sixboxes.com for more information.

Our focus in developing both of these models in the mid 1980s was on simplicity and plain language for the sake of easy learning and communication. We discovered that the language of Gilbert's (1978) models did not communicate easily to ordinary nonspecialist stakeholders, so we began changing terms and phrases until we arrived at what we have now. We user-tested the language in iterations as we refined the models for several years between about 1984 and 1988. A client, Tom Hogan, who brought street-smart sales and marketing savvy to his job as sales vice-president at Dun and Bradstreet, suggested that we call it the Six Boxes Model, a label that stuck. We ultimately trademarked the name to protect its integrity and ensure consistent use of language in any reference to the model.

Accordingly, there are differences in language between our two models and Gilbert's terminology. The most relevant difference here is that we use the phrase *work output* rather than *accomplishment* to describe the valuable products of human behavior. We changed this language for several reasons. First, dictionary definitions of *accomplishment* generally include at least one reference to behavior (e.g., "an activity that a person can do well, typically as a result of study or practice") (Soanes, Hawker, & Elliott, 2009). Second, and perhaps related to the dictionary definition, we found that people often confuse *accomplishments* with *behavior*. This is a common and understandable confusion, and the phrase *work output* does not seem to occasion descriptions of behavior quite so often, at least among our audiences of ordinary organizational employees, educators, and others.

We insist that work outputs are *things*, tangible or less tangible things that can be described as countable nouns (e.g., documents, widgets, decisions, new ideas, relationships that meet specific criteria). We emphasize nouns rather than verbs, including passive verbs. We find even in sophisticated performance improvement and OBM groups descriptions of accomplishments such as *procedure completed*—a passive verb rather than a countable noun that is the product of behavior. Following Gilbert's lead, we prefer to anchor our analyses of performance on the valuable products of behavior, what is left after the behavior is finished, not mere completion of the behavior itself. In early attempts to teach people the distinction, we found that the phrase *work output* resulted in fewer category errors than the word *accomplishment*.

Once we define a work output, stakeholders work to agree on criteria for a "good" instance of the work output—characteristics of the work output itself that make it valuable. Those might include details of magnitude, quality, timeliness, or other factors that specify what "good" means—often defined by downstream users or recipients of the work outputs. As mentioned previously, we insist that work outputs be *countable*, a guideline not shared by some of our colleagues in the fields of OBM and performance improvement. We have seen many examples of accomplishments described as *information*, *advice*, or *support* or in other ways that are not *countable* nouns. We believe that until a work output is countable—specifying what could be called a *unit* *of analysis*—it is difficult to determine whether it is "good" or "not good." We must know for each work output—whether a deliverable, a decision, a new idea, a widget, a relationship, or something else—what a good one looks like. Once we define work outputs and criteria, we can more easily pinpoint the behavior needed to produce work outputs to criterion and measure (count) the work outputs that do and do not meet criteria. This approach is similar to common practice in manufacturing process improvement.

It is important to note that work outputs might include *people who can do or produce something specific* (the work output of a trainer) or things produced by a manager designed to be behavior influences for others (e.g., goals, feedbacks, consequences). We find that it is possible to adequately describe any role/job title or individual's work with a list of major work outputs far more easily than with endless (or truncated) descriptions of behavior. We can likewise pinpoint the intermediate and final work outputs produced by the steps in any process.

We use the Performance Chain and the Six Boxes Model in our proprietary programs to teach performance improvement to leaders, managers, coaches, consultants, and staff performance professionals in many specialties (e.g., human resources, training and development, process improvement, quality, organizational development, performance consulting). They begin by capturing the language used by leaders and investors/owners to define the organization-level business results (e.g., profit, revenue, employee engagement, regulatory compliance, quality) at the right end of the Performance Chain. Once they know what is at stake for the whole organization, they identify the work outputs involved in the performance their clients or teams seek to establish, improve, manage, or support. They define criteria for a *good* instance of each work output ("what good looks like") and describe the behavior needed to produce work outputs at whatever level of detail is needed.

These steps start with the end in mind, using elements of the Performance Chain to define existing and/or desired performance. Business results define success for the organization, work outputs that contribute to those business results identify value delivered by people and processes, and behavior is what people must do in order to produce the valuable work outputs. Once we identify critical behavior, we can analyze and arrange behavior influences to optimize performance, framed by the cells of the Six Boxes Model. This is the Performance Improvement Logic that we teach, based on simple models of the elements of performance and the variables that influence it.

Given this synopsis of our technical approach to performance analysis, let us proceed to a discussion of how we apply it in work with organizational culture and potentially with societal culture as well.

How cultural values can influence performance expectations

As mentioned previously, our work with culture and culture change has been driven more by the definitions of values and practices advanced by Tosti and Jackson (1994) than by the extensive analyses of behavior, macrobehavior, and metacontingencies conducted by Skinner (1956), Glenn (2004), Houmanfar et al. (2015), and others. Although we acknowledge the excellent analyses conducted by these and other scholars, our vocabulary derives more from plain English discussions of values and practices that we encounter among stakeholders and leaders in organizations than from the scholarly literature.

As noted previously, most descriptions of cultural practices are open to wide interpretation by those attempting to apply them to *their* jobs or processes. Such lack of specificity undermines the ability of leaders and managers to set clear expectations for individuals and groups of employees. It muddies the waters for measurement of how people apply cultural values, and it makes detailed implementation planning and management of cultural change or cultural strengthening more difficult at the individual, departmental, or process levels of the organization, where practices associated with value statements might differ significantly.

Using the Performance Chain as a guide to identify the valuable work outputs that any job or process must deliver, and the behavior needed to deliver it, we can create a framework for setting specific performance expectations, providing feedback, enabling performance with tools and resources, accelerating behavior with positive consequences, and so on. Over the past several years, in our work to develop leaders and managers in several Korean conglomerates, in which cultural differences and culture change are high priorities, we realized that there are only two points on the Performance Chain at which a cultural value can influence desired performance. Practice of the value may change *criteria* considered to be “good” for any given work output, and it will certainly change or refine descriptions of the *behavior* needed to produce the work output. In addition, a given cultural value might or might not be relevant to a particular work output. For example, the new Korean corporate value of *challenging fixed ideas* probably does not apply to many work outputs in accounting departments but certainly applies to work in research and development.

Consider the following three examples of how organizational values might affect the definition of desired performance specified by work outputs and behavior.

Example 1: Impact of openness on decisions

In the Tosti and Jackson (1997a) example from British Airways, the value of *openness* was practiced in meetings between people. A typical work output from such meetings might be a *decision*, or perhaps a *recommendation*. Note

Table 1. Impact of the Value *Openness* on Decisions.

Cultural value	Work output	Criteria for "good"	Behavior
Openness	Decision in a 1:1 meeting	Based on full mutual disclosure	Say and gain agreement: "In the spirit of openness, I'd appreciate your hearing me out and giving me your full considered opinion."
Career advancement	Decision in a 1:1 meeting	What I want	Only disclose what is necessary to sway opinion and do not disclose any contrary information.

that although the process of deciding might entail many different types of behavior, when that behavior is successful, it produces a work output called a *decision*. In a culture that practices *openness*, criteria for what would be considered a "good" decision might be (in addition to its producing the desired organizational impact) that it reflects or takes into account the fully considered opinions of those involved in the meeting. This might be in contrast to a decision made in a culture in which participants do not practice openness and consequently only reveal information beneficial to their own particular careers or desired outcomes. In arriving at decisions in those two cultures, people will behave quite differently, and their work outputs will differ accordingly. Table 1 summarizes this analysis.

This example may remind some readers of meetings in which they have participated, with the behavior in those meetings driven more by the individual goals of people in the meetings and not so much by collective organizational or cultural values. Definitions of a "good" decision, and the behavior for producing it, vary depending on values.

Example 2: Impact of fairness to customers on pricing agreements

For one of our clients, a supply chain and transportation logistics company that seeks to distinguish itself from the competition, executive leaders stress the value *fairness to customers* as part of the corporate culture. They articulate this value to ensure that their employees' actions will put customers first in providing services considered to be fair and beneficial as a long-term strategy for customer retention. Table 2 analyzes how they apply this value to a particular work output—the *pricing agreements* that account managers periodically renegotiate with major clients.

This case is striking because the company, through its articulation and practice of *fairness to customers*, did the opposite of what many organizations would do: It intentionally lowered its own short-term profits to maximize long-term client retention and revenue. Leaders in the company cited this as differentiator from their competitors, whom they characterized as "cigar-chomping backroom dealmakers" likely to raise prices just short of losing the customer. In this context, the value reflects a strategic decision.

Table 2. Impact of the Value *Fairness to Customers* on Pricing Agreements.

Cultural value	Work output	Criteria for "good"	Behavior
Fairness to customers	Pricing agreement with customers	Priced as low as possible for the customer as long as we can ensure a minimum overall profit	Optimize spreadsheet values for different types of shipments to calculate the lowest possible overall pricing plus a specified minimum profit margin.
Profitability	Pricing agreement with customers	As profitable as possible without losing the client to price competition	Raise pricing as high as you can, checking to be sure it does not produce sticker shock and loss of the customer.

Example 3: Impact of differing values on the final feature set in a software release

Although the following is not a documented example from our work with clients, readers will recognize how it reflects the historical values and products of two well-known high-tech companies. In one company, driven by a cultural value of *cool technology* (sometimes described by its founder and former chairman as "neat features"), decisions about the final feature set to be included in each release of a software product were weighted toward including as many features as possible. In the other company, driven by the value of *user experience*, feature set decisions were weighted toward elegance and the elimination or redesign of features that undermined simplicity of user experience. The late founder and chairman emphasized saying "No!" to as many features and add-ins as possible, quite a different way of arriving at a final feature set than packing in as many bells and whistles as could be made tolerably navigable. Table 3 summarizes this analysis.

Although these examples only hint at what is possible, they illustrate a straightforward approach to defining and communicating performance expectations in relation to cultural values for specific types of performance. With this level of analysis it is possible for any job or any process to identify whether and how a given cultural value might influence what are considered "good" work outputs and what behavior will be expected to produce the work outputs. Added to or highlighted in descriptions of desired operational behavior, this lays a foundation for culture-driven performance management.

Table 3. Impact of Values on Decisions About Software Feature Set for Release.

Cultural value	Work output	Criteria for "good"	Behavior
Cool technology	Decision about software feature set for a given release	Includes as many features as possible and tolerably navigable	Incorporate as many neat features as we can possibly include, with tolerable means of navigating them.
User experience	Decision about software feature set for a given release	Elegant, beautiful, and as simple to use as possible while delivering maximum value to the user	Get rid of as many features and add-ins as possible. Revise to ensure a positively pleasant user experience.

That is, it will be possible to set expectations and deliver feedback and consequences based on conformance to defined criteria for “good” work outputs and specific forms of behavior.

How organizations can apply this approach

For any given job, a cultural value might be relevant to some work outputs and irrelevant to others. The same applies to a given process, in which a value might influence criteria and behavior for some work outputs or milestones and not others. This approach enables leaders, managers, supervisors, and performance professionals to focus on the areas of performance in which values can be practiced and to determine specific performance expectations, work output by work output.

Organizations need not always conduct the type of top-down effort illustrated by Tosti and Jackson’s work at British Airways. They can apply this approach from the bottoms up in an organization, albeit with new expectations, tools, incentives, and skills/knowledge that may be provided from a central organization. If the organization decides from the top down that a given value statement should drive performance, then leaders and managers of each department or team can define expected work outputs and behavior for job roles or processes, examine whether and how the value statement(s) might alter criteria for “good” instances of the work outputs and desired behavior, and then manage performance to those modified expectations.

Although specification of the value statements themselves would be from to top down, the identification of exactly how the values apply to particular types of performance could be managed from the bottom up, starting with department heads or even team leaders. The initiative can begin in certain departments, in important processes, at specific levels of management, and so on. Management and leadership development programs might teach this approach. And if leaders and managers count (measure) key work outputs that meet culture-driven criteria and those that do not, they will be able to apply a multiple-baseline evaluation approach across work outputs, teams, departments, or other units and to refine how they engage various levels and groups of individuals in the effort. This approach will enable them to be as specific as they need to be as they communicate expectations, measure performance and provide feedback, provide tools and resources, arrange consequences, and develop the skills and knowledge needed for people to perform well.

The prerequisite for those who would apply this approach is that they must become fluent in the analysis of performance into its elements: specific work outputs that contribute to business results and the behavior needed to produce them. We teach this form of analysis both to staff human resources and performance professionals in various specialties and to leaders and managers, to the point that it becomes second nature. Thus, any manager, leader, or staff professional can work with individuals and groups in any part of an organization to define performance with organizational values in mind and to use that performance definition to set expectations for their people.

Although we have only begun to develop this approach, we believe that the practical implications may be significant. For example, in so many organizations these days, values such as *Customer First* or *Quality Across the Enterprise* are proudly proclaimed on posters, in presentations, and in various types of employee and customer documents. These phrases alone give only the most general hints for how employees should proceed. But in a relatively simple exercise that can be facilitated in the beginning by consultants or staff performance professionals, managers and leaders, department heads, process owners, and self-managed teams can deconstruct their jobs and processes into major work outputs and arrive at agreements about how cultural value statements should affect criteria for each work output and/or the behavior needed to produce it.

A research and development team, for example, might determine that the organizational value of *Customer First* will determine certain elements of their product designs and the activities they complete in order to be sure that their new products are customizable, are easy to use, or incorporate features that allow customers to obtain rapid product support. Applying that same organizational value, a customer service department might determine that any solution offered to customers needs to align with stated customer preferences and surpass customer expectations in specific ways. Naturally, how people behave in producing and configuring these work outputs would have to incorporate tasks and tactics designed to meet criteria.

Strategies for implementing this approach

One of our colleagues, a Six Boxes® Practitioner at Insperity, Inc., working as a consultant to the owner of a small information systems asset management company, was able to begin with a single department. She helped the manager redefine performance expectations based on two stated organizational values. The effort focused on work outputs that were part of the client lifecycle and used the organizational value statements *delivering value* and *stewardship* to specify criteria for the work outputs and specific forms of behavior for producing work outputs to criteria.

Although the experiment is not complete, the initial experience suggested that it is feasible and relatively straightforward for managers to identify how stated values apply to performance within their scope of control (individuals, teams, processes) and to manage the performance of their people accordingly. The performance consultant recognized the importance of starting small, developing a prototype implementation for a segment of the organization, and then expanding to other departments and cross-functional processes.

Such an effort can be accompanied by some degree of central staff oversight if there is a concern about consistency and alignment across the organization. But unlike the anthropological approach of the 1980s or the company-wide values and practices methodology described by Tosti and Jackson (1994, 1997a), this can be applied one job or process at a time, and even one work output at a time. We will see how the application unfolds as we encounter more organizations interested in approaching organizational culture in a proactive way.

By zeroing in on specific work outputs and behavior, this approach enables what might otherwise seem to be an overwhelming and resource-demanding focus on culture development to become a pilot, a small step, or an initial lab from which insights and improvements can be extended to work with other groups. It is an example of how simplicity and specificity in the analysis of performance can make behavior science and performance technology available to ordinary team leaders, managers, and department heads, not merely to consultants or staff specialists conducting large projects.

Conclusion

This article is a preliminary examination of a potentially powerful and straightforward technique for defining and strengthening organizational culture. It seems clear that identifying work outputs with criteria for "good" ones and the behavior needed to produce them offers a path for better defining cultural expectations and supporting behavior at a societal level as well. It is a good example of how Gilbert's (1978) shift of the focus in performance analysis from behavior to its valuable products (*accomplishments* or *work outputs*) provides leverage and clarity in performance management and the application of behavior science and performance technology to important organizational and societal outcomes.

Acknowledgments

Additional information about this approach can be found at www.SixBoxes.com.

Performance Thinking and Six Boxes are registered trademarks of The Performance Thinking Network and should not be used to label products or services provided by other organizations or individuals. I request that those who cite these models or this approach acknowledge copyright and trademarks, as applicable, and refer to www.SixBoxes.com in their citation.

References

Binder, C. (1998). The Six Boxes®: A descendent of Gilbert's behavior engineering model. *Performance Improvement*, *37*(6), 48–52. doi:10.1002/pfi.4140370612

Binder, C. (2005). *What's so new about the Six Boxes® model?* [White paper]. Retrieved from The Performance Thinking Network website: http://www.sixboxes.com/_customelements/uploadedResources/160039_SixBoxesWhatsSoNew.pdf

Deal, T. E., & Kennedy, A. A. (1982). *Corporate cultures: The rites and rituals of corporate life*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Gilbert, T. F. (1978). *Human competence: Engineering worthy performance*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Book Company.

Glenn, S. S. (2004). Individual behavior, culture, and social change. *The Behavior Analyst*, *27*, 133–151.

Houmanfar, R. A., Alavosius, M. P., Morford, Z. H., Herbst, S. A., & Reimer, D. (2015). Functions of organizational leaders in cultural change: Financial and social well-being. *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management*, *35*(1–2), 4–27. doi:10.1080/01608061.2015.1035827

Houmanfar, R. A., & Mattaini, M. A. (Eds.). (2015). Leadership and cultural change [Special issue]. *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management*, *35*(1–2). doi:10.1080/01608061.2015.1036645

Skinner, B. F. (1956, November 30). Some issues concerning the control of human behavior: A symposium. *Science*, *124*, 1057–1066. (Reprinted in *Cumulative Record*, pp. 25–38. New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts).

Soanes, C., Hawker, S., & Elliott, J. (2009). Oxford dictionary of current English. Retrieved from http://www.encyclopedia.com/The+Oxford+Pocket+Dictionary+of+Current+English/publications.aspx?pageNumber=1

Teodorescu, T. M., & Binder, C. (2004). Competence is what matters. *Performance Improvement*, *43*(8), 8–12. doi:10.1002/pfi.4140430805

Tosti, D. T., & Jackson, S. F. (1994, April). Organizational alignment: How it works and why it matters. *Training Magazine*, *5*, 8–64.

Tosti, D. T., & Jackson, S. F. (1997a). *Changing organizational culture*. Sausalito, CA: Vanguard Consulting.

Tosti, D. T. & Jackson, S. F. (1997b). Changing Organizational Culture. Presented at the annual conference of the International Society for Performance Improvement, April 14-18, 1997, Anaheim, California.