

TO READ

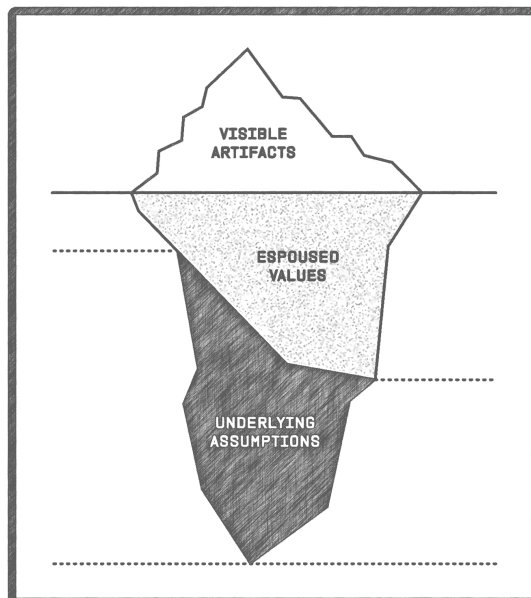
Schein, E. H. *Organizational culture and leadership* (4th ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.

Edgar Schein's three-levels of culture model provides a framework for understanding how culture operates at different depths within society. Originally developed for organizational analysis (corporate culture), these levels are helpful in other ways. They reveal how cultural elements interact from the most visible “artifacts” on the surface, and all the way down to unconscious assumptions that drive or shape behavior.

Level 1: Artifacts and Observable Behaviors

At the surface level, we see the tangible manifestations of culture - the architecture of our cities, fashion trends, popular media, social rituals, and public ceremonies. These artifacts are immediately visible to any observer. In American society, for example, we might point to suburban sprawl, fast-food chains, sports stadiums, or the ritual of high school graduation. These elements are easy to see but difficult to interpret without understanding the deeper levels beneath them.

Note: The challenge with artifacts is that they can often be misleading. A society's monuments or public art might reflect historical values rather than current ones, or they might represent the values of dominant groups rather than the broader population, or, in some cases serve as propaganda or intimidation. Confederate statues or street names in the United States, for example, illustrate this complexity. For some, it is part of their family history and cultural heritage. For others, they elicit negative reactions. Same artifacts, vastly different meanings.



Level 2: Espoused Values and Beliefs

The middle level encompasses the stated ideals, philosophies, and goals that societies explicitly embrace. These are the values found in constitutions, mission statements, political speeches, and educational curricula. In democratic societies, these often include concepts like equality, freedom, justice, and individual rights. Religious societies might emphasize community, duty, or spiritual growth.

However, there's often a gap between what societies claim to value and how they actually operate. Many Western societies champion equality and justice for all. Yet, systemic inequalities persist across racial, economic, and social lines in different ways, in

different countries. The same holds true for other institutions (religion, major sports organizations like the IOC or FIFA, universities, etc.) This disconnect between espoused values and actual practice reveals the influence of the deepest cultural level.

Level 3: Basic Underlying Assumptions

At the deepest level lie the unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs that truly drive behavior. These assumptions are so fundamental that they're rarely questioned or even recognized. They shape how people perceive reality, define problems, and determine what solutions seem reasonable. ***They are also very hard to “see”!***

In Western societies, some underlying assumptions might include the belief that individuals are autonomous agents responsible for their own success (in the U.S., we call that the “independent” or “self-made” spirit). Other examples: progress is inherently good; nature exists to be controlled and be used; competition drives improvement, etc. As a contrast ... other cultures value community harmony over individual achievement; tradition provides better guidance than innovation; humans should live in balance with nature and not abuse it, etc.

These assumptions are particularly powerful because they operate below conscious awareness. They create what seems like "common sense" to cultural insiders while appearing strange or illogical to outsiders. They also tend to be self-reinforcing - societies create institutions and practices that support their underlying assumptions, which then validate those assumptions.

Dynamic Interactions Between Levels

These three levels don't operate independently. Underlying assumptions influence which values societies choose to espouse. Levels 2 & 3 shape the artifacts (Level 1) that get created and preserved. Conversely, changes at the surface level can often challenge deeper assumptions, particularly when new generations grow up with different artifacts and experiences.

Consider how digital technology has introduced new artifacts (smartphones, social media, virtual reality) that are beginning to challenge underlying assumptions about privacy, community, attention, and even the nature of reality itself. These surface-level changes may eventually drive shifts in cultural values and basic assumptions.

This framework helps explain why cultural change is often slow and difficult. Surface-level changes in laws, policies, or institutions may have limited impact if they conflict with deeper cultural assumptions. Lasting transformation typically requires shifts at all three levels, with the deepest level being the most resistant to change.

FINAL NOTE: Understanding Schein's model reveals why cross-cultural interactions can be so challenging. Groups may share similar artifacts or even espouse similar values while operating from fundamentally different underlying assumptions, leading to misunderstandings and conflicts that seem puzzling on the surface.