Chapter 9
Organizational Culture and Its Consequences*

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Abstract Typically comprised of a medical school, teaching hospital, and one or more physician practice groups, the complex organizational structure of academic health centers can be difficult to understand, especially to persons who are unfamiliar with academic medicine. Adding to the complexity, each academic health center has a unique organizational culture. Most broadly defined, “culture” is a shared pattern of basic assumptions shared by a social group about itself. Organizational culture describes these patterns of basic assumptions and related behavior within a defined social environment. Organizational culture has a major effect on faculty health. Some academic health centers may be described as having a “conflict laden” culture, where competition and the associated struggle to remain “on top” are a way of life.

Some academic health center faculty members refer to an environment where compensation is based on a model where “You eat what you kill.” On the other hand, some organizational cultures are more nurturing and, as such, more conducive to maintaining the health of the faculty. “Family-friendly” cultures may offer generous leave to families following the birth or adoption of a child. Likewise, a high priority may be placed on mentoring of junior faculty. In recent times, preventive health and wellness programs have become a part of the organizational culture of some academic health centers. Nonetheless, others persist in the expectation of long work hours, subordination of personal needs like sleep and meals, and self-denial in general. Other changes in organizational culture could enhance the health and well-being of faculty at academic health centers.

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Introduction

Edgar Schein argues that leaders create culture and that an understanding of culture is necessary if leaders really intend to lead [1]. As such, leadership and organizational culture are inextricably linked. So, too, is the effect of leadership and organizational culture on the health of faculty members in the academic health center. This chapter offers information on the relationship between organizational culture, leadership, and the consequences of organizational culture related to the health of faculty members in the academic health center.

Organizational Culture

Typically comprised of a medical school, teaching hospital, and one or more physician practice groups, academic health centers are complex. Some academic health centers include other professional schools including public health, dentistry, nursing, and allied health. Understanding the organizational structure is daunting, especially to persons unfamiliar with academic medicine. Adding to the complexity, each academic health center has a unique organizational culture.

Most broadly defined, “culture” is a shared pattern of basic assumptions shared by a social group about itself. In an oft cited, succinct, and easily understood definition of culture, Bower defines it as “the way we do things around here” [2]. In defining the culture of the workplace, Peterson and Wilson explain that basic assumptions “form an unspoken or unwritten basis upon which people behave, communicate, and interact in the workplace” [3]. Organizational culture describes these patterns of basic assumptions and related behavior within a defined social environment [3].

Organizational Culture in Academic Health Centers

Although there are many similarities between academic health centers, especially in terms of organizational structure, it is probably most accurate to say “If you’ve seen one academic health center, you’ve seen one academic health center” as there are often are vast differences when comparing the organizational culture of one academic health center with another. As in any large social system, the enduring nature of organizational culture is not conducive