

# Culture as a Resource for Social Change Series:

Article #1

*Culture as a Resource for Organizational Development*

**By Atum Azzahir,  
Cultural Wellness Center,  
Minneapolis, MN**

**Celebrate our cultures**

Apoyar a nuestra juventud

**HEAR OUR  
VOICES**

Reconocer nuestra fuerza

**HONOR OUR  
TRADITIONS**

# Culture as a Resource for Organizational Development

By Atum Azzahir

Cultural Wellness Center, Minneapolis, MN

## Introduction

This article will explore a culturally-based organizational structure developed from the perspective of culturally specific organizations. In addition, it will explore cultural foundations for leadership development, management/administration, governance and organizational accountability using a lens that integrates cultural realities and considerations.

Culturally specific programs and organizations are on the rise today as disparities in health, education, employment and other human conditions become more a part of the public awareness. Upon breaking down culturally specific programs and organizations, I will begin by expounding on what is considered culture.

What is culture? Kim Ann Zimmermann, a LiveScience Contributor, defines culture as: the characteristics of a particular group of people, defined by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts... Ahmed Azzahir, a consultant in African Knowledge Systems defines culture as: The symbols a group of people create to give themselves cohesion and continuity across generations examples include language, art, images, attire, dance, stories/characters...

The Cultural Wellness Center, located in Minneapolis, MN, opened in 1996. A group of cultural activists worked with the founder to bring an institutional voice into existence to support the community's cries for inclusion, acknowledgement, as well as equity in the cultivation and allocations of resources which are dedicated to solving problems and conditions in people's lives.

The history of the organizational structure can be used to explain a large part of the world structure that exists today. Organizations have become so prevalent that people use its structure in the way that they handle day-to-day activities. As you begin to understand the history of organizations, you will understand the history and evolution of human civilization.

The Cultural Wellness Center emerged as the community's alternative institution, dedicated to the study, the examination along with the implementation of cultural alternatives to Human conditions in society. It is fast becoming the centralized structure in its communities. The organization's strength in the community is due in part to the organizational structure of the Center. The Center has created an all-inclusive role for the community, allowing their thoughts and ideas to be implemented into the way care is given. Professionals who provide care are considered to be members of a team by people who need their care. Needing care is not a signal for "not knowing" or having a total lack of capacity.

For a very long time, mainstream organizations have maintained the greater centralization and control of the economy. After the Industrial Revolution, large businesses, through organizational structuring, began controlling the world's economy. The government through centralization began using social welfare programs as regulatory bodies to delegate its control and authority. Because the knowledge/

# Culture as a Resource for Organizational Development

By Atum Azzahir

Cultural Wellness Center, Minneapolis, MN

ways of other cultural groups who live in community today were not considered in the development of the institution these cultural groups became a part of the problem which had to be controlled.

## Organizational Structure and Culturally-Based Work

Organizational Structure refers to the way that an organization arranges people and jobs so that its work can be performed and its goals can be met. Organizational structure determines how the roles, power and responsibilities are assigned, controlled, and coordinated, and how information flows between the different levels of management. Culturally-based organizations respect languages, roles, traditions, values and rituals which are incorporated into the daily practices. These practices include eating together, socializing, and personal sharing in the day-to-day workflow.

Vertical Organizational Structure is a hierarchically structured organization where all management activities are controlled by a centralized management staff. This traditional type of organization often develops strong bureaucratic control over all organizational activities. In culturally-based organizations, supervision and management are more based on trusted advisor roles, kinship and familiar relationships. Conflicts of interest are not as pronounced in the minds of participants. In recent times, the CWC has collected many stories from cultural elders about these practices being the basis for corruption.

The Best Organizational Structure depends on the community from which the organization emerged. The community's values, visions, and group norms are mimicked in the organizational structure. This is particularly true in culturally-based organizations. Organizations will often change in response to external stimuli which often depends on the structure it uses to manage operations. External stimuli for culturally-based organizations include; funding, mainstream policies and regulatory guidelines which impacts the organizations capacity to stay true to the cultural community's norms and way of meeting the needs of the people.

Types of Organizational Structure - Organizations are set up in specific ways to accomplish different goals, and the structure of an organization can help or hinder its progress toward accomplishing these goals.

# Culture as a Resource for Organizational Development

By Atum Azzahir

Cultural Wellness Center, Minneapolis, MN

There are three main types of organizational structure:

- 1) Functional structure is set up so that each portion of the organization is grouped according to its purpose.
- 2) Divisional structure is used in larger companies that operate in a wide geographic area or that have separate smaller organizations within the umbrella group to cover different types of products or market areas.
- 3) Matrix is the third main type of organizational structure. It is typically used in large multinational companies, the matrix structure allows for the benefits of functional and divisional structures to exist in one organization.

| Mainstream   | Culturally-Based  |
|--|---|
| <p><b>Functional Structure</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set up so that each portion of the organization is grouped according to its purpose.</li> </ul>  | <p><b>Functional Structure</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has overlapping and integrated portions. Functions are grouped by gene rational age stages.</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>Governance and Authority</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is hierarchical based on position</li> </ul>   | <p><b>Governance and Authority</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elders or the oldest person has great influence in determining bottom line settings and directions in placing limits.</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>Program and Product Development</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is driven by the market and consumer demands</li> </ul>   | <p><b>Program and Product Development</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is fluid, flexible, specific to spiritual and invisible forces what is seen is symbolic of deeper needs</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>Divisional Structure</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Used in larger companies that operate in a wide geographic area or that has separate smaller organizations within the umbrella group to cover different types of products or market areas. Customs, rituals, and traditions are based on one group’s cultural traditions. Exchange systems do not exist. Laws and regulatory guidelines do follow the dominant group in the society. Teaching and educational activities all are highly specialized and learned in academic environments.</li> </ul> | <p><b>Divisional Structure</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group structures which acknowledge language, vocabulary of local people. Customs, rituals, and traditions are respected as a part of the business norm. Exchange systems are created and defined in order to assure each group respects each other laws and regulatory guidelines. Leadership is grown cultivated for effective negotiating to take place across groups. Teaching and educational activities are established but offered in the homes, families, and are lead by experienced members of the group.</li> </ul> |

# Culture as a Resource for Organizational Development

By Atum Azzahir

Cultural Wellness Center, Minneapolis, MN

## Culturally-Based Practices in Action

I recommend that people examine the internal workings of their organization. It should be a regular task to review your job descriptions, performance review practices and the communication patterns in the organization. It is important to have these practices written, readily available for employees and staff as well as to have them reviewed frequently at staff meetings or one-on-one dialogue sessions.

The review is done through the lens of culture that we are now bringing forward. For example, women advocates and program managers might sit together to dialogue about their job descriptions. During this dialogue, they can discuss areas found where the job is technical or where the job is nurturing to the spirit of the person holding the job. Remember, as you study this description, that culture is a vital resource to the spirit.

If there is a total absence of reciprocity/return from the job being done will cause burn out, bitterness, exhaustion and stress. When there is a lack of spiritual vitality, while the job itself is being done and the person in the job has to seek acknowledgement from external sources, the job itself has become a technical job, in an organization where people are working to create a space for various customs, rituals, along with ways of knowing, definitions and conceptual frames. To co-exist, we have to become intentional about making the work a learning process as well as a self study, self development instead of an overseer. The exercise of sitting with job descriptions is the same exercise needed for communications practices.

There is a reporting system within the organization: who reports to whom and what is the process for speaking to one another and what values are placed on direct communications. To create a ritual or a standard of connecting and listening to one another, which I believe is required for renewing the spirit; I recommend this for culturally-based supervision to happen. It is not "I" supervise you, but "you and me" working together to bring out the best in one another. As a supervisor and employee, our roles and skill set should complement one another. This helps to build a culture that mirrors the people-hood, which exists inside of the people, who work in the community and in the organizations. These are small ways an organization can begin the process of creating the space for an alternative, culturally based organization.

**Values: Self study, self correction, learning, teaching and supporting.**

*This project was supported by Grant No. 2009-TA-AX-K007 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.*