



Robert A. Cooke

EDITORS' NOTE Robert Cooke is also Associate Professor Emeritus of Management at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He was previously an Associate Research Scientist at the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center and a Visiting Scholar at Stanford University. He received his Ph.D. in Organizational Behavior from the Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, where he was a National Defense (Title IV) and Commonwealth Edison Fellow. Dr. Cooke specializes in the development and validation of surveys used for individual, group, and organization development. His surveys—including the Organizational Culture Inventory, Leadership/Impact, and Group Styles Inventory—have been translated into numerous languages, and used by consultants and major organizations throughout the world. As the author of many research articles and reports, Cooke's work has been selected for the William J. Davis Award for outstanding research and the Douglas McGregor Award for excellence in the behavioral sciences. His teaching has been recognized with Alumni and MBA Professor of the Year Awards at the University of Illinois.

COMPANY BRIEF Human Synergistics International (www.humansynergistics.com; HSI) is the pioneer in quantifying organization development concepts including culture, leadership strategies and impact, group processes and synergy, and individual thinking and behavioral styles. The company focuses on providing the highest-quality assessments and simulations, as well as consulting services, through its Global Change Circle practitioners. Featuring a highly visual, integrated diagnostic system linked to performance, HSI works with the majority of the Fortune 500 companies and Ivy League universities.

How did the mission for the company come about and how has it evolved?

Founded in 1971, we specialized in management surveys and consulting to “strengthen organizations through individual development.” However, even back then, we also emphasized team building with our *Desert Survival Situation* and similar group process exercises. Over time, we got heavily into

Changing Culture

An Interview with Robert A. Cooke, Ph.D., Chief Executive Officer and Director, Human Synergistics International

measuring organizational culture and related factors that lead to adaptability and sustainability. Given this broader emphasis, our mission evolved into “Changing the World – One Organization at a Time.”

We are serious about helping each organization we work with to change and improve. If we make a sufficient number of organizations and their members more constructive and effective, it will literally spill over and improve the cultures and economies of the societies within which they operate.

Do “organizations” include everything from large global players to growth companies or are you focused on a certain segment?

We take the word “organization” literally, to broadly include groups of people with specific goals, within any industry and of any size. Beyond large organizations, we work with smaller companies, not-for-profit organizations, and public sector agencies.

You can measure, provide feedback on, and constructively change the culture of any organization. We make our products general so that they apply as much to a nuclear power plant as a daycare center. The constructive norms we measure promote engagement and performance across industries.

With high turnover in the C-Suite, is it tough to maintain a constructive culture and do your relationships need to continue on a long-term basis?

Turnover can truly derail any organizational change initiative, even an effective one, whether focused on culture, strategy or technology.

Nevertheless, we have had a number of transitions at the C-Suite level where the executives promoted to replace the retiring directors had been involved heavily in the cultural change programs, and the concomitant leadership development initiatives.

In many of those cases, they continued with the change initiative and the transition was almost seamless.

Did you know early on that this was an area you would focus on?

I got heavily into culture as a result of research I was carrying out years ago on the *Life Styles Inventory*, developed by my senior colleague, J. Clayton Lafferty. The inventory is designed to help leaders better understand their personal styles and to make changes to increase their effectiveness.

I learned while working on this research that it was difficult for leaders in many organizations to act on their survey results and adopt a more constructive style, even if they thought it was appropriate.

Around 1980, I started writing what I thought was a rewards system survey to see if some organizations were inadvertently reinforcing passive or aggressive rather than constructive approaches to leadership. As the survey evolved, I thought back to my classes in social psychology and the sociology of business, and realized that what I was trying to measure was culture, but at the organizational rather than societal level.

By 1983, we had a prototype of a new, somewhat unusual, survey called the *Organizational Culture Inventory*[™]. When I began showing the survey to clients, they would ask if we meant “climate” rather than “culture” and whether organizations really had cultures.

Fortunately, within just a few years, the survey went mainstream and it has been going strong ever since.

Are there others that you consider competitors? Though you've created innovative surveys in areas you're known for, do you need to further differentiate within your space?

Over time, the number of competitors has increased. The bright side of this is that today, culture is much more a part of the language of business and it's easier to talk about.

We continue to differentiate ourselves through our heavy research base and the validity of our surveys. We're also differentiated by the multilevel nature of our measurement and change system. Beyond providing clients with analytics on the extent to which their cultures are constructive, passive or aggressive, we offer complementary surveys that focus on the individual and group levels. Thus, we reinforce cultural change by providing parallel developmental feedback on the behavior of individual members, the impact of leaders, and the styles of groups and teams.

As you grow, how do you maintain personal relations with clients and increase the visibility of your tools?

We have two advantages. First, we have excellent accredited consultants who represent us beautifully and do wonderful work with our products. They've published important books including *Leadership Transformed* (by Peter Fuda) and *Winning with Transglobal Leadership* (by Linda Sharkey and associates).

Second, we have wonderful people within Human Synergistics who are very talented. They care about what we do, and have excellent relationships with our clients. I am optimistic that we will continue to maintain close relations with existing clients and gain new ones throughout the world. ●