

How Seven Colors Can Inspire an Entire Organization

Cultural Transformation at Swiss Post

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Every new strategy requires a cultural realignment — organizational developers are generally in agreement on this. Swiss Post took advantage of the momentum created by its strategy development to also work on its corporate culture. This article demonstrates how the company succeeded in developing a vision for the "culture of tomorrow" and began a cultural transformation towards greater customer focus, holism, and courage.



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Project Start "Without Assignment"

In the spring of 2019, Roberto Cirillo took over as the new CEO and initiated the development of a new strategy for Swiss Post. The strategy was intended to address market challenges and guide the organization into the future. The "Post of Tomorrow" project focused on developing a new business strategy — but a cultural transformation was not initially part of the plan. At the kickoff, however, the HR representative in the strategy group proposed developing a future-oriented cultural framework for Swiss Post in parallel with the strategy. The idea gained traction in the HR and communications departments. Several upcoming initiatives (such as digital upskilling, understanding leadership, and corporate branding) required cultural embedding. HR specialists were convinced that the new strategy would not take flight in the existing culture.

Initially, the idea met with resistance. The strategy leadership was doubtful about the need for a cultural shift. A small group of leaders from various departments eventually approached the CEO directly to persuade him to integrate the cultural element into the strategy project. The CEO gave the green light, and the cultural work, aligned with the strategy project, could begin.

The group organized itself as a project team and invited interested parties from senior management to participate in an advisory group. About 30 people from different divisions of Swiss Post immediately joined, accompanying the cultural initiative and continuing to disseminate it within their own management teams. The project benefited from the involvement of members from all divisional leadership teams in the advisory group.

Assessing the Current Culture

How should the comprehensive and complex topic of culture be approached? The first step was to capture Swiss Post's existing culture at that time. Where does the entire company stand culturally? What are the core values at Swiss Post, and which ones are not widely practiced? What evidence of this can be seen in daily operations, and what are the impacts? With these questions in mind, the project team searched for a suitable cultural model and external partner. They found a solution with The Culture Institute (TCI), using the Culture Map model and its clear cultural language (see sidebar). The methodology was introduced by assessing the existing culture at Swiss Post.

The first step involved conducting exploratory interviews, followed by an online survey. The collected data were further explored in culture workshops, with over 300 employees from across the organization participating. The workshops focused on the following questions: "How do we recognize the corresponding colors (value clusters) in daily life? And how dominant do we perceive them in our own environment?"

The intensive discussions produced 62 Culture Maps and numerous explanatory notes on how to interpret the various cultural manifestations. It quickly became clear that despite the heterogeneity of the different divisions, there is a common cultural pattern that shapes the overall culture. The many Culture Maps from the workshops were consolidated into Swiss Post's current culture map by aggregating the various maps. All drawn maps were quantitatively evaluated, supplemented with the TCI perspective, and validated with the online survey data.

The Methodology

Making Culture Discussable

A corporate culture can be represented as a map. A so-called Culture Map explains the visible manifestations of a culture and the deeper patterns they are based on. This makes culture tangible and concrete.

The seven value clusters of the Culture Map each group certain cultural units together. The model's structure is based on findings from cultural evolution. In colors from violet to aqua, cultures find increasingly complex solutions to their challenges at each stage. At the same time, the Culture Map shows an interplay between group-oriented, stabilizing values on the right side and individualistic, dynamic values on the left.

In every company, in every department, and every team, elements of all seven colors are present. Nevertheless, each organization develops

habitual patterns over time: In some, conflicts are typically avoided in green ways or pragmatically bypassed in orange ways, in others, they are fought out in red ways or resolved in violet ways by a patriarch. All colors are available, but in serious situations, people habitually revert to the familiar behaviors.

On a rational level, the Culture Map makes cultural patterns visible with their strengths, weaknesses, tensions, and development topics. Equally important — if not more so — is what the Culture Map triggers on an emotional level. People constructively develop an understanding of their corporate culture. Together, they become aware of the characteristics of their culture in light of the company's challenges. They develop cultural visions that provide orientation for the future, similar to strategic directions.



Figure 1

Examples of the maps drawn in the workshops

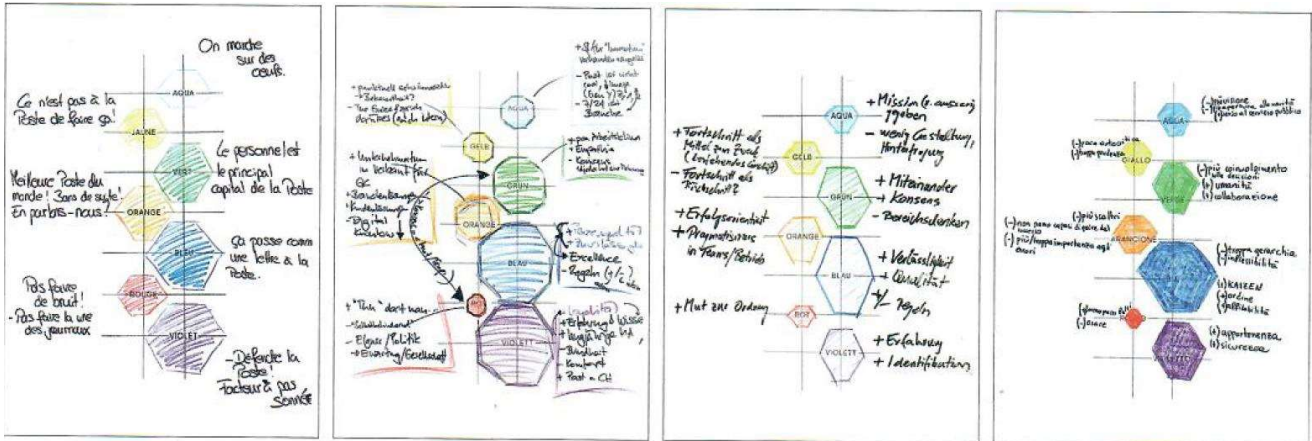


Figure 2

Consolidated current Culture Map of the Post

- Recognizable joy in progress
- Future orientation and radical rethinking possible in specific innovation teams
- Customer orientation as a motivator widely present
- Joy in (collective) performance is lived rather cautiously. Individual performance sometimes remains entirely hidden
- **Field of tension:** Processes and consensus (blue/green) before pragmatism — experimentation is difficult
- Disruptive energies have little room
- Courage or contradiction is hardly rewarded — "Just don't stand out!"
- **Field of tension:** Consensus and process orientation (green/blue) inhibit speed and (individual) determination



- Public service as an honorable service to Switzerland
- Little known official vision and mission
- **Field of tension:** Self-organization and open system boundaries disturb the usual order (violet/blue)
- Appreciative working conditions
- Friendly, pleasant working atmosphere
- Distinct consensus orientation
- "The well-oiled machine"
- Reliability, high quality standards
- Rules and processes guide actions
- Strong sense of belonging
- Secure employer
- 170 years of experience
- Modesty, down-to-earth attitude

The explanations of the drawn maps helped to better understand the manifestations of the colors. The current culture map was thus established, showing the basic patterns that generally apply to Swiss Post, along with all the detailed differentiations.

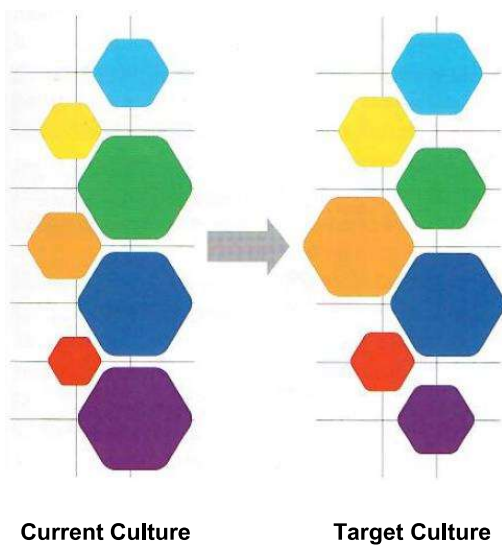
Developing a Cultural Vision and Transformation Priorities

Swiss Post has been successful for 170 years,

not least because of its culture. But does it also have the right mindset to be successful in the future? The implementation of the "Post of Tomorrow" strategy imposes new demands on employees and the culture. Economic requirements are also changing rapidly and call for transformation. Based on this, the executive board has considered the requirements for the culture of tomorrow, developed a vision, and defined priorities for the upcoming transformation.

Figure 3

From the current to the target culture

**Current Culture****Target Culture**

The target culture indicates in which cultural colors changes should take place. Swiss Post aims to become even more customer-centric, focusing its actions on customers and pursuing relevant solutions (orange). It wants to be bolder in tackling conflicts and taking responsibility (red). It should function as a unified entity with a common vision and purpose, moving away from divisional silos (aqua). At the same time, dominant cultural elements like harmony (green), rule orientation (blue), and excessive identification with individual divisions (violet) must be softened. The transformation priorities were defined as the colors orange, aqua, and red.

Deriving Action Fields and Observable Behavioral Changes

The next step was to determine where to apply the levers for cultural change. The project team was keen to anchor significant changes in the framework and corporate processes to encourage or even necessitate behavioral changes. Action fields were identified in workshops, guided by the question, "What will be different if we behave more in line with red, orange, or aqua in the future?" The desired behavior served as the basis for deriving five action fields with 24 work packages. One and a half years later, progress toward the cultural vision was measured based on this target behavior.

We make a mark by...

- being involved in society, companies, the environment and people and by thinking and acting in a networked way as one Post;
- placing customers and partners at the center of what we do and offering them innovative, contemporary and relevant services;
- face conflicts more courageously and promote determination and initiative;
- to strengthen creativity and curiosity for new business ideas.

We build on our strengths by...

- maintaining our humanity and collegiality, while accepting irritation through performance orientation and determination;
- using our reliability and trust in process quality, but at the same time critically questioning the amount of regulation in order to create room for maneuver;
- focus our identification on the post as a whole and create space for diversity and personal responsibility.

Launching the Cultural Discussion Across the Organization

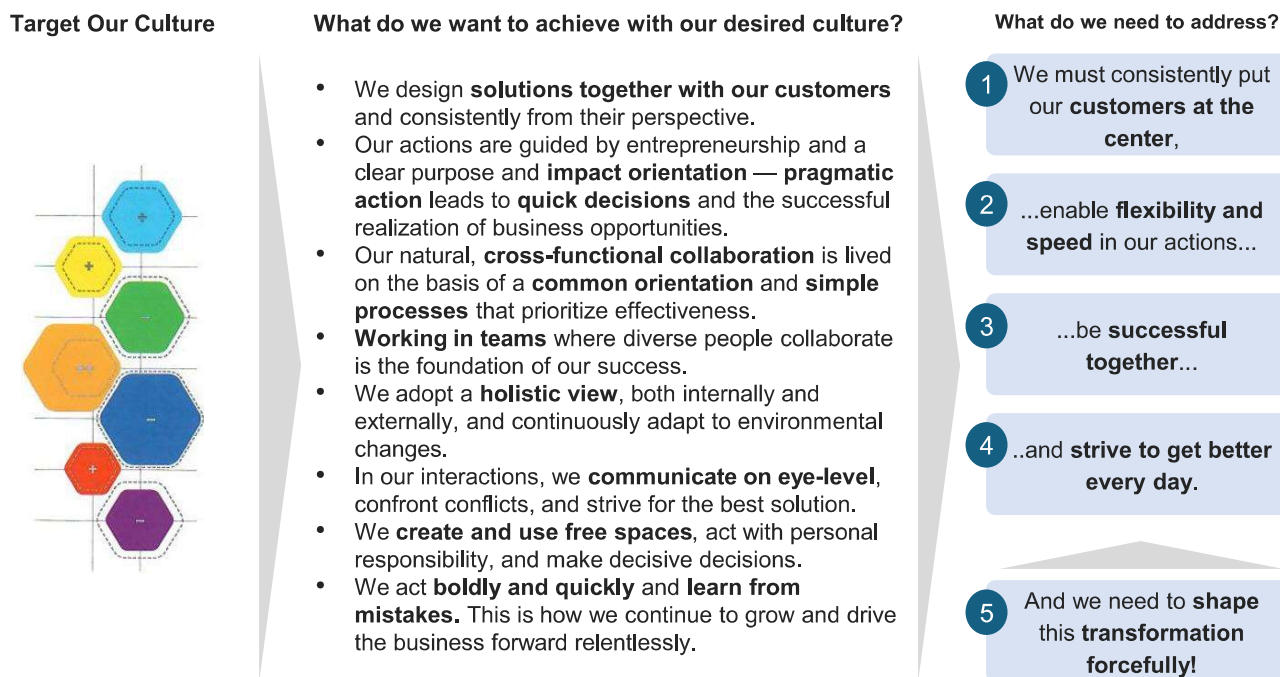
At that point, the cultural vision was still a declaration of intent. But how could it be turned into a company-wide topic? How could the vision be integrated into the organization? There was no specific corporate mandate to address corporate culture. Each division was free to determine how to engage with the topic. The solution was to offer a physical workshop that the project team would provide to the divisions on a voluntary basis.

Swiss Post as a Company



Swiss Post, recognized as the "best post in the world" by the Universal Postal Union for five years, was founded as PTT in 1849. It is responsible for Switzerland's basic postal and payment services. Since 2013, it has operated as a joint-stock company, still wholly owned by the federal government, largely in the open market, and without taxpayer funding. To compensate for declining letter and payment services, Swiss Post has been developing new business divisions, such as e-government and cross-border logistics. With around 50,000 employees, Swiss Post is the third-largest employer in Switzerland.

Figure 4
From the target image to the fields of action



However, just as this workshop became available, the COVID-19 lockdown was imposed. What initially seemed like a disaster turned out to be a great opportunity. Physical workshops were no longer possible, so the team quickly designed virtual formats of two and a half to three hours, allowing the first virtual culture workshops on cultural language and the current culture to take place as early as June 2020. The reach of the virtual offering far exceeded that of physical workshops.

The first workshop module (Module 1: Culture Map) aimed at learning a common cultural language and understanding, linked to Swiss Post's current culture. This was followed by engaging with the cultural vision and one's role in the transformation (Module 2: Vision - What's Next?). Participants were encouraged to assess where opportunities and challenges lie for themselves, their divisions, or their teams. Using Culture Hacks — small, simple behavioral changes — the first impulses were introduced into the organization. For example, one team decided to strengthen its conflict capability (red) by introducing the role of the "Devil's Advocate," who would ask critical questions. Another team aimed to enhance customer centricity (orange) by asking three questions regarding the customer, their reaction, and the customer benefit in every

decision. In this way, initial experiments and behavioral changes were launched at both the individual and team levels.

For those divisions that joined the cultural discussion later, a combined module was provided, allowing the discussion of cultural language and the current culture map to be integrated with the discussion of the vision.

The participants in Modules 1 and 2 perceived them as inspiring. Participants increasingly expressed a desire for more concrete change. Therefore, further modules were designed to be more implementation-oriented. While Module 3 (My Colors - Our Colors) focused on reflecting on individual cultural colors and their implications for the team, Module 4 (Strategy and Culture - Linked) considered where cultural action was needed to optimally pursue forward-looking initiatives.

Implementation and Multiplication

The implementation of the cultural discussion varied widely across divisions. Based on Modules 1 and 2, department-specific variants were developed. While some relied on live-stream events with up to 400 participants, others offered their teams workshops, some voluntary and some mandatory. Still, others opted for large formats with 60 participants.

To meet the high demand, the project team recruited 70 culturally interested employees from across the organization who were then trained by TCI to become certified Culture Coaches. This allowed 353 workshops and events to be held within a year and a half, reaching around 6,000 employees. Culture Coaches were recruited from nearly all divisional leadership teams, providing valuable moderation resources and building cultural ambassadors within leadership teams. In addition to networking into leadership teams, the exchange of all culturally interested employees across the organization was promoted. To this end, the Culture Community was established, providing a platform to engage in dialogue on current cultural topics, offering inspiration, and helping to accelerate cultural transformation as a bottom-up movement.

Alongside the cultural discussion, elements of the target culture were reflected in HR processes and tools. For example, Swiss Post's competency model was completely redesigned with culture-based core competencies. One relevant meta-competence was defined for each

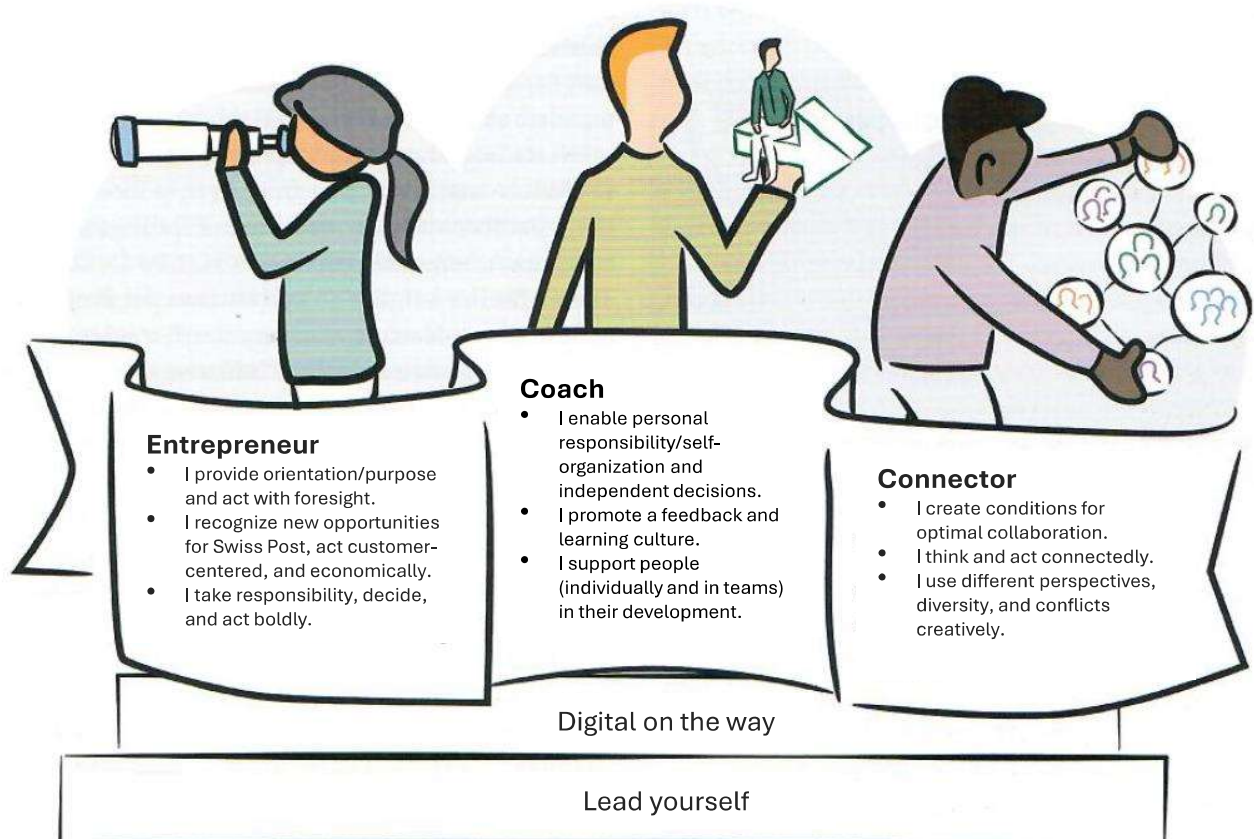
cultural color, and an additional one for each transformation priority. The recruitment process and all of Swiss Post's development processes were aligned with these core competencies.

The most important transmission belt into the organization is the leadership. Therefore, a fresh start was made in terms of leadership understanding and accompanying tools. Based on the target culture, a new Leadership Map with the leadership roles of Entrepreneur, Coach, and Connector was developed (see Figure 5). The leadership program "En Viadi," in which the top 600 managers of the group participate, was aligned with the Leadership Map and the requirements of the target culture. The aim is now to extend this offering to further management levels and design it specifically.

Measurable Cultural Change

At the beginning of 2022, after a year and a half of the new strategy and culture, the organization was systematically evaluated to determine whether it was moving towards the cultural vision.

Figure 5
Leadership Map of the Swiss Post



An online survey and subsequent evaluation workshops (2 workshops with 120 participants from across the organization, 2 workshops with senior management) were conducted to gauge the pulse of the organization. The results were combined with other data that could indicate cultural changes (e.g., employee surveys, risk management assessments, customer satisfaction measurements). The survey was structured in two parts: the first block focused on desired behaviors and asked about perceived changes in daily behavior. The second block asked about core values and assessed whether a healthy, goal-oriented expression of these values was being lived out daily, or whether there was an unhealthy expression (too much or too little of a given value).

"The broad acceptance and support, we attribute to the compelling cultural language."

The first results show that changes were noted in all behaviors surveyed. For example, while regulatory density was only slightly reduced, there was a significant change in autonomous action. This applies to both employee feedback and managers' assessments, which, on average, found a more substantial change.

The evaluation of the questions on values reveals a consistently positive assessment of the individual expressions, which were predominantly rated as "healthy." The most critically viewed aspects were hierarchy, courage, and critical questioning, while humanity, reliability, and quality awareness topped the list. The executive board was pleased with the results and wants to focus more deeply on the two priorities of personal responsibility and cross-divisional collaboration. Therefore, it will be particularly

interesting to observe the development in these areas in the next survey.

Reflection on the Approach

In issue 4/2017 of ZOE, an article by Winfried Berner titled "Cultural Change from Above — Often the Better Alternative" was published. In it, he refutes the idea that "a change in the characteristic thinking and behavior patterns of an organization could only be achieved 'bottom-up'." We have critically engaged with Berner's statements and hypotheses to reflect on our approach and the success factors we identified.

Berner emphasizes the role model function of top management in terms of tangible actions or behavior as a prerequisite for successful cultural change. This assertion can be confirmed in the Swiss Post project. A key success factor here was the unconditional support of Roberto Cirillo, the CEO of Swiss Post. Convinced that cultural work is an important lever for strategy implementation, he acts as a role model in various ways, together with the executive board: For example, cultural and leadership understanding is worked on at various leadership events, and executive board members discuss current leadership challenges with participants in Swiss Post's leadership program, further developing their leadership skills as a team and initiating cultural and leadership initiatives in their divisions. Moreover, Roberto Cirillo's leadership actions and behavior in everyday work underscore the relevance of the topic to him. However, the cultural initiative at Swiss Post was not initiated by top management but by committed employees on their own initiative. The top management allowed this space for design to be taken up.

We agree with Berner that the definition of the target culture should come from top management — as was the case at Swiss Post. Berner further states that broad involvement is not necessary for defining the vision but is helpful in operational implementation. The project at Swiss Post started very early with the involvement of a large number of employees across the organization, namely during the assessment of the current culture. The broad support and acceptance the project experienced during the assessment of the current culture and the operationalization of the target culture in the divisions can be attributed to the compelling cultural language characterized by TCI's model.

Success Factors for a Successful Cultural Change Process



- Choosing the right timing or using the momentum of a strategy development
- Active and personal support from the CEO and the role model function of top management
- The added value and benefits of change are clearly seen and supported in the organization
- Establishing a common, compelling, and accepted cultural language
- Broad involvement of the organization and opportunities for participation
- Early involvement of key stakeholders
- Purpose-driven: Participation and implementation in the areas on the basis of voluntariness and conviction rather than mandates
- Consistent "translation" of the target culture into requirements for leadership, collaboration, competencies, and the design of the work environment

This has generated a lot of enthusiasm for cultural work at both the individual and team levels. Additionally, the early involvement of key stakeholders and consideration of their requirements, as well as the conditions of the respective business environments in the divisions, were success factors. This turned these individuals into supporters, role models, and multipliers of the cultural initiative. At the same time, the offerings and formats of cultural development were designed so that internal customers could choose the most suitable options for them according to their needs. This was done on a voluntary basis without pressure, a predetermined timeline, or control — let alone sanctions for actions not carried out. Today, almost everyone in the organization knows what is meant, for example, when it is said, "We're not orange enough as a team." This created a kind of pull effect for the cultural development offerings and formats in the sense of: "What you've done is great, we want to implement it in our team too." Berner describes the consistent attention of top management in the sense of rewarding desired behavior and sanctioning undesired behavior as a key lever for cultural change. Our experience shows that cultural change can also occur noticeably if the added value and benefits of change are clearly seen and supported within the organization, if the cultural vision and the work on it are attractive enough, and if a critical mass — including influential stakeholders — in the organization is convinced.

Berner's argument is entirely understandable that a "threatening development" or "sustained high workload" is highly likely to divert an organization's energy and attention to other matters than a cultural project. He calls this a "bet on calm times." The experience from Swiss Post's cultural initiative has shown how valuable it was to use the momentum of strategy development and launch the cultural process shortly afterward. The new strategic direction provided countless points of reference for convincing communication and continuous dissemination of the need for cultural development. Thus, it was not detached from the organization's upcoming challenges; there was no "either-or," but it was tackled timely in the divisions.

Finally, the consistent "translation" of the target culture into requirements for leadership,

collaboration, competencies, and work environment design has contributed to cultural development within Swiss Post. These have now been integrated into the core HR processes and formats, such as recruiting, performance and talent management, change management, and team development, as well as into the training and development portfolio for employees and managers. Furthermore, the work on Swiss Post's culture has continued to unfold in a "decentralized" way: Several hundred members are actively involved in various communities, such as the Culture or Leadership Community. These, along with working groups around topics like agility and the work environment, promote cross-hierarchy and cross-divisional exchange, initiate offers, and participate in them. The term "culture" is not necessarily at the forefront.

Often, it is more about how employees can further develop their attitudes and behavior towards their customers and various stakeholders within the organization to remain "the best post in the world" in the future.

"The entire organization understands cultural development as a central aspect of transformation."

Outlook

The start has been successful: The entire organization understands cultural development as a central aspect of transformation and as an enabler for strategy implementation. The above-mentioned culture measurement, with more than 2,500 participants from all divisions of the organization, has shown that the culture in all areas has developed noticeably in the desired direction in the three transformation priorities over the past two years. Even though the measures for cultural development are demonstrably effective, the priorities defined by the executive board show that cultural change at Swiss Post is not yet complete. It will also take some time before all 50,000 employees in different functions and regions perceive the cultural changes. The time invested in dealing with the organization's culture has shown its impact: It has laid the foundation for cultural change, enabling the successful implementation of Swiss Post's ambitious new strategy.

Literature



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Case Clinic for Cultural Change at Swiss Post

In the "Case Clinic" section, we present change projects by our authors for discussion to create an extended platform for shared learning between authors and readers. The Case Clinic is open to everyone: Are you interested in a second opinion? We welcome the submission of your change project!

A Wonderful Response to Peter Drucker

I have been waiting a long time for such a case study: The article illustrates the connection between strategy development and cultural change in a large organization at its best. The change project at Swiss Post provides a textbook answer to Peter Drucker's legendary and very pragmatic assessment: "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." One could also say that without considering organizational culture, change projects come to nothing. The article makes it clear how the transformation of organizational culture can succeed in alignment with the reformulation of corporate strategy. Highlights include: 1. The dynamic inter-play of internal and external consulting, 2. The special importance of top management in determining a target culture, 3. The dialogue-promoting visualization through colors (Culture Maps), 4. The skillful design of the project setting, including project management, 5. The openness for area-specific implementation corridors, and 6. The combination of online and face-to-face formats. Perhaps the Culture Maps concept could be linked with the Competing Values Framework (by Quinn & Rohrbaugh), which also involves the description and visualization of competing cultural and value patterns.

The following questions come to mind: How were or will conflicts on the way to the target culture be managed? This applies to the "clash of cultures" of different cultures as well as the question of what happens if strategy and culture development cannot be reconciled? And what does it mean for the new organizational culture if, for example, the CEO changes or a sudden strategic shift occurs?



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Strategic Cultural Development

To prevent Swiss Post's corporate culture from developing an appetite for the strategy developed by top management, it was considered with its development process. The approach is convincing on various levels: Effective governance (the CEO protected the process), both qualitative and quantitative analytical work (model-based), a common, catchy language to make cultural aspects of the organization discussable (noteworthy is the color logic borrowed from TCI), extensive multiplication work within the organization (with much room left for the respective topics of organizational areas and few guidelines), and even initial monitoring of the change results in a pulse check (the culture seems to be moving) make the case an excellent example of concerted work on the culture of a large organization with a high degree of participation.

Nevertheless, two questions remain open for me. Cultural change only happens when the unspoken agreements among organizational members, the unspoken rules, are changed. This often takes a long time, especially in traditional companies, because it involves the backstage themes of the organization, which are often very specifically occupied. When looking at the documentation of the fields of action that emerged on the way to the target culture, these appear quite generic (for example: "Work in teams is our basis for success"). Therefore, my first question is: Is the measured change (already) real? And the second: What role did the strategy play during the process — and did it facilitate the implementation as desired?



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