Information Note

Reshaping UNOPS Organizational Culture

Executive summary

Pursuant to the Executive Board decision 2023/23, UNOPS was requested to share a strategy for the implementation of organizational culture reform fully aligned with United Nations norms and values.

Over the last two years, UNOPS has experienced significant change, particularly marked by the phase out of the former Sustainable Investments in Infrastructure and Innovation (S3i) initiative.

Under the guidance of the Executive Board, a range of strategic and administrative reforms have been initiated, including a reset of the organizational strategy and review of the organizational culture.

The crisis unexpectedly provided a much needed opportunity for the organization to address issues which had been lingering and ignored around the management of people, accountability and leadership approaches, and ways of working.

These are critical components of what has become a new phase in UNOPS history, highlighted by a sustained cultural transformation. This has provided an anchor for UNOPS as it prepares itself to become a stronger, more agile and responsive operational UN agency, supporting sister UN agencies, national governments and other multilateral actors in the acceleration of progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
I. Introduction

The reated UNOPS strategic plan 2022-2025, endorsed in June 2023, places a strong emphasis on expanding capacity for the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Built on a fast-tracked midterm review, the plan reaffirms its alignment with the Goals, underscores capacity expansion for Our Common Agenda, and aspires for improvements in management structures, digital systems, cost-recovery, and the cultivation of a UN-values-based organizational culture.

II. Culture assessment

In 2023, the Internal Audit and Investigation Group (IAIG) commissioned a third party to provide observations on key elements in the existing organizational culture and identify the most critical areas for development.

The UNOPS Management team welcomes the report, values the reflections and the views and concerns of personnel, and considers that the recommendation areas are aligned with priority actions already being implemented as part of the Comprehensive Response Plan.

The third party report emphasizes that the UNOPS commitment to delivering in challenging environments strongly influences its organizational culture. In addition, the report found that the majority of UNOPS personnel are highly motivated to make an impact and contribute to the SDGs as part of the UN family.

The report findings also highlighted the need to shift towards a more collaborative organizational culture, where effective decision-making is derived from the principle of subsidiarity.

The report presented the following five main areas along with corresponding recommendations for management consideration, decision making and integration:

- **Tone from the top**: Communicate a clear vision and strategic direction for the organization and its culture, aligned towards UN values, impact creation, quality, and service to others;
- **Accountability**: Enhance accountability at all levels of the organization, supporting a culture where misconduct can be dealt with effectively;
- **Transparency and communication**: Ensure a transparent flow of information across the organization, aligned to our refined strategic direction;
- **Invest in people**: Strengthen the people related systems that support an effective organizational culture;
- **The long journey towards a future proof culture**: Increase collaboration across the organization towards a defined common direction and resilient new culture.

To implement these recommendations UNOPS is defining a prioritized and concrete action plan. The detailed actions will be developed through the management team and through a consultative process across the organization.
III. Re-shaping UNOPS culture

Organizational culture is a complex and multifaceted concept, which can be defined in various ways. At UNOPS, we see it as a blend of shared beliefs, values and behaviors that uniquely characterize our organization. Culture manifests itself through the unwritten rules and norms that guide how we interact, behave and make decisions through mechanisms and processes.

Figure 1: Culture understanding: the 3 levels of organizational culture (Deloitte 2023)

UNOPS leadership is committed to shaping an organizational culture that reinforces our identity as the UN organization dedicated to expanding our partners’ capacity for implementation. Consequently, our policies, processes and operating model, as well as our leadership and personal behaviors must adapt to the diverse contexts in which we operate, fostering a diverse and inclusive environment where we can deliver with effectiveness and efficiency.

IV. Progress to-date

UNOPS has taken significant steps and actions since May 2022 in driving strategic transformation and shifting the organizational culture. The following illustrates some of the concrete actions implemented:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Governance and decision making</th>
<th>Communication and focus on personnel</th>
<th>Supporting systems</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Clarified strategic direction through re-stated Strategic Plan</td>
<td>• Changed tone from the top to instill UN values</td>
<td>• New strategy on Prevention and Protection against Sexual Exploitation and abuse and Harassment (PSEAH)</td>
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<td>• Renewed and more inclusive Management Team, bringing back HR representation</td>
<td>• Enhanced regular, direct and open communication between ED and all personnel</td>
<td>• Joined Inter-Agency Misconduct Disclosure Scheme</td>
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<td>• New organisational structure with segregated reporting lines</td>
<td>• Regular pulse surveys in 2023 including the UN survey on mental health and well being</td>
<td>• Updated and launched UNOPS whistleblower protection policy</td>
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<td>• Strengthened independence and capacity of Internal Audit and Investigations Group and Ethics Office</td>
<td>• Created personnel forums (Employee Resource Groups, ICA Dialogue) to foster open communication and active engagement</td>
<td>• Established a dedicated role for victims support to support victims of misconduct</td>
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<td>• Increased focus on SDG contributions</td>
<td>• UNSSC partnership anchors UNOPS leadership and learning in UN values and reform priorities</td>
<td>• New comprehensive performance management rebuttal channel for ICA</td>
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<td>• Increased collaboration through Mission Hubs</td>
<td>• New channels for personnel to request a formal review of management decisions</td>
<td>• Consistent use of UN staff contract modalities in line with organisational needs and functions in response to UNBOA recommendation</td>
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<td>• Reviewed risk management approaches</td>
<td>• Strengthened UNOPS ICA contract modality to support DEI agenda, including increased mobility, and more equitable pay</td>
<td>• Strengthened relations with staff representative bodies</td>
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<td>• Active participation in CEB HRN on strategic People and Culture issues (e.g. ICSC code of conduct, HR policy, strategic workforce planning, performance management, PSEAH, HR policy Field group)</td>
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<td>• Active member of the UN mental health strategy implementation board</td>
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1 A separate briefing will be provided to the Executive Board on the Contract Modality Review, which has facilitated the phased conversion of Mission Critical Roles and positions that entail ‘inherently UN activities’ to FTA in response to UNBOA oversight recommendations.
To rise to the challenge and reshape the organizational culture, the UNOPS People and Culture Group has established a new team which will be led by a new Head of Organization Culture and Engagement (under recruitment). This team will spearhead efforts related to diversity, equity and inclusion, organizational culture and employee engagement. Tangible efforts are already underway to further connect our new global leadership with operations on the ground in the regions. Visits by the senior leadership throughout 2023 to hardship and other locations and engaging directly with these teams is part of building one culture and bridging tensions that can and do arise in global organizations. UNOPS is also revisiting its HR operating model and value chain.

V. Approach and priorities

UNOPS senior leadership now has clarity based on the diagnosis and the priority areas of focus and actions identified below. The exact mechanisms and actions will emerge and be sequenced through advice, benchmarking, consultation and best practices as we move forward. The details of the actions will be developed through the management team and across the organization.

UNOPS is using an iterative three-step model to culture transformation, as shown in Figure 2, to bring about a sustained change to which UNOPS management is committed. This model embraces flexibility as a cornerstone, ensuring that our cultural shift remains responsive to the ever-changing landscape.

![Figure 2: UNOPS organizational culture model](image-url)
UNOPS has identified the following priorities that we will pursue in 2024 as part of the culture change journey:

- **Tone from the Top**
  - Strengthen implementation of the restated strategic plan 2022-2025, embracing UN values and emphasizing impact creation, quality, and service to partners and beneficiaries.
  - Cascade communications to ensure alignment of messaging across all leadership and management levels of the organization, inspiring and instilling new behaviors.
  - Remove silos and incentivize collaboration across the entire organization to align efforts with organizational goals and promote synergies.

- **Accountability**
  - Develop and deploy a new code of conduct for all personnel.
  - Overhaul and revamp the whistleblowing process.
  - Strengthen the platforms for expressing dissents and timely resolution of issues.
  - Design leadership competencies that role-model the desired behaviors.
  - Strengthen the application of the accountability framework across the organization.
  - Strengthen performance management and the behaviors expected at leadership levels.
  - Enforce consistent measures for non-compliance with policies and ethical standards, across all levels of the organization.

- **Transparency and Communication**
  - Develop a new UNOPS communication strategy to ensure effective and transparent communication across the organization.
  - Further strengthen engagement and dialogue through personnel associations across UNOPS locations to ensure representation.
  - Identify and empower culture change champions to drive the expected behaviors.

- **Investment in People**
  - Review and adapt HR policies and processes to reinforce expected behaviors.
  - Strengthen the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (PSEAH), Victim Support, Internal Grievances and Employee Engagement functions.
  - Review and reposition the organization’s performance management cycle and process.
  - Promote an equal and safe environment for all personnel through dedicated efforts to enhance diversity and inclusion.
  - Conduct an assessment of leadership competencies and skills needed in management positions; train and recruit to bridge identified gaps in leadership skills.
  - Improve the attraction and retention of personnel, including related HR processes.
  - Design and launch a mobility policy.
  - Invest in dedicated capacities to actively engage all personnel in the change process.

- **Future Proof Culture**
  - Identify the desired behaviors that embrace the values of our organization and support the effective implementation of our strategic plan.
  - Ensure desired behaviors are role-modeled, starting from the top and cascading the organization.
○ Build incentives into performance management that role-model the expected behaviors.
○ Create an enabling environment that allows feedback loops where different views are valued and decisions are challenged constructively and without fear.
○ Regularly assess the state of the organizational culture, e.g. Pulse surveys.

The actions will be measured, monitored and improved over time based on feedback and learnings. The action plan will be dynamic and momentum will be sustained to reshape the organizational culture at UNOPS.

The Executive Director has ensured that resources are allocated to support the cultural transformation. UNOPS expects that the key positions will be filled early 2024 and commits to completing at least one priority under each of the five areas identified by the third party review in the first six months of 2024.

Progress to implement the above 2024 priorities will be reported to the Executive Board through the annual reporting of the restated Strategic Plan 2022-2025.

VI. Conclusion

Culture transformation requires continuous and sustained efforts - it is a journey. Notwithstanding this, UNOPS is seized by the urgency to make the transformation meaningful and concrete. Significant progress is well underway and the above-mentioned priorities will focus the organization’s efforts to reach the desired culture. This will enable UNOPS to be a stronger, more agile and responsive operational UN agency, supporting sister UN agencies, national governments and other multilateral actors in the acceleration of progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).