



## Stronger Smarter Institute Research & Impact Footprints Reading Review

“Organizational culture and leadership”

### Stronger Smarter Meta-Strategy links:

→ 2. Acknowledging and embracing Indigenous leadership → 3. High Expectations Leadership to ensure high expectations classrooms → 4. Innovative and dynamic school staffing models

Edgar Schein has been described as the ‘father’ of organisational culture. His book, *Organizational culture and leadership* is now in the 5<sup>th</sup> edition (2016) and is considered a definitive work on understanding organisational culture.

The Stronger Smarter Leadership Program (SSLP) uses Edgar Schein’s work, alongside the Indigenous Knowledge framework of the great Torres Strait Islander leader and thinker, Uncle Steve Mam to show how subconscious patterns of thinking and behaving can impact on classroom practice. In this reading review, we provide a summary of the key aspects of Schein’s work that underpin the SSLP.

Contents	Page
Definition of culture	2
Group collaboration	3
A changing view of leadership	5
The culture creation leader	5
The change leader	6
The learning leader	7
Stronger Smarter Discussion and Provocations	7

Edgar Schein concludes his book where the Stronger Smarter Approach (SSA) starts – his final thought is that while needing to understand the culture of organisations, you also need to discover the culture within yourself that looks at why you react in certain ways.

We begin this reading review by looking at Schein’s definition of culture, which is an underlying concept used in the SSA. We then look at how Schein uses this view of culture to show how leaders can create culture, create change, build collaboration, and cultivate a learning environment.



## Definition of culture

Schein defines culture as the conscious and subconscious patterns of thinking, perceiving, and behaving that characterise any group. He explains (p.100) how the culture of any group or organisation can be considered in terms of artefacts, espoused values and underlying cultural assumptions.



- ▶ **Artefacts** – The artefacts are the visible ways people relate to each other and interact with each other.
- ▶ **Espoused values** – The espoused values are the rules and policies that show the distribution of power.
- ▶ **Assumptions** - The artefacts and espoused values are based on a series of deeply embedded, and often out-of-awareness, assumptions about the correct way for individuals to relate to each other to make the group safe, comfortable, and productive. These assumptions derive from the macro culture which every society has learned from its own history (p. 27).

## Group collaboration

Taking this view of culture, Schein looks at how to create group collaboration. Schein describes three levels of relationships: Level 1 transactional, Level 2 working, and Level 3 close friendships (p.101). Schein explains that for true collaboration, we need to move from the Level 1 transactional norms of politeness, fear of offending and face saving (p.107).

- ▶ **Level 1: Transactional** – people treat each other as fellow human beings with polite levels of openness. Level 1 has norms of politeness and face saving that are designed to make society possible.
- ▶ **Level 2: working relationships** – implied trust, agreeing not to undermine each other or harm what they have agreed to do, agree not to lie to each other or withhold information.
- ▶ **Level 3: close friendships** – stronger emotions are involved, with the assumption that people will actively support each other when possible or needed. This may not necessarily be desirable in the workplace.

To move to Level 2 working relationships, everyone participating needs to undergo experiences to discover cultural characteristics in common and develop trust and open communication. In the Stronger Smarter Approach, we describe this as High-Expectations Relationships – where it is essential to build the safe spaces before challenging conversations and true collaboration can occur.

### Cultural intelligence

Schein suggests that to move to Level 2, the concept of cultural intelligence introduces the proposition that to develop understanding you need:

- ▶ knowledge of the other culture
- ▶ cultural sensitivity or mindfulness about the other culture
- ▶ motivation to learn, and
- ▶ behavioural skills and flexibility to learn new ways of doing things.

He explains how, when working in multicultural situations, simply learning about the norms and assumptions of each culture involved is not enough. As he describes (p.108), members of each macro culture may have opinions and biases about others or even have some level of understanding of others but still operate on the premise that their own culture is the one that is right. To put this into the Stronger Smarter Approach, if our western education system continues to operate on a basis that the ‘western view’

is right, and we need to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to 'fit in', then we are not moving beyond Level 1.

While it is obviously important to start with gathering knowledge about the other culture, we also need the empathy to move beyond the idea that the other group is simply doing things wrong. Schein explains that because culture is so deeply embedded in each of us, we need to start with confronting our own reality and assumptions that our way is the only right way to do this. This requires some deep self-reflection to reflect on our own assumptions and accept that the assumptions of the other group may be as valid as our own. The process of moving from Level 1 to Level 2 has to start with questioning ourselves.

Schein suggests that cultural intelligence involves learning from your own experience. Meg Wheatley's work (see the [Institute's Reading Review on Leadership and the New Science](#)) takes a similar view, where she describes how we will only have buy-in to any change process if the change responds to our values and makes us 'more of who we are.' This can only come about through a process of self-reflection and experiences. No-one will make a change simply because someone tells them to.

### **Dialogue**

Schein (p.111) describes how, in the normal Level 1 conversation, we are generally expected to actively participate to respond to questions and discuss disagreements. This is the idea of debate, so often used in workplaces, where we defend our own perspectives as 'known' or 'right'. He suggests that if, instead, we use dialogue as a form of conversation, this legitimises the concept of suspension to slow the conversation down. This gives participants the time to reflect and listen and examine the assumptions that lie behind their own thought processes. Rather than voicing a disagreement, participants hold back and reflect on why they disagree and what assumptions might lie behind that disagreement. Schein explains that this suspension is crucial for cross-cultural dialogues, as we cannot understand another culture if we don't see our own cultural assumptions and explore the differences in an objective way.

Schein (p.117) describes how if we are to move beyond the safe Level 1 protocols of not offending people in another culture, we must temporarily suspend the rules needed to maintain face. He introduces the concept of a cultural island (p.109) where we can place the discussion in a learning frame rather than a performing frame to create a safe space to explore and develop Level 2 relationships (p.110).

## A changing view of leadership

Edgar Schein suggests (p.353) that the focus on ‘vision’ for leadership has limited our understanding of the fact that leaders need to bring everyone together to co-create that vision. He suggests that it is critical for leaders to see and acknowledge the complexity of problems, to listen, scan the environment, admit uncertainty, embrace experimentation, and accept help as the way to build the organisation’s capacity to learn.

## The culture creation leader

Schein suggests that when change programs fail, it is because they don’t create the right conditions (p.330). The first step (p. 217, 319) is to understand what kind of change you need to make and be clear about the ultimate goal. ‘Culture’ is an abstraction that refers to a range of concrete things such as structure, processes, and beliefs. For this reason, the ‘problem’ or the ‘goal’ has to describe future behaviours and be defined without using the word culture.



Schein (p.350) suggests that the culture creation leader needs persistence and patience and must also be a learning-oriented leader who is flexible and ready to change. This means articulating a clear and strong visions, and enforcing that vision through consistent messages, while also being open to change in complex environments.

Schein (p. 190 – 194) describes how the action of a leader has to match the rhetoric, as visible behaviours are important when communicating assumptions and values to other staff members. The culture of an organisation may reflect the assumptions of the leader, and if the action of the leader doesn’t match the rhetoric, this can result in a complex set of sub-cultures where staff are creating defensive mechanisms against inconsistent leader behaviour.

### Exploring culture

Once the vision for success has been clearly defined, the next step is to examine what elements of the existing culture may enable or disable the change process. Often the change process can draw on the existing strengths of the culture which is easier than trying to overcome constraints by changing the culture. Schein suggests that this requires humility on the part of the leader to step away and examine the culture objectively and understand what might inhibit change. Schein (p.297) describes how this involves the dialogic process to reveal the elements of the culture that bear on the change problem.

Schein cautions that it is not possible to study all facets of a culture at one time, and that not all parts of the culture are relevant to any given issue. However, he says it is important to be sensitive to subcultures in an organisation. This might mean bringing them together in dialogue with common goals and languages (p.230).

Any cultural assessment needs to delve down to the assumptions level (p.316) to be able to explain the discrepancies that almost always surface between the espoused values and observed behaviours. Schein suggests that where changes to culture are necessary, it is usually a matter of changing one or two assumptions, perhaps looking at the assumptions that are dividing groups.

## The change leader

When looking at the process of bringing everyone along on the change journey, Schein (p. 332) suggests that while everyone is expected to reach the same ultimate goal, that doesn't necessarily mean they have to reach it in the same way.

Schein (p.322) explores the different ways that a change leader can implement change, noting that some change theorists argue to change beliefs and values first while others argue the other way. Schein notes that while changing beliefs and values first is a better way to create change, it is also harder to do. As we note in our Reading Review of *Leadership and the New Science*, we are only motivated to change when we see that the new way of doing things adds to our own values.

A leader can choose to change behaviours by articulating the goals and imposing new ways of doing things and coercing or demanding new behaviours. This can be accompanied by the leader being the role model. In this way of doing things, the hope is that once the new behaviours are adopted, there will be changes to values and beliefs to justify the new behaviour. Schein (p.333) suggests this will only work if staff perceive that the change will be an improvement.

The alternative is to encourage all staff to scan the environment, try new things and develop their own solutions (p.333). This allows staff to internalise and interrogate the learning and make sure that the new behaviours really fit with their underlying values. Schein explains that this may need to include 'unlearning' or 'unfreezing' as a legitimate stage to unpack underlying assumptions. The next process is then learning new meanings or standards and internalising or 'refreezing' these new concepts to incorporate them into self-concept and identity. Again, Schein (p.337) suggests that this refreezing will only occur when it is reinforced by results and the change is seen as an improvement.

## The learning leader

Schein (p.344) looks at learning-oriented leadership and developing an organisational culture that continues to learn. He suggests that in complex situations, the leader must recognise their own lack of expertise and wisdom (p.347), recognise others who may have the knowledge and skills to solve a problem, and be willing to seek ideas from others. He suggests that the learning leader needs to believe the world is intrinsically complex, nonlinear, and interconnected, and favour complex mental models that are critical to learning (p.349).

This learning culture accepts that the truth will not be found in any one source or method and seeks truth through inquiry, dialogue, and multiple perspectives. This builds a learning culture of shared responsibility that requires leaders at all levels. As we describe in our Reading Review of *Leadership and the New Science*, this is a recognition that leadership is about relationships, not about roles and hierarchies.

A learning culture must give members the time, resources, and safety to experiment, to seek feedback and evaluate the implications. Schein explains that learning leaders must have faith in people and believe that everyone will learn. The culture must be built on the assumption that communication and information are central to organisational wellbeing. Schein says this means there needs to be a principle of openness which can only happen when members of the group trust each other. Likewise, Meg Wheatley describes how the connections between staff on the organisational chart should be the communication channels.

## Stronger Smarter Discussion and Provocations

### **Why is this view of culture is important?**

Schein's view of culture sitting side by side with Uncle Steve Mam's Indigenous Knowledges has formed an underlying theoretical basis for the SSLP where we bring Indigenous Knowledges and western knowledge together.

Uncle Steve Mam uses the metaphor of a coconut tree to analyse cultural spaces through the aspects of heritage, rituals, and culture (Mam et al., 1993).

- ▶ Heritage – the roots of the coconut tree (heritage) are the grounding, the anchor in time and place through traditions and customs.

- ▶ The trunk of the coconut tree represents the traditions and rituals, the vital channel connecting the lower and upper parts of the tree.
- ▶ The leaves of the coconut tree are the cultural artefacts. These are what can be seen and heard and form the living culture held strong by the rituals (trunk) to ensure that the heritage (roots) remain in place.



This view of culture is essential to understanding the Stronger Smarter Approach. Schein describes this as both a way to understand the culture of an organisation or group, and also a way to ensure true collaboration between groups of different cultural backgrounds. In Australia, when most educators come from a Western construct, understanding how personal heritage and associated assumptions impact on the way they work is an important step to understanding how students and families from other cultural backgrounds have different ways of looking at the world.

The Stronger Smarter Approach is about working in a third cultural space (Davis, 2008; Nakata, 2002; Yunupingu et al, 1994) where it is not simply understanding the heritage or assumptions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander students but valuing those and bringing them into the western education system.

### Implementing the SSA

In the SSLP, participants are taken through a series of steps to set up a workplace challenge. This is the first part to defining the 'problem'. As Schein describes, this needs to then be defined in terms of future behaviours and visions.

As both Schein and Meg Wheatley describe, people are motivated to change when they have been part of the process, and when they can see that the change will be in line with their values and support them to be 'more of who they are.' In implementing change in schools, whether through a school change agenda or an SSLP workplace challenge, it is essential to think about how to bring others along on the change journey.

The learning leader needs to draw on others to help solve problems, and the best way to get others on board is to involve everyone from the beginning. We believe that the first step in defining what you want success to look like in the future should be a collaborative step with the whole school community.



## Multiple perspective and dialogue – different conversations

In order to ensure that everyone is on board with a school change agenda, this requires multiple perspectives, and opportunities for dialogue. High-Expectations Relationships involve dialogue as a conversational process that is focussed on building on the perspectives and ideas of others and challenging personal perspectives and assumptions (Sarra, Spillman, Jackson, Davis & Bray, 2020). High-Expectations Relationships describe the importance of deep listening, where, as Schein says, we slow the conversation down, and provide time to listen and reflect.

The SSA is based on facilitative leadership, which involves leaders accepting the uncertainty of ‘not knowing’, actively listening to others and stimulating creative thinking. As we described in our Reading Review on Meg Wheatley’s work, leadership is about relationships and facilitating energy flows in the organisation. These concepts have implications for how school leaders work with staff to implement change agendas, and importantly also about how schools work with their school communities to implement change.

## References

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