Organizational culture can be likened to the collective habits of people in terms of how they behave and interact with each other while trying to perform tasks. Habits can be healthy or unproductive. Changing them is difficult. Some organizations suffer from ill habits of apathy, passing-the-buck, upward delegation, unquestioning obedience and lack of ethics. These are red flags in any culture. A well meaning board of directors will attend to such a malaise with a sense of urgency and will commence a comprehensive change effort. Changing processes and structures is relatively easy. However, changing habits i.e., attitudes and behaviors of people is a tough and time-consuming undertaking. Could this be a reason why organizations needing change are stuck in status quo?

Organizational culture is the set of shared understandings and assumptions the members of an organization have about what the organization is (beliefs), how it ought to be (values), and how organizational members should behave (norms). The culture is perpetuated through symbols and language (e.g. stories, myths, legends, heroes/heroines, rituals, and ceremonies). [1]

If you've ever had the opportunity to invite a friend or colleague from outside Pakistan to a family wedding you would find yourself saying, "you see Peter, in our culture…" explaining each ritual. The constraint with this understanding of 'culture' is that it limits it to the extraordinary activities and does not consciously count other every day behaviors.

Culture is bigger than the way we dress up for Eid, or the way we take blessings from the elderly when leaving for a big journey. Culture is the way we live our entire life – special occasions and everyday moments. Culture is an amalgamation of our behaviors. It colors our outlook to life, our thought process, our values, our opinions, our likes and dislikes. What we say, how we think and what we do are governed by the culture we grow up in.

Just like in a country, an organization has its own culture. It determines how people behave in the organization, how they make decisions, how they achieve results and how they interact with others. While culture in a country is determined by traditions, religious values etc. culture in an organization is ideally determined by organizational values. I write 'ideally' because regardless of the values espoused a culture is there already. Whether it's a culture we want is the question. Culture needs to be created. It is a constant and conscious effort.

Culture represents the 'personality' of an entity. It defines its identity. Because of Google's corporate culture, we can easily answer the question, "if Google was a person, what kind of a person would he/she be? What would he/she look like? What qualities would he/she have"?

This is a huge advantage because human beings by nature prefer clarity over confusion. Whether one is interacting with an organization as an external, a customer, a supplier; or someone working within the organization, we like to be clear about who we are dealing with. This reduction in ambiguity allows for better comfort levels: customers can easily predict responses to requests; an employee can behave more confidently knowing the company's stance on staying back late, taking a big risk, achieving great results etc. Corporate culture also gives one a sense of identity. It's easier to develop a sense of belonging with something we clearly understand and relate to.

Corporate culture helps attract relevant talent. It enables people to perform in a particular way, and establishes what is expected of them. Creating a culture means bringing organization's values to life through behaviors. If a culture is not nurtured and developed it will form itself and could end up being counterproductive in terms of professionalism and efficiency.

A strong culture makes it easier for people to decipher if they fit in or not. For example, some organizations are quite clear that they do not want people in the same role for more than a specific amount of time. They may never write or say it, but its part of everyone's subconscious and thus people act and make decisions accordingly - the dynamism is automatic. Similarly, another organization may expect people to have long lasting careers built on their contributions in a particular role. Once again it may never be said, but would be based on examples around that organization, one would know. Therefore, a defined culture, at the end of the day makes life easy for all stakeholders.

Build and nurture culture based on your organization's values and vision; a culture that is relevant and conducive to your reality and environment. Consider the 'first name' culture in multinational organizations in Pakistan. While some may argue that it has brought down communication barriers, sometimes people feel as though it is leading to a lack of decorum. Organizational culture needs to be in tune with broader cultural realities. Certain individuals in the organization may be more comfortable referring to a colleague 15 years their senior as 'Shahid Sahab' as opposed to 'Shahid'. There is nothing wrong with that. In fact the associated respect may even enable them to communicate and work with each other better!

Cultures are not good or bad. They just need to be right for the people in the organization and what it has sought to achieve given the values it upholds. Organizational culture of Pakistan Army for example would be very different from Aga Khan University Hospital. Imagine what would happen if one tried to copy the other's culture! Having said that, it is pertinent that cultures are continuously improving, but in their contextual realities.

Just like changing age-old habits, building a desired culture in any organization is not as straight forward as it seems. The process begins with knowing what an organization wants to achieve, the impact it dreams of creating, the principle it will never compromise on. By consistently practicing and upholding key values and principles, an organization forms an identity which others come to recognize and respect over time. This has to start from the top. A natural chain reaction will take care of the rest. But this is easier said than done. It's like a doctor saying, "You can be healthier very easily. Just eat healthy food, exercise every day and quit smoking!" While it sounds very simple, it requires discipline and commitment! In the same way, understanding how to build positive cultures is simple but making it happen requires constant effort.

The effort is worth its while. Once you have the right culture, strategies and plans will get executed efficiently and effectively, bottom lines and top lines will improve, and people will work with greater commitment and devotion to delight customers and key stakeholders.

[1] Read more: http://www.answers.com/topic/organizational-culture#ixzz1cRJJjiIR