



A Strategic Checklist for Organizational Health

REGARDLESS OF SIZE OR MISSION, EVERY NONPROFIT IS A LIVING, BREATHING ENTITY.

Like an organism, it requires nourishment, care, and regular checkups to ensure its overall health and well-being. This is a strategy checklist intended for churches and nonprofits. But, it might be different than the ones you've seen before.

This isn't a strategy to maximize your impact 10 times in 10 days or double your budget in half the time; it's a strategy checklist for assessing and promoting health within the culture of your organization. We believe healthy things grow. Your best work happens when you and your organization have a symbiotic relationship between creativity and health. This is a tool to define the areas of unhealth—we call this “the rub”—and be able to recognize and respond to it.

IN ORDER TO DIAGNOSE THE HEALTH OF YOUR ORGANIZATION'S CULTURE, THERE ARE A FEW IMPORTANT PARAMETERS AND DEFINITIONS.

Defining Culture

Maybe the easiest way to define culture is to focus on the negative aspects of it. While we don't like being negative, stay with us for a moment.

- > **Culture isn't only what we celebrate, it's also what we tolerate.** Unhealthy organizations and dysfunctional relationships have an uncanny ability to know how to push the boundaries of what is tolerated. What is the worst behavior tolerated at your organization? Answering this question helps identify the spectrum of tolerance in your church or nonprofit.
- > **Culture isn't about one leader's behavior—it's about how widely shared and intensely held the values of your church or nonprofit are.** If key leaders or volunteers don't embody the values of your organization, this can be an indication of unhealthy culture.

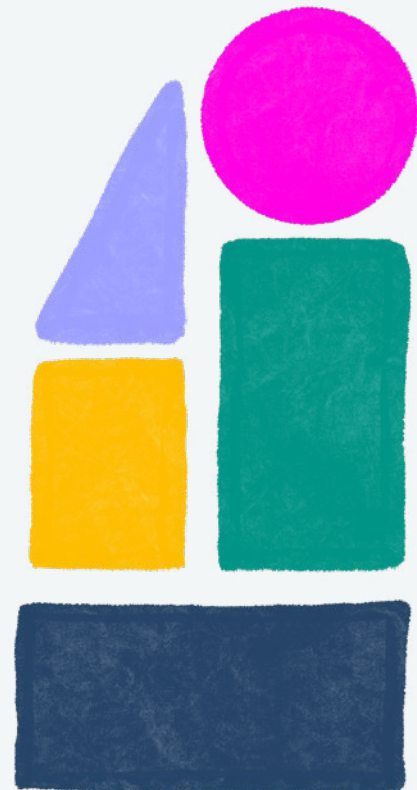
Diagnosing your Culture

In order to get where you want to go, you need to be able to identify where you are right now. You might think you have a healthy organization, but would staff and volunteers indicate otherwise? These three prompts are effective ways to get conversations going within your organization:

- > Tell me about something that happens here that wouldn't elsewhere.
- > Tell me a story about who gets hired, promoted, and fired.
- > Tell me about a time when people didn't "walk the talk" around here.

This isn't an exhaustive list to diagnose your organization's culture, but a resource to get your brain churning on assessing its health.

Here are four challenges we see that require regular attention in order to ensure a healthy workplace. Our roadmap to health starts with the rub (the point of unhealth or tension), how you can recognize it in yourself and others, and how you respond in a healthy way.



CHALLENGE 1: ANXIETY

The Rub: *It seems like anxiety has become synonymous with the air we breathe. For most, anxiety begins when they don't know what to do.*

- > Part of a person's anxiety stems from losing control, comfort, or a lack of approval from others.
- > Anxiety blossoms in ambiguity. Think back to the beginning of the pandemic. There was so much uncertainty around what could or would happen. None of us (really) knew what to do; enter anxiety.
- > "Anxiety is whatever response happens next after you're not getting what you think you need," says Steve Cuss, author of *Managing Leadership Anxiety*. You might think the root need is affirmation, your boss's approval, or control, but these are all your attempts to grasp what you think you need.

Recognize: *Like a virus, anxiety spreads. That's why it's important to be able to recognize it in yourself and in others. How do you know when you're anxious? While this is a simple question, it can be really difficult to answer. We can often learn to recognize triggers to clue us into what's happening in our body.*

- > Spinning Mind: Are you ruminating repeatedly about the same things?
- > Racing Heart: Is your heart beating like you're all hyped up on Mountain Dew?
- > Tightening Body: Do your shoulders feel stiff? Is nausea coming on?
- > Bonus: Ask the person who knows you the best, such as a spouse, a parent, a friend, or a coworker.

Respond:

- > Name the thing you think you need (the one you probably don't really need)—the last word in an argument, affirmation from a boss or colleague, control, doing a task with perfection.
- > Play! (No, seriously.) In Edwin Friedman's invaluable book, *The Failure of Nerve*, he says, "A major criterion for judging the anxiety level of any society is the loss of its capacity to be playful." It's pretty hard to be anxious while laughing along with your coworkers as you play a game of kickball.





CHALLENGE 2: TRIANGULATION

The Rub: *Triangulation is a fancy word for gossip. A triangulated relationship is any relationship that has three people in it that should only have two. An example? If you're talking with a coworker about your boss, that is triangulation. Gossip will always generate anxiety because it comes from a triangulated relationship—this is every middle school relationship you've ever seen. How do you know you can trust what someone tells you if they're also notorious for talking about others behind their backs?*

Recognize: *Notice how often people who are not in the room are talked about, especially when talking with one other person.*

- > This can also be recognized by the meeting after the meeting or the meeting within the meeting. Are you chatting in Slack with someone else in the meeting about the meeting you're currently in? Or is there a smaller meeting after the meeting to talk about what happened in the meeting?
- > Triangulation is indirect communication and is not indicative of healthy organizations.

Respond: *Ask yourself, “Is there something I need to say to someone face-to-face that I've said behind their back?”*

Tracking Communication: *Is direct communication modeled by the leaders in this organization?*



CHALLENGE 3: REACTIVITY

The Rub: *In a reactive state, individuals often resort to defensive behaviors, deflecting criticism and blaming others, rather than addressing the root cause of a problem. When people are reactive, this almost always increases the anxiety in a room.*

Recognize: *Many of us can recognize when we are reactive...after the fact. The challenge is recognizing reactivity as it is happening. Reactivity is often found in “you” statements rather than “I” statements.*

Respond: *Start with I. “I” statements help name what you might be feeling or thinking, deescalating the reactivity and the anxiety in the room. Responding to reactivity is less about who or what is the problem and more about who is motivated to work toward health.*

CHALLENGE 4: BLAME SHIFTING

The Rub: Blame shifting shirks accountability and is a close relative to reactivity. An element of a healthy organization is accountability. This isn't meant to create a culture of fear, but one of responsibility and growth. Blame shifting is a sign of a defensive and anxious culture where people are unwilling to take responsibility for their actions, and instead pass it on to someone else.

Recognize: Listen to the language used during problem-solving meetings.

- Does it involve “you,” “they,” or “them” more often than “I” or “we”?
- You'll also recognize blame shifting if you offer feedback to someone and they counter with something you need to work on, too.

Respond: Encourage a culture of accountability and learning. Normalize making mistakes and destigmatize the shame around messing up. When someone makes a mistake, avoid blaming or shaming them. It's especially effective when leaders are vulnerable and can vocalize their mistakes to staff, when appropriate.

HEALTH IS ATTRACTIVE

Healthy things grow. **Healthy organizations attract talented people and retain them.** Have you ever heard someone say, “I can't imagine working anywhere else?” This is a sign of a healthy organization.

We love working with nonprofits and churches of all shapes and sizes and believe that branding, creativity, and organizational health can all work together to make your work stronger. **Let's see what we can do together.**

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