ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE AND THE PUBLIC SERVICE

STATE OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE SERIES | NOVEMBER 2015

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FOREWORD

Many times in recent years failings of the Irish public service have been blamed on organisational culture. This paper seeks to shed light on organisational culture, what is meant by the term, particularities of organisational culture in the public service, the relationship between organisational culture and performance, the centrality of effective leadership to a functional organisational culture and lastly how to assess, and if necessary change, organisational culture.

In the State of the Public Service research series, we seek to provide evidence-informed research and commentary on key aspects of contemporary Irish public administration. The authors of these reports bring their considerable expertise and practical knowledge to the topics selected so as to provide evidence, insights and recommendations to support future development. Our aim is that these reports will not only inform, but also challenge current thinking about how the Irish public service performs. It is intended that these short research reports will be of relevance and use not only to public servants, but also to policy makers and the wider public.

Dr Marian O'Sullivan
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many times in recent years failings of the Irish public service have been blamed on organisational culture. As the following extract identifies, this concept both officially and in popular understanding encompasses a myriad of failings.

It's the culture, stupid

Over the past decade a long list of institutional failures have been attributed ultimately to the prevailing culture of those institutions, including FÁS, the system of childcare, Fianna Fáil, the Central Bank and financial regulator, the Department of Finance, juvenile prisons, various hospitals and the HSE as a whole, the Gardaí, property developers, the political system, the civil service and so on. Strong words were used by respected commentators to characterise particular cultures, words like cover-up and collusion, denial, deference, irresponsibility, entitlement, corruption, clientelism, cronyism, secrecy, extravagance, greed and 'gombeen man'.

Source: Molloy, 2011

One of the commonly seen definitions of the word culture is the behaviours and beliefs characteristic of a particular group. In particular since the 1980s the term organisational culture has been used by researchers to describe the climate and practices that organisations develop around their employees and the espoused values of the organisation. While complex to understand and identify in organisations, it is now widely accepted that organisation culture is a key factor in achieving strategic objectives and positive performance in organisations.

One of the reasons why organisational culture is difficult to identify and understand is because it encompasses the taken for granted values, underlying assumptions, expectations, collective memories and definitions present in any organisation (Cameron and Quinn, 2011). While culture is undetectable for the most part and people may not even be aware of it, it provides a sense of identity to employees and unspoken guidance for how to get on in the organisation.

Organisational culture and the public service

The notion of values is particularly pertinent within the public service. What are for many public servants core values, such as impartiality, loyalty, equity, accountability and fairness, were identified over one hundred and fifty years ago. However, more recently value conflicts have emerged in the context of modernising public services and in particular introducing reforms under the rubric of New Public Management aimed at ensuring greater efficiency and effectiveness within the public services of OECD countries (MacCarthaigh, 2008). However, overly simplistic analysis of public service values, along the lines of 'out with the old and in with the new' have largely proven to be unhelpful. The public service is fundamentally different to the private sector. The range of objectives of government and the constraints imposed by political authority ensure that private sector practices cannot be readily transferred. The different operating environment also appears to impact on the organisational culture and perhaps explains why cultural change may be more challenging in the public service than in the private sector.

Changing organisational culture

Many organisations including public service ones do need to change their culture for a whole range of reasons. Culture change may be necessary to make improvements to the organisation, influence employee behaviour, provide better customer service and/or achieve specific organisation objectives and results.

This report suggests that working with and within your culture is likely to prove most beneficial in the long-run and to garner the support of a majority of employees. Five principles to support organisational change are suggested (Katzenbach et al, 2012):

1. *Match strategy and culture*: Too often an organisation's strategy, imposed from above, is at odds with the ingrained practices and attitudes of its culture. Leaders may underestimate how much a strategy depends on cultural alignment. Yet, it has been well documented that culture trumps strategy every time. A few cultural traits that truly match and support the organisation's strategy should be identified and fostered.
2. *Focus on a few critical shifts in behaviour*: Change is hard so you need to choose your battles carefully. When a few key behaviours are emphasised heavily it becomes easier for employees to relate to them. In addition, when only a few key behaviours are emphasised, employees themselves will often find additional ways of reinforcing them.
3. *Honour the strengths of your existing culture*: In observing an organisation's culture it can be tempting to dwell on the negative traits, but most corporate cultures have many strengths, albeit that some characteristics of the culture have evolved in unexpected ways. Demonstrating the relevance of the original values and acknowledging the existing culture's assets while still seeking to make the necessary changes will make change feel less like a top-down imposition and more like a shared evolution from which everyone stands to gain.
4. *Integrate formal and informal interventions*: In promoting new behaviours critical to an organisation's strategic objectives and performance, it is important that both formal approaches and informal approaches are adopted. Traditionally organisations are quicker to adopt formal methods of trying to bring about behaviour change (rules, metrics, incentives, changing reporting lines, decision making autonomy or putting new IT systems in place) and neglect informal approaches which are more closely aligned with the emotional side of the organisation, such as networks, communities of interest, ad hoc conversations and meaningful management-employee connections.
5. *Measure and monitor cultural evolution*: It is essential to measure and model cultural progress. Measurement provides tangible evidence of progress and can help to maintain positive momentum over what is a long journey.

1 INTRODUCTION

> The Review Group found the culture of the Department to be closed and unnecessarily secretive (even taking into account the important and confidential nature of some of the work). This has resulted in an inward looking organisation with limited learning capacity and reduced openness to new ideas – the Review Group found that although there has been a challenging expansion of work, the overall Departmental culture has not changed or adapted to the world in which it now operates.

Report of the Independent Review Group on the Department of Justice and Equality, July 2014

The above quote illustrates why organisation culture matters. Indeed given the abstract nature of culture its relevance is perhaps best understood by reference to examples – how did corruption become so endemic within FIFA? How did health and safety within Formula 1 improve so dramatically following the death of Ayrton Senna? Why was Ryanair so widely derided for its management practices? Or why does the Irish Health Information Quality Authority repeatedly find failings in patient management practices at Health Service Executive-run care homes. Yes, culture is an abstraction, but the forces that derive from culture are powerful.

Culture: an empirically based abstraction

Culture as a concept has had a long and checkered history. It has been used by the layman as a word to indicate sophistication, as when we say that someone is very 'cultured'. It has been used by anthropologists to refer to the customs and rituals that societies develop over the course of their history. In the last several decades it has been used by some organizational researchers and managers to refer to the climate and practices that organizations develop around their handling of people, or to the espoused values and credo of an organization.

In this context, managers speak of developing 'the right kind of culture', 'a culture of quality' or a 'culture of customer service', suggesting that culture has to do with certain values that managers are trying to inculcate in their organizations. Also implied in this usage is that there are better or worse cultures and stronger or weaker cultures, and that the 'right' kind of culture will influence how effective the organization is.

Schein (2004), p. 7

Cameron and Quinn (2011) note that there are many levels of culture that affect individual and organisational behaviour. At the broadest level are global cultures such as that of a world religion or the culture of a region, for example Asia or Europe, or national differences identified between people of individual countries. At a less general level are subgroups that are occupation or industry based, for example police culture or those pertaining in high-tech industry. Lastly there are cultures within organisations: 'An organisation's culture is reflected in what is valued, the dominant leadership styles, the language and symbols, the procedures and routines, and the definitions of success that make an organisation unique' (Cameron and Quinn, 2011:22). An organisation's culture describes 'the way things are done around here'.

A review of the literature on culture (O'Donnell and Boyle, 2008; Schein, 2004; Cameron and Quinn, 2011) reveals that a majority of writers agree that organisations can only be fully understood through an awareness of their culture. As Schein (2004) notes once we learn to see the world through cultural lenses, all kinds of things begin to make sense – departments that seem to be more interested in fighting with each other than getting the job done, communication problems and misunderstandings that should not be occurring between reasonable people and

why, despite explaining in detail why something different must be done, people continue to act as if they had not heard us.

Furthermore, organisation culture is increasingly being identified as a key factor in organisation performance. Against the background of a rapidly changing external environment, most organisations are rethinking what they do and how they can best accomplish their goals and objectives. Part of this process is to reflect on the type of culture that is necessary to advance these goals and objectives. In particular, as noted by Baker (2002:1) organisation culture would appear to play a critical role in 'motivating and maximising the value of intellectual assets, particularly human capital'.

Cameron and Quinn (2011) argue that what most distinguishes successful organisations, their most important competitive advantage is their organisation culture. They cite examples including Coca-Cola, Disney, General Electric, Intel, McDonald's, Microsoft and Toyota and suggest that each has developed a distinctive culture with which its employees can clearly identify. The culture was sometimes created by the original founder (such as Walt Disney), sometimes emerges over time as the organisation encounters and overcomes obstacles and challenges in its environment (Coca-Cola) , or sometimes is developed consciously by management teams that decide to improve the company's performance in systematic ways (Google). The authors conclude that these successful companies have created something special that supersedes corporate strategy, market presence and technological advantages. While these factors are important, many highly successful firms have capitalised on the power that develops and resides in a unique corporate culture.

2 UNDERSTANDING ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Overview of research on organisation culture

According to Baker (2002) organisation culture became a business phenomenon in the early 1980s prompted by a number of publications. Among these, were books (Ouchi, 1981; Pascale and Athos, 1981) suggesting that Japanese economic success could be attributed to Japanese corporate culture and the Total Quality Management approach. The other highly influential book of the early 1980s was *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best Run Companies* (Peters and Waterman, 1982). These best-selling books, while with hindsight rather simplistic in their analysis[1] – a majority of the companies in Peters' and Waterman's book subsequently failed – did serve to draw attention to the importance of corporate culture and the notion that corporate culture could be managed to improve an organisation's performance.

According to Cameron and Quinn (2011:19) one of the reasons why organisation culture was ignored was because 'it encompasses the taken for granted values, underlying assumptions, expectations, collective memories and definitions present in an organisation. It conveys a sense of identity to employees, provides unwritten and often unspoken guidelines for how to get on in the organization, and it helps to stabilize the social system that they experience'. Thus culture is undetectable for most of the time. In the main, people are unaware of it.

Research in respect of organisation culture has typically come from two perspectives. Firstly a desire to come to a fuller understanding of what it is and efforts to define organisation culture, and secondly, theories around different types of organisation culture and how they function.

Definitions of organisation culture

Schein (2004) is perhaps the foremost analyst of the concept of culture existing at several different levels in organisations, whereby the term level relates to the degree to which the cultural phenomenon is visible to an observer. The levels he identifies are:

Artefacts – These are outward expressions of culture that provide signals to others about what is valued. Cultural artefacts might include physical office spaces and how they are organised, the dress code and language used; technology and products; publications of the organisation, both internal and external documents, which reveal both what is valued by the organisation and how it wishes to be perceived by others; and behavioural patterns such as ceremonies and celebrations.

Espoused values - These are the strategies, goals and objectives of the organisation. They are usually explicitly articulated because they guide members of the group with regard to how to behave in different circumstances, and in training new members how to behave. However, it is also possible to have a breach between espoused values and behaviours. In this situation values predict only what people might say in different situations, not what they will actually do. Thus a company may say that it values its employees, but its record in that regard may contradict what it says.

Underlying assumptions – These are the taken for granted beliefs that pertain in organisations and that represent the essence of the culture of the organisation. In Schein's view these constitute the core and most important aspect of organisation culture, and an understanding of how these assumptions came to be is necessary for any complete understanding of organisation culture. Organisation cultural change is

[1] Their analysis is mainly based on the statements of CEOs and senior executives from the organisations. As noted by Williams et al (1993:13), 'These interesting, but largely second hand, executive stories are probably truly the myths of culture. It seems to us that many of these cultural statements are more likely the product of the corporate PR machine'

challenging because these basic assumptions are perceived to be so 'basic' that they are 'non-confrontable' and 'non-debatable' (Schein, 2004:31).

However, the extent to which these underlying assumptions are invisible has been questioned. According to Baker (2002:3), 'while the deeper levels may have been somewhat invisible in the past, this may no longer be the case. As a result of greater attention being directed at managing culture, organisations are recognising the importance of articulating and stressing their fundamental assumptions'

The cultural web first developed by Johnson and Scholes in the 1990s is in effect a more detailed version of Schein's artefacts, espoused values and basic assumptions framework. The cultural web identifies six interrelated elements that help to make up what Johnson and Scholes call the 'paradigm' – the pattern or model of the work environment. By analysing each of the factors it is possible to see the bigger picture of your culture: what is working, what isn't working, and what needs to be changed. An approximate correlation between the two approaches is shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1 TWO APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Cultural web		Schein
Symbols and titles	The visual representation of the organisation	
Power relations	Those with the greatest influence over decisions, operations and strategic direction	Artefacts
Organisational structure	Both formal and informal lines of power and influence	
Control systems	How behaviour and performance is directed and controlled; governance	
Rituals and routines	The daily behaviour and actions of people that signal acceptable behaviour	
Myths and stories	The events and people that have gained the status of folklore within the organisation, and the basis on which they have gained this status	Espoused values
The paradigm	The organisation's purpose, function, mission and goals	Basic assumptions
Source: http://www.accaglobal.com/hk/en/student/exam-support-resources/professional-exams-study-resources/p3/technical-articles/culture-and-configuration.html		

Types of organisation culture

Studies around the different types of culture that apply in organisations often commence with an analysis of the notion of strong versus weak cultures. Baker (2002:4) notes that although all organisations have cultures, 'some appear to have stronger, more deeply rooted cultures than others'. A strong culture is typically conceptualised as a coherent set of beliefs, values, assumptions, and practices embraced by most members of the organisation. In contrast a weak culture is characterised by core values that are not clearly defined, communicated or widely accepted by those working for the organisation. According to Riley (2014) in organisations with very strong cultures, the culture is the strategy. He cites Ikea, Disney and Starbucks as examples. However, assumptions that a strong culture is always good because it fosters motivation, commitment identity, solidarity and sameness, have now been questioned, and it has been suggested that strong can also imply inflexible and intransigent. (Baker, 2002).

The relationship between the strength of organisation culture and business performance was examined by Sorensen (2002). He found that strong cultures were best able to deliver a successful strategy in fairly stable operating conditions. However, when the market or the economy became more unstable or volatile, businesses with a strong culture might be less likely to react to the need to change. A further danger is the possibility of 'groupthink'. This is a state in which even if people have different ideas they do not challenge organisational thinking and therefore there is a reduced capacity for innovative thoughts. The Victorian Public Service Commission (2015) sets out some of the circumstances in which groupthink can arise, for example, where there is heavy reliance on a central charismatic figure in an organisation, or where there is an evangelical belief in the organisation's values, or in groups where a friendly climate is at the base of their identity (avoidance of conflict). In fact groupthink is very common and happens all the time, in almost every group. Members that are defiant of the prevailing culture are often rejected and seen as a negative influence because they bring conflict.

Ultimately it would seem that while strong organisation cultures are generally desirable, they need also to be change oriented. According to Schein (1992) this is achieved through a culture that is strong but also limited. In other words, a distinction is drawn between fundamental assumptions that are pivotal (vital to organisational success and survival) from everything else that is merely relevant (desirable but not mandatory). Baker (2002:4) sums this up by noting that 'today's organizations, characterised by rapidly changing environments and internal workforce diversity, need a strong organizational culture but one that is less pervasive in terms of prescribing particular norms and behavioural patterns than may have existed in the past'.

The dangers of groupthink

Groupthink occurs when people adapt to the beliefs and views of others without real intellectual conviction. A consensus forms without serious consideration of consequences or alternatives, often under overt or imaginary social pressure.

The generally held belief in a soft landing outcome, which was quite common even as late as 2008, can also be seen as a consequence of groupthink.

Source: Nyberg, 2011

How organisation culture functions

Consistent with the fact that there are different perspectives on what organisational culture is, there are also differing perspectives on how it functions. Several methods have been used to classify organisational culture. While there is no one single type of organisational culture and organisational cultures vary widely from one organisation to the next, commonalities do exist and researchers (Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Denison, 1990) have developed models to describe these indicators of organisational culture.

The Competing Values Framework is a framework for understanding organisation culture that has proven influential. The framework has evolved from empirical research (Quinn and Rohrbaugh, 1983; and Zammuto and Krakower, 1991) into what makes companies effective. These indicators were subsequently mapped onto two dimensions of competing values – an internal versus external dimension, and a control versus flexibility dimension (Table 2). These two dimensions constitute the two axes of the framework, which results in four major types or models of culture. Organisations with an internal focus emphasise integration and communication, while those with an external focus prize growth, acquisition and interaction outside the organisation. With regard to the second axis, organisations focus on cohesion and control versus adaptability and spontaneity. According to Cameron and Quinn (1999), the resulting four quadrants are indicative of four types of culture:

- Clan culture (internal focus and flexible): A friendly workplace where leaders act like father figures
- Adhocracy culture (external focus and flexible): A dynamic workplace with leaders that stimulate innovation
- Market culture (external focus and controlled): A competitive workplace with tough and demanding leaders
- Hierarchy culture (internal focus and controlled): A structured and formal workplace where leaders are coordinators

	Stability / Control	Change / Flexibility
Internal focus / Integration	Hierarchy	Clan
External focus / Differentiation	Market	Adhocracy

However, while the four culture types appear to be incompatible, research (Parker and Bradley, 2000) suggests that the different models of culture can and do coexist in the same organisation. A balance between the four culture types is regarded as desirable.

The value of these frameworks is that they help managers to reflect on organisation culture. Cameron and Quinn (1999) also developed an organisation culture measurement tool based on the competing values framework model. Assessing organisation culture is important for leaders who wish to see if their culture is in line with their strategic objectives. By assessing the current organisational culture as well as the preferred situation, the gap between them and the direction in which to change can be made visible.

3 ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE AND THE PUBLIC SERVICE

The vision [for the civil service] cannot be achieved without significant change to how we work. To initiate this, we will prioritise improvements in four main areas:

1. A unified civil service – managing the civil service as a single unified organisation;
2. A professional civil service – Maximising the performance and potential of all civil service employees and organisations;
3. A responsive civil service – Changing our culture, structure and processes so that we become more agile, flexible and responsive; and
4. An open and accountable civil service – continuously learning and improving by being more open to external ideas, challenges and debate.

The Civil Service Renewal Plan, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (October 2014)

Public service administrative culture

The focus of this paper is organisational culture but it would be impossible to examine how the concept applies in the public service without first appreciating the influence of administrative cultures. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004: 40) note that the study of politics and public administration has for many years been intimately concerned with the question of what features are the most sensible and illuminating for comparing one state with another. They contend that typically the key features identified are structural, functional and cultural. The first two categories encompass how the apparatus of the state is organised, the nature of the political system and approaches to governance and accountability. However, the dominant administrative culture also represents a key distinguishing feature. They describe this as the expectations the staff of an organisation have about what is normal and acceptable in that organisation.

At the very highest level they distinguish between two models of administrative culture, the *Rechtsstaat* model with its strong legal basis, as in France and Germany, where the actions of public servants are grounded in a strong understanding of the law, rule following and precedent. In contrast, the *Public Interest* model, common in Anglo-Saxon countries, accords the state a less extensive or dominant role within society. Of course the law is an essential component of governance, but its particular perspectives and procedures are not as dominant as within the *Rechtsstaat* model. The law is in the background rather than the foreground and civil servants are regarded as simply citizens who work for government organisations, not some special cadre with a higher mission to represent the 'state'.

Of course in practice the administrative cultures of states evolve. Many states have shifted away from a highly legalistic form, but towards something other than a straightforward public interest model. The Netherlands, Finland and Sweden all fall into this third category. The legal underpinnings of the administrative system are considerably less significant in each of these countries than they were in the past but the notion of state remains important.

A further contribution to our understanding of the culture pertaining in different societies was made by Hofstede (2001). Hofstede sought to quantify the relevance of five dimensions of culture across countries. These elements are:

- Power distance: this factor relates broadly to the degree of equality/inequality in a society. But more specifically it refers to the relationship between senior officials and subordinates and in particular the status of the former.
- Uncertainty avoidance: the extent to which members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations.
- Individualism versus collectivism: the culture that pertains in societies where the ties between individuals are perceived to be loose versus one where people are seen to belong to strong, cohesive groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in return for unquestioning loyalty.
- Masculinity versus femininity: societies where gender roles are clearly distinct versus those where gender roles overlap.
- Long-term versus short-term orientation: the fostering of virtues oriented towards future rewards versus one that fosters virtues related to the past and present, in particular respect for tradition, fulfilling social obligations and saving 'face'.

Although Hofstede's measures relate to citizens in general and do not apply specifically to politicians or public servants, as noted by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004: 55) they presumably reflect the broad cultural climates in which the administrative system must operate and reforms are 'announced, interpreted, promoted and resisted...They help us understand why what appears to be exactly the same reform may be very differently received in different countries'.

A final point of consideration with regard to administrative cultures is perceptions with regard to reform. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004: 61) comment that 'a good deal of the rhetoric associated with public management reform vividly contrasts the new (=good) with the old (=bad). The name given to the old – that against which the modern, reformed public sector organization stands out as superior – is usually something like 'traditional bureaucracy'. Certainly there has been a widespread trend across OECD countries for several decades to introduce management techniques associated with the private sector, widely referred to as 'new public management''.

However, as noted by Parker and Bradley (2000:125), 'concern has been raised that management techniques associated with new public management will conflict with the attitudes, values and culture within public sector organisations'. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004) expand on this point when they comment that 'it is not that the negative features of the 'traditional model' are fantasies, with no basis in reality. However, it is a long and unjustified leap from there to the idea that governments are now able to move, without significant loss to a new, modern type of organisation that avoids all of the problems of the past. They conclude (2004: 63) that 'each country is different (though there are some groups and patterns) and within each public domain, individual sectors have distinctive organizational cultures of their own. The idea of a single, and now totally obsolete, ancient regime is as implausible as the suggestion that there is now a global recipe which will reliably deliver 'reinvented' governments'.

Public service values

A further distinctive feature of administrative cultures in the public sector is the notion of values. As noted by MacCarthaigh (2008) values are essential components of organisational culture and instrumental in determining, guiding and informing behaviour. It has also been suggested (Bradley and Parker, 2000) that values are the most meaningful aspect of organisation culture to assess because they are more accessible than assumptions and more reliable than artefacts. While relevant for all organisations, the concept of values has particular resonance for public service organisations. As MacCarthaigh (2008) further comments, if the work of the public service is not based on or driven by an appropriate set of values, it may lose the trust, confidence and respect of the public who rely on it. Reflecting this Beck Jorgensen and Bozeman (2007:355) argue that 'there is no more important topic in public administration and policy than public values'. Boyle (1995: 46) notes that: 'similar structures e.g. devolved units based on contract management, are in operation in a number of countries, yet they operate in practice in quite different ways because of the political choice about which values receive priority'.

Values have been defined by the OECD (1996: 12) as 'the individual principles or standards that guide judgment about what is good or proper'. What would be perceived by many to be core public service values, such as impartiality, loyalty, equity, accountability and fairness can be traced back to Northcote and Trevelyan's report (1854) on the Organisation of the Permanent Civil Service which set out the principles that came to shape the public service in the UK and other countries such as Ireland which followed the so-called Westminster model. However, it is also true that different values can apply to different parts of the public service and also that values may change over time. Given the increasing range of demands on the public service, as well as frequent ambiguity in terms of goals, relationships and responsibilities, value conflicts are not unusual. MacCarthaigh (2008) details some of the trends and dynamics that have challenged what would have been perceived to be traditional public service values. These include the impact of New Public Management and management reforms particularly in the area of human resource management, new modes of governance, politicisation and political expectations, growth in the use of agencies and the advent of new technologies.

Values have been debated within the context of the Irish civil service. MacCarthaigh (2008: XI) conducted a series of workshops with senior civil servants and local authority directors. The general conclusions from his research were:

> There was greater emphasis on 'defensive' values in response to various pressures on the public service. New or non-traditional values occasionally identified included flexibility and 'value for money' or effectiveness. However, some values that may have been expected in the context of modernisation, such as innovation, did not emerge. The workshops agreed that values were developed and transmitted in the workplace, and daily formal and informal communication with colleagues were instrumental in developing value sets. They also agreed that values were learned through 'osmosis' rather than in a once-off manner. Strong emphasis was placed on the role of line managers in the transmission of values.

> In terms of how values were changing, it was suggested that the 'pecking order' of values had altered in response to public service modernisation and related reforms, as well as wider social change. For example, many public servants reported that accountability was now the dominant value in the performance and execution of their work. Others noted that efficiency, in the sense of speedy service delivery, had emerged in importance. EU and domestic legislative requirements, as well as a greater emphasis on the role of the

individual public servant, were also identified as drivers of change in respect of values. On the issue of what values were necessary for the future public service, views ranged from the belief that traditional values would become more important, to the opinion that values such as innovation, leadership and flexibility were increasingly desirable.

Values were also debated by the Civil Service Renewal Task Force, established by the government in 2013 to renew the vision and strategy for the civil service. The outcome of the deliberations of that taskforce, the Civil Service Renewal Plan was published by the Department of Expenditure and Reform in October 2014. The values identified for the civil service are:

- A deep rooted public service ethos of independence, integrity, impartiality, equality, fairness and respect
- A culture of accountability, efficiency and value for money
- The highest standards of professionalism, leadership and value for money.

In a paper describing the deliberations of the taskforce (Barrington et al, 2014), the authors note that while freshly stated, the values identified do have roots in both the Civil Service Code of Standards and Behaviour and the Introduction to the Irish Civil Service. Both of these are publications all new entrants to the civil service would be aware of. They also cite (2014:8) other commentators on civil service values (2014:8). Sean Cromien, former Secretary General of the Department of Finance described the traditional values of the civil service as 'political neutrality, total loyalty to the democratically elected government, even-handedness and fairness to all, discretion and avoidance of the limelight and a dedication to the national interest'. Dermot McCarthy, former secretary general in the Department of the Taoiseach, identified 'honesty, integrity and impartiality as the traditional values and strengths of the civil service'.

However, as recognised by Barrington et al (2014:19) 'writing the vision, mission and value statement for the civil service, although far from straight forward, was the easy bit. The next and most challenging stage is the leadership challenge, instilling these words into the very fabric of day-to-day transactions'. According to MacCarthaigh (2008) while informal communication of values is important, formal methods, for example induction and training programmes which demonstrate clear methods by which value conflicts can be managed, offer many benefits. Ultimately MacCarthaigh concludes that the evidence suggests that performance will be enhanced through the meaningful integration of values into all aspects of the work of the civil service

The relevance of Public Service Motivation

The notion that people are motivated to work in the public service as a result of altruism, a desire to serve, or a wish to have an impact on society is a long-standing one. It is closely associated with the idea of public service ethos, which is rooted in an understanding that the public service is different from the private sector, both because of the tasks it performs and the behaviours it expects of its employees.

Public service motivation is not the only or even the most important criterion of individuals choosing to take up, or remain in, public service employment. Recent research cites the superseding importance of good, or at least market-rate, levels of pay and security of tenure. The prevailing economic situation in the country and long-standing cultural issues which impact on the prestige and social standing of public officials are likewise relevant. However, public service motivation does matter, and among the intrinsic reasons that come into play when individuals chose where to work it is highly significant.

Against a backdrop of global recession, many governments are increasingly seeking to reform their public service, reducing cost and increasing efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of services. These changes are necessary. However, this report cautions against ignoring or minimising the negative impact on employee motivation and engagement of changes to terms and conditions and ways of working.

In circumstances where extrinsic motivations are significantly constrained or even reduced, as is the case currently in the Irish public service, it is critical that managers are very aware of the importance of fostering and supporting the intrinsic motivations of employees.

O'Riordan J (2013)

Public service organisational culture

An awareness of the cultural characteristics of public service organisations is central to understanding the impact of reforms within the public service. O'Donnell and Boyle (2008: 66) note that it is particularly important for public service managers to pay attention to organisational culture when planning or reacting to major organisational change: 'Culture is particularly important when an organisation is undergoing significant transformation or introducing major reforms which require new cultural or value traits from those exhibited in the past'.

This is not surprising given the general evidence in respect of the centrality of culture to the achievement of strategic objectives in an organisation. Public sector organisations are fundamentally different to private organisations. In addition to the distinctive values described in the previous section, public service organisational culture is also critically influenced by the fact that most public organisations are subject to political rather than market controls.

In discussing this reality Parker and Bradley (2000:130) reflect that public organisations are constrained by political authority and political activities. Their activities are part of a broader government strategy of economic management and social development. Consequently the diversity of their goals, access to resources, and the nature of organisational constraints differ. An awareness of these differences might explain the resilience of a hierarchical culture in the public sector and suggests that cultural change may be more challenging in the public service than in the private sector.

4 ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE AND PERFORMANCE

Interest in organisational culture has always been driven by a belief that having the right sort of culture impacts positively on organisation performance. In the early 1980s Peters and Waterman's In Search of Excellence included many companies that scored low on well-established critical success factors such as barriers to entry, capacity to build economies of scale, or non-substitutability of products. Yet, these companies were at the time highly successful, allegedly because of their organisation culture.

In addition there is strong anecdotal evidence (Baker, 2002; Cameron and Quinn, 2011) indicating that the primary source of failure of many change projects in organisations, such as business process re-engineering or total quality management, has been failure to change the organisational culture. Cameron and Quinn (2011:12) explain this by noting that 'the procedure was treated as a technique or program of change, not as a fundamental shift in the organisation's direction, values and culture, and without this there is little hope of enduring improvement in organisational performance. Indeed failed attempts to change often produce cynicism, frustration, loss of trust, and a deterioration in morale in many employees, resulting in a situation where organisations may be worse off than if the change strategy had not been attempted in the first place'.

The Victorian Public Service Commission (VPSC, 2015:6) identifies a number of ways in which a functional organisational culture improves organisational performance:

- The organisation has greater capacity to manage risk, uncertainty and ambiguity because in a functional culture employees share norms, values and ways of interacting. This sets out the ground rules and provides employees with 'mental models' to help address uncertainties and reduces anxiety in respect of change
- The organisation has a more positive organisational reputation because how staff feel about their workplaces will be reflected in how they talk about their organisation
- The organisation delivers services to a better standard because staff have higher levels of motivation and engagement and are better equipped to solve problems

The research on which the report is based also sets out some of the difficulties that can arise where organisational cultures don't work. In particular where staff don't share the same values, or if what the staff value is not what the organisation needs them to value, then the result can be a values clash. According to the VPSC report (2015:6), 'a values clash manifests most commonly as disengagement and a loss of motivation. Discretionary effort is replaced by 'work to rule' or 'clock watching'. When more outspoken individuals are involved, or where there is strength in numbers, such a clash can manifest as agitating behaviour, factionalism, or the emergence of silos and countercultures, which actively work against the best interests of the organisation as a whole. Inevitably productivity and the quality of service will decrease'.

Performance management has become established as one of most widely used means of improving performance, with many organisations collecting wide ranging data in respect of their operations, programmes and employees, with the objective of using this information to achieve performance outcomes. However, both academics and practitioners have noted that many public organisations fail to actually use the performance information they collect, beyond for reporting purposes and in some cases, the actual behavioural outcomes of performance management contradicted the desired behavioural outcomes. Taylor (2014) provides cultural explanations for these challenges.

The link between performance management and organisation culture has been widely identified (Moynihan and Pandey, 2010). Taylor (2014) proposes that a failure to appreciate the impact of organisation culture on the promotion and use of performance information data is to blame for the inconsistencies found in many public sector performance management programmes. In doing this she reverts to Schein's model of organisation culture as existing at multiple levels – artefacts, values and underlying assumptions. She argues that many organisations fail to acknowledge all three levels of culture and also that different cultures can apply in different parts of an organisation in promoting performance information use. She concludes (2014:18) that 'effective performance management is more likely when it is integrated and aligned with an organization's cultures'.

What's happened to performance management systems?

Armstrong and Baron (2004) refer to performance management as a process which contributes to the effective management of individuals and teams in order to achieve high levels of organisation performance. However, effectively implementing performance management schemes has proven particularly challenging in the public sector. It has been suggested that organisation culture lies at the heart of these difficulties. The OECD (2007) refer to the weak performance culture existing in many public services and the lack of managerial sensibility for achieving more and better results from public resources.

Within Ireland, failure to effectively implement the Performance Management and Development System has been criticised by both internal and external commentators. The Public Service Reform Plan (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2014:31) states that 'existing performance management systems in the civil and public service have been designed to reflect good practice standards but need to be implemented consistently by mangers'. Molloy (2011) in referring to PMDS as ' a dead letter in so many areas' suggests that 'in the absence of a formal, structured system that is anchored to the core value of serving citizens, new staff inevitably learn from the hidden curriculum, 'the way things really work around here'. Boyle (2014) argues that the standardised approach to PMDS should be dropped and experimentation with different approaches at organisational level tried.

It would appear that the private sector also has difficulties with performance management appraisal systems. According to the CIPD (2015) major companies including Amazon and Deloitte are abandoning their annual appraisals on the basis that they are expensive to administer, time-consuming for managers and add very little value. The CIPD conclude that a more enlightened approach to performance management would appear to be required across all organisations.

5 ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE AND LEADERSHIP

Schein (2004:10) perceives leadership as so central to organisation culture that he refers to them as 'two sides of the same coin'. He comments that in an age in which leadership is touted over and over again as a critical variable in defining the success or failure of organisations, it becomes all the more important to look at how leaders create culture and how culture defines and creates leaders. He further contributes to the leader/manager debate by suggesting that leaders have the capacity to create and change culture if required, whereas managers act within a given culture. Schein acknowledges that culture is of course influenced by other factors, however, if for any reason an organisation's culture requires change, it is the job of leaders throughout an organisation to address this and it is from this perspective that 'leadership and culture are conceptually intertwined'.

Transformational or value-based leadership is a process whereby employees are motivated by appealing to their higher ideals and moral values. This is particularly relevant in the public service where altruistic values and 'a desire to serve others' are among the factors influencing people's decision to work in the public service. Transformational leaders influence followers by elevating employees' motivations beyond their own self-interest and communicating goals and values that are consistent with public service values (Paarlberg and Lavigna, 2010). Staff involvement, sometimes referred to as employee 'voice', that is the ability of employees to feed their views back to management and have them listened to, is a further important aspect of transformational leadership. The CIPD (2012) contend that this style of leadership is even more critical against a backdrop or recession when many of the characteristics of the traditional public service psychological contract, such as job and pay security have been eroded.

The Victorian Public Service Commission (2015) map out what they perceive to be the top five contributions leaders make to organisational culture:

1. Recognising their role in organisational culture

Good leaders recognise that culture is something they can influence. They maintain a functional organisational culture by identifying, articulating and demonstrating what needs to be valued. Their own behaviour is an example of what needs to be valued. However, they also recognise that other managers play a vital leadership role and support line managers by providing coaching and direction.

2. Seeing and sharing the big picture

The concerns, issues and practices of government agencies are interlinked with other agencies, and actions taken in one part of the system can have consequences well beyond organisational boundaries. Good leaders recognise this; they articulate the role and functions of their organisation in the context of the roles and functions of other organisations. They recognise what needs to be valued in order for the whole public service to function effectively.

3. Establishing cooperation and collaboration as the norm

Good leaders establish values and baseline expectations that staff will cooperate, collaborate and share information. Within the organisation they work to minimise the emergence of cultural silos by establishing shared operational norms, shared language and a shared sense of purpose. They don't try to use competition or rivalry between business units and divisions as motivators, or as the basis for organisational culture. Public sector agencies usually can't operate effectively when they are isolated from, or at odds with, other organisations. Good leaders foster a respectful understanding of the values, perspectives and operational imperatives of

other organisations, irrespective of whether these conflict with their own. Governments can demand closer collaboration between separate organisations to achieve policy outcomes and machinery of government changes can force agencies closer together. If this does occur, the leader's work of bringing the staff of previously separate organisations together will be much easier if there is a history of respect and cooperation rather than a legacy of conflict and rivalry.

4. Understanding the power of symbols and messaging

Good leaders recognise that messages about what is valued are conveyed through all their actions, and what they don't respond to or acknowledge is as significant as what they do respond to. Leaders need to be continuously aware of the messages they may be conveying to staff, either intentionally or unintentionally. What leaders say needs always to authentically reflect what they value.

5. Acknowledge the different experiences and perspectives of staff across the organisation

Leaders and managers commonly have a more positive perception of their workplace and its culture than staff at the middle and lower levels. In other words the view from the top is different from the view from the middle, or bottom. Leaders can access resources, set agendas, control their day to day interactions and are generally the first to received important information from within or outside the organisation. These are opportunities that are not open to staff at the mid and lower levels in an organisation.

The Victorian Public Service Commission (2015) also emphasise the importance of leaders being supported in managing and changing organisation culture. One way they recommend is to seek outside perspectives. They suggest that there are significant benefits for leaders in seeking perspectives from others through, for example, external supervision or mentorship, or a trusted network of professional colleagues who are familiar with but not part of your organisation. Such arrangements can provide a valuable reality check in relation to organisational culture by offering different perspectives, which, while informed, are not influenced through immersion in the culture itself.

6 CHANGING ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

When an organisation does not possess a healthy culture or requires some kind of organisational culture change, the change process can be daunting. One major reason why such change is difficult is that organisation cultures, and the organisation structures in which they are embedded, have evolved over an extended period of time and may have become particularly 'deep rooted'.

Within the public service of OECD countries the New Public Management reforms to emerge in the early 1990s had in principle the objective of replacing sluggish, centralised bureaucracies, with their preoccupation with rules and regulations and their hierarchical chains of command with more flexible, fast-moving, performance-oriented forms of modern organisation. However, as highlighted in Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004: 62), 'unfortunately what one might term the 'NPM story' is misleadingly simple'. Firstly, if some parts of the public service in some countries fitted the image of traditional bureaucracies, many did not. But more significantly, 'the accounts of traditional bureaucracy given by the NPM 'school' tend to be rather one-sided'. They emphasise the negatives such as rigidity and centralisation but ignore or underplay the positives, such as continuity, honesty and a high commitment to equity in dealing with the citizen. Thus Pollitt and Bouckaert conclude (2004:63) 'public sectors have not all come from the same place and are not all headed in the same direction. Modernization often involves losses as well as gains. Each country is different (though there are some groups and patterns) and within each public domain, individual sectors have distinctive organizational cultures of their own'.

However, despite these notes of caution, many organisations including public service ones do need to change their culture for a whole range of reasons. Culture change may be necessary to reduce employee turnover, influence employee behaviour, make improvements to the organisation, provide better customer service, and/or achieve specific organisation objectives and results. As Baker (2002:8) suggests 'what is important for long-term organisational success may not be a particular type of organizational culture per se but the ability to effectively manage and change the culture over time to adjust to changes in the situation and needs of the organization'.

Prior to a cultural change initiative, a needs assessment can play an important role in identifying and understanding the current organisational culture. The Victorian Public Service Commission (2015) emphasise that an understanding of organisation culture can be made from observation and intuition, observing employees' habits and patterns of behaviour, the daily interactions of staff in their 'natural state' and reflection on the 'stated' organisational values versus the 'revealed' values. For example, if the organisation and its leaders claim to value collaboration and cooperation, but instead you actually see insularity, a lack of connectivity and areas of the organisation whose contribution is perceived to be of less value than that of others.

There are a number of tools that can be used to further add to knowledge about the culture of the organisation, and it could be argued that the presence (or absence) of these tools reveals something about what is valued in the organisation. If they are not used, what does this say about the extent to which leaders value organisation improvement? Similarly if there is no appetite or indifference on the part of managers or the views of staff, what does that say?

Examples of tools used include employee or customer surveys, interviews, focus groups, and any other research considered useful in identifying areas that require change such as turnover figures, absenteeism rates, feedback from 360 degree performance reviews, employee exit interviews, and information on allegations of bullying, workplace stress or the number of employees availing of the employee assistance service. Also relevant is

information held by HR, for example in respect of unproductive conflict among staff which results in individuals or groups who claim to be unable to work together. Some organisations also choose to conduct specific research around their organisation culture. This can be with small groups or reflective individuals throughout the organisation asking questions along the lines of 'If we had the culture we aspire to, what kind of new behaviours would be common, and what ingrained behaviours would be gone?

Questions to consider when assessing organisational culture

- What do you hear staff say when they discuss work, clients, other divisions, or their managers?
- What do leaders say when they discuss work, clients, other divisions in the organisation, or their staff?
- Are there 'elephants in the room', things people avoid discussing?
- Are there 'sacred cows', what principles, processes or people do staff take steps to defend?
- What makes staff and leaders upset or angry?
- How are individual and organisational milestones celebrated; who attends and who interacts with whom?
- What stories do you hear and what is the message or moral of these stories?
- How are those with different views treated?
- How do staff and leaders behave in response to requests, especially those that are ad-hoc or require extra effort?
- What makes staff, including leaders and managers stressed or anxious (for example demanding deadlines, unfavourable media attention or external scrutiny)?
- What do managers pay most attention to?
- What kind of behaviour gets rewarded; what kind of behaviour is frowned upon or condemned; how is poor behaviour addressed?
- Is success acknowledged?

Source: Victorian Public Service Commission, 2015

'Less is more' appears to be the key with culture change. The Victorian Public Service Commission (2015:10) makes the realistic assessment that 'it is unlikely that the culture will be entirely good or entirely bad. You are more likely to identify specific aspects of culture that need improvement, or that work well and should be maintained. You may also identify cultural silos, subcultures and counter-cultures. According to Katzenbach et al (2012:110), 'the secret is to stop fighting your culture and to work with it and within it, until it evolves in the right direction'. To this end they outline five principles that will support organisational culture change:

1. Match strategy and culture: Too often an organisation's strategy, imposed from above, is at odds with the ingrained practices and attitudes of its culture. Leaders may underestimate how much a strategy depends on cultural alignment. Yet, it has been well documented that culture trumps strategy every time. Some leaders struggle with cultural intransigence for years, without ever fully focusing on the question, what aspects of our culture is it truly necessary to change in order to deliver on our organisation goals? Long-lists of aspirational organisational traits (collaborative, quality focused, innovative) are too vague. Rather a few cultural traits that truly match and support the organisation's strategy should be identified and fostered.

2. Focus on a few critical shifts in behaviour: Change is hard so you need to choose your battles carefully. When a few key behaviours are emphasised heavily it becomes easier for employees to relate to them. Most organisations will probably already have pockets of employees who already practice the behaviours they desire and they can act as role models. In addition, when only a few key behaviours are emphasised, employees themselves will often find additional ways of reinforcing them.

3. Honour the strengths of your existing culture: In observing an organisation's culture it can be tempting to dwell on the negative traits, but most corporate cultures have many strengths, albeit that some characteristics of the culture have evolved in unexpected ways. For example, impartiality and equity have been important cornerstones of public service culture for many years. However, more recently and perhaps unthinkingly this has given rise to a distrust of performance management systems and any approach that tries to distinguish between the performances of individual employees. Demonstrating the relevance of the original values and acknowledging the existing culture's assets while still seeking to make the necessary changes will make change feel less like a top-down imposition and more like a shared evolution from which everyone stands to gain.

4. Integrate formal and informal interventions: In promoting new behaviours critical to an organisation's strategic objectives and performance, it is important that both formal approaches and informal approaches are adopted. Traditionally organisations are quicker to adopt formal methods of trying to bring about behaviour change (rules, metrics, incentives, changing reporting lines, decision making autonomy or putting new IT systems in place) and neglect informal approaches which are more closely aligned with the emotional side of the organisation, such as networks, communities of interest, ad hoc conversations and meaningful management-employee connections.

5. Measure and monitor cultural evolution: It is essential to measure and model cultural progress. Measurement provides tangible evidence of progress and can help to maintain positive momentum over what is a long journey. In particular managers should pay attention to

    - Business performance - Are key performance indicators improving?
    - Critical behaviours - are enough people at multiple levels starting to demonstrate the few behaviours that matter most?
    - Milestones - have specific intervention milestones been reached?
    - Underlying beliefs, feelings and mind-sets - are key cultural attitudes moving in the right direction, as indicated for example through employee surveys? This last area is usually the slowest to show improvement. Most people will shift their thinking only after new behaviours have led to results that matter and thereby been validated.

The Tipperary County Council Merger

Tipperary County Council was established in June 2014 as a result of the merger of the former North and South Tipperary County Councils. The merger happened within the context of an extensive programme of public service cost reduction and also the *Putting People First* local government reforms. Combined with the latter, the merger represents a major reform of local government arrangements in Tipperary.

The merger of two county local authorities represented a significant challenge, especially in Tipperary's case where the main administrative centres (the towns of Clonmel and Nenagh) are 90 kilometres or one and a half hours of travel time apart. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly there was also little contact or connection between the two former authorities. North Tipperary County Council was in the old Mid-West Regional Authority and was oriented towards Limerick, while the council in South Tipperary was in the South East Regional Authority and looked to Waterford and Cork. It was commented internally that 'we had nothing in common but our name and our hurling team'.

Following the formal merger in 2014, the management team in Tipperary are now turning their attention to merger consolidation and the issues likely to impact on the long-term success of the merger. Addressing concrete concerns of staff in respect of issues such as workforce planning and career progression are important priorities. But it is also appreciated that so much of merger consolidation is about cultural issues. Mergers don't simply involve the addition or deletion of organisation features; they demand the creation of something new, a new organisation culture.

Some of the cultural issues identified in a review of the merger by the Institute of Public Administration (O'Riordan and Boyle, 2015), for example different management styles and different approaches to delegation, are being addressed. However, it is only with time that more underlying assumptions and beliefs will merge, for example, the rituals of organisational life, the stories told by employees about important events, and the general notion of 'how things are done around here'.

While there is no 'quick fix' in terms of merger consolidation, the management team in Tipperary are committed to supporting the process through addressing the concrete concerns of staff, facilitating employees to voice concerns they may have, seeking to build a rapport with staff they never previously managed, providing training where required and as evidenced by the development and adoption of a new corporate plan to putting in place a new vision for a unified authority.

Source: O'Riordan and Boyle, 2015

7 CONCLUSIONS

Many times in recent years failings of the Irish public service have been blamed on organisational culture. Failure to prioritise the needs of often the most vulnerable citizens has been attributed ultimately to the prevailing culture in the Health Service Executive, various hospitals and services under its remit, the Gardaí, the Department of Finance, the financial regulators office, FÁS and so on.

Even in public service organisations that don't make newspaper headlines organisation culture matters. Managers need to have an appreciation of whether a failure to achieve strategic objectives or performance targets is related to organisational culture. Are staff aware of the values and behaviours espoused by the organisation, do they share them and act on them? Are employees engaged, motivated and empowered? Is the organisation coping with change in its environment? Does the management team work as a cohesive unit? Is there an overall tendency towards inertia (we've always done it this way) even when evidence suggests a different course of action. Any of these factors may indicate problems with an organisation's culture.

This paper has sought to shed light on organisational culture, what is meant by the term, particularities of organisational culture in the public service, the relationship between organisational culture and performance, the centrality of effective leadership to a functional organisational culture and lastly how to assess and if necessary change organisational culture.

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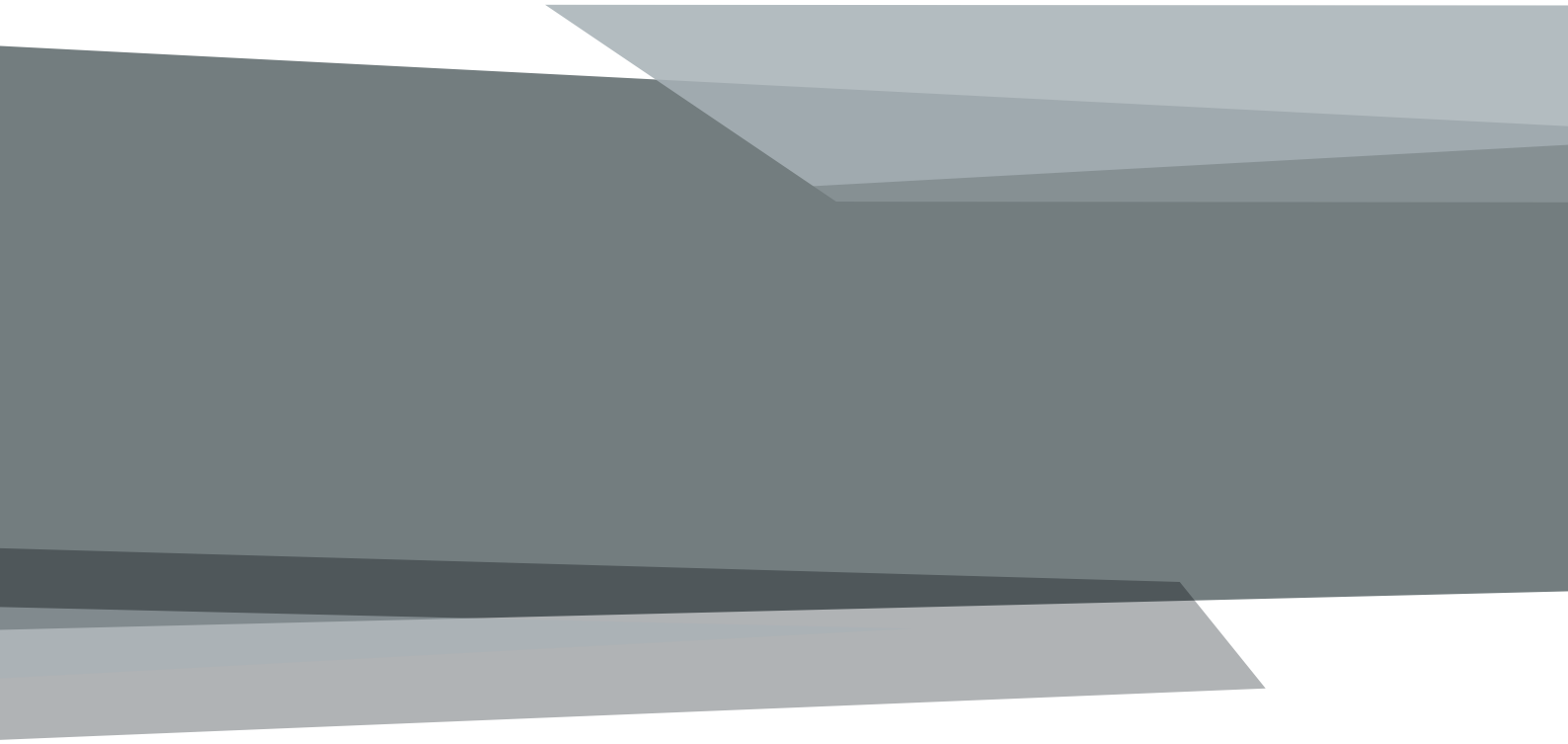

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