What are you really measuring with a culture survey?

Hopefully you're measuring the culture of the organization! But it shouldn't be taken for granted that survey tools measure what they are intended to measure. Indeed, many organizations learn the hard way that the quality of instruments available in the marketplace varies a lot. In short, sacrificing quality or lowering the bar on the instruments that are used can compromise the quality of the survey data collected. And with culture diagnosis and change, the stakes are high! There is no better way to derail an otherwise well-intentioned change initiative than to begin from an inaccurate picture of the current state of the culture.

Just what is at stake? Sure, it's about the success of the culture program in the short term, but much more importantly, it's about the effectiveness of the actions that are taken down the line. And this can amount to the difference between hitting the bulls-eye versus missing the dart board entirely. Whether you're building a high-performance organization, merging the cultures of two organizations, or getting to work on a turnaround and transformation, the stakes are high.

So, what does it take to verify that a survey tool is hitting the mark? Dan Denison, Levi Nieminen, and Lindsey Kotrba describe what it takes in a recent article published in the European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology[1]. Beyond the substantial time and elbow grease needed to construct and validate a culture tool, these authors describe three specific tests needed to establish evidence of a tool's **reliability** (the extent to which the tool produces results that are consistent and reproducible over time) and **validity** (whether the tool truly measures what it was intended to measure). The authors also review the accumulation of evidence in support of the Denison Organizational Culture Survey (DOCS) over the last 15 years.

Test 1: Psychometrics
First, the tool must pass a series of psychometric tests. This includes demonstrating that the items function appropriately and that the data supports the "structuring" of the items into the specified dimensions. The DOCS has been submitted to extensive psychometric testing. This research supports the reliability of the tool to measure culture consistently, with high-reliability 5-item scales for each of the 12 culture indexes in the model. The research also supports the way that the indexes are organized into the four higher-order traits in the model: Involvement, Consistency, Adaptability, and Mission.

Test 2: Aggregation
Culture tools have the added challenge of measuring not only individual-level perceptions of culture accurately, but also the "aggregation" of those perceptions to get an accurate read on the culture of the organization as a whole. Research on the DOCS has shown strong agreement and reliability between these two levels, suggesting that individual ratings on the tool can indeed be aggregated to the organization-level. This is critical because the circumplex reports were designed to show organization-level data and lead to organization-level actions.

Test 3: Link to Performance
Not all tools are designed to shine a light on how culture promotes or inhibits the performance of an organization. But for those tools that are designed for this purpose, including the DOCS, this linkage needs to be supported by statistical relationships between what is measured in the survey and how the organization actually performs. Research on the DOCS has consistently reported positive and statistically significant relationships between the 12 culture indexes and a range of organizational effectiveness criteria, including financial performance, quality, innovation, and people metrics such as engagement and satisfaction. These linkages mean that the DOCS focuses on the right aspects of culture when moving the needle on performance is part of the game or IS the game.

Gathering new evidence, retesting, and calibrating tools is a never-ending process in a global and dynamic environment, and researchers at Denison will continue to invest the time and technical expertise to conduct and publish high-quality work in support of its measures. Most of all, we recognize that setting the bar high on the technical side gives the practical side its best opportunity for success. Ultimately, this means using the tools to guide well informed and thoughtful actions.

Not Reliable Not Valid   Reliable Not Valid   Both Reliable and Valid

• Tools that are reliable produce results that are consistent (or reproducible). Tools that are valid measure what they are supposed to measure. Tools that are reliable and valid do both.

• The DOCS has proven to be both a reliable and valid measure of organizational culture, passing tests related to its psychometric properties, ability to measure a group-level phenomenon, and demonstrated relationships with organizational performance.

References
1 Denison, D., Nieminen, L., & Kotrba, L. (2012). Diagnosing organizational cultures: A conceptual and empirical review of culture effectiveness surveys. European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology. doi: 10.1080/1359432X.2012.713173