



# A case study in creating and revisiting organizational culture: The story of Alwan w Awtar's culture

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The objectives of this case study are to document the main contributing factors to the practice, the key challenges that faced the organization, and the key lessons learned that could enlighten the organization itself and other organizations working in a similar field.

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«**Organizational culture**» has always been a matter of focus for *Alwan wa Awtar's* (AWA) leadership since its inauguration in 2003.

The AWA journey of identifying values and their related practices went through several milestones, starting with identifying organizational values for the first time in 2005. Then, from 2008 until 2010, there were more substantial efforts to identify clear practices for each value. Then, in 2017, there was a revisit of the organizational values, including the code of conduct in dealing with children, the process of decision-making, and the practices related to the accountability value. And finally, in 2019-2020, publishing the «**AWA organizational culture booklet: all branches dance, all roots are steady**».

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Azza Kamel, the founder of AWA, was a true believer in participation. Hence, the participation value was reflected in how AWA leadership involved team members and community members, said Yasmine El Rifai, a member of the AWA leadership circle.

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### What are the main characteristics of the AWA organizational culture?

AWA organizational culture main characteristics are beautifully captured in their published booklet in 2020 titled «organizational culture booklet<sup>1</sup>: all branches dance, all roots are steady. The metaphor reflects values as seeds, organizational culture as roots, practices as a trunk, work environment as branches, impact as fruits, spaces, and teams as trees (illustrated in diagram 1).

Six central organizational values shape the AWA organizational culture, as diagram (2) shows: respect, participation, consistency, responsibility, continuous learning, and appreciation for diversity. AWA crafted its understanding of each of these values, which is clearly articulated in their organizational culture booklet.

**Respect** is a crucial element of the AWA organizational culture. AWA understands respect as the ability of the work environment to reflect appreciation and kindness toward all people. The respect value has seven practices, i.e., team members act kindly with each other as they are dealing with the beneficiaries. Another complementary practice is that team members communicate clearly in a way that shows appreciation and presence.

**Participation** was always a key element that characterized AWA culture. AWA understands participation as actively contributing to shaping the shared reality among each other. The participation value has eight practices, i.e., ensure that all concerned with any decision are involved, whether colleagues, subordinates, or beneficiaries. Another practice is differentiating among tasks that need cooperation, coordination, and communication.



Diagram (1): AWA organizational culture metaphor. Source: AWA organizational culture booklet

(1) <https://alwan-awtar.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/AA-structural-guide-final.pdf>

**Consistency** value plays the role of an «organizational reminder» to try your best to «walk the talk.» AWA understands the consistency value as «AWA constant pursuit towards the fit among reality, values and actions.» The consistency value has four primary practices, i.e., expressing what we are thinking of honestly while allowing others to express themselves.

**Responsibility** starts from a shared understanding that our actions and choices affect others and achieving our common goals. The responsibility value has seven practices; i.e., when tasks conflict, we give feedback, suggest solutions or alternatives.

**Continuous learning** is another value that AWA is almost living daily through experimentation, reflection, questioning their current practice in a continuous attempt to respond to community evolving needs. AWA understands the value of continuous learning as finding ways to deal with the reality that keeps changing creatively and in an impactful way. This value has nine practices, for example,

understanding that mistakes are part of the learning journey, sharing knowledge with generosity and openness, and searching for learning opportunities through and outside daily work, in and outside the organization.

**Appreciating diversity** is understood in AWA as relying on our different capabilities, complementary visions, and genuine understanding. This value has five practices; i.e., we allow learning and promotion opportunities based on professional competencies and not on a cultural, social or religious basis.



Diagram (2): AWA organizational values, Source: AWA organizational culture booklet

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AWA has a unique working environment, I used to work more days than the days written in the contract because the atmosphere and team were very nice, said one of AWA team members.

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Almost all AWA employees are very supportive, and that is something scarce. They don't deal with it as work. I can send a request at midnight, and they reply. They are flexible, and they believe in what they are doing; they build a perfect trust with children and their parents, said one of AWA's partner organization.

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## How did AWA develop their organizational culture?

AWA applied a participatory approach across the years to **develop, deploy, and document** its organizational culture. These phases are repeated based on a periodical review of values and their related practices. The process can be summarized in the coming steps;

**The development phase**, in this phase the team translated their organizational values into concrete practices with children, team members, and external partners. These efforts were followed by developing AWA educational code of conduct (dostorna<sup>2</sup>- our constitution) with the participation of both children and team members.

**The deployment phase**, this phase started in the weekly staff meetings, where organizational values were discussed and team members were trained on. Additionally, the weekly meetings were a platform to discuss «hot topics» related to decision making, accountability among the team, and power dynamics. AWA positioned these discussions as an opportunity to reflect on the organizational culture and to question their identity and values with a precise aim; sharpen their shared understanding and avoid any future tension. The last step in the deployment phase was to allow time for these discussions to be tested on the ground and then formulate them into a clear process.

**The documentation phase**, this phase comes after the testing of the new processes, practices, understating, and realization. The documentation took different formats; manuals, guides, toolkits, forms, and policies, depending on the focus value.

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When working on our HR culture, we discussed a lot «working time»: working hours, being late, punctuality, flexibility and personal freedom versus team needs etc... The outcome is a policy that reflects the collective culture. We did so for several policies: HR, Safety in the workplace that includes anti-bullying and harassment etc..., child protection, Assets management, said Yasmine El Rifai.

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There is no easy path to change, but taking the time to onboard people and acquire buy-in on the purpose of any intervention is a worthwhile investment as it saves time and effort later, said Lamiaa Serag El Din, member of AWA leadership circle.

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(2) [https://alwan-awtar.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Dostourna-version-2-jan-2018\\_1.pdf](https://alwan-awtar.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Dostourna-version-2-jan-2018_1.pdf)

## What are the main significant events that shaped AWA organizational culture and how did it evolve over the years?

AWA had three significant events/ milestones that shaped its organizational culture; the first milestone was **the early days of AWA**: the culture was mainly shaped by the founder and the initial team. The second main event was **the lockdown of AWA** main activities center in Mokattam in 2014. This was the first significant event that AWA witnessed. The lockdown resulted in the need to downsize the size of the organizations from 30 to 8 members.

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I believe the way this crisis was handled is a key moment in the maturity of the organizational culture. The management of this crisis was done with complete transparency. Dialogue and participation were how Azza, the founder of AWA, chose to address the crisis with the team. It led to total ownership and shared responsibility, which were built over the years, of course; it couldn't be born in one day. This pivotal moment cemented the organization's identity as one that belongs to its team and is nourished by the dedication and selflessness of its members... and one that deals with crises collectively, said Yasmine El Rifai.

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The third milestone was the **organization's rapid expansion**: in 2016-2017, several funds were received, which resulted in growing the team rapidly compared to 2015 when the team was only eight part-timers.

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This exponential growth of the team, working in three different locations: Mokattam, Ezbet El Nasr, and later Kafr Hamza, with many new team members compared to the older ones. With very little dispersed documentation of prior accumulated knowledge and processes, new team members join with their own culture and ways, and the energy of innovation and experimentation... The older team was afraid to lose their much-cherished organization culture and identity, said Yasmine El Rifai.

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Throughout the years, the AWA team has accumulated experiences and stories that made them learn what defines their organizational culture, how to sharpen and deepen the culture, and what needs to be changed or replaced. According to Yasmine El Rifai, there were certain aspects of their understanding that evolved across years;

### The move from a “family/friend” to more institutionalization of organizational culture

*“In the early days of AWA,» relations were heavily based on friendships. Due to expansion in terms of the number of team members and the locations, AWA felt the urge to institutionalize their work processes, way of communication and most importantly, how decisions are made.”*





### The move from «participation in all and everything» to «participation where relevant»

«... So not everyone has a say in everything, but everyone can have a say in whatever concerns him/her. So, there is a team where you belong and where you help shape the work... but then there is the possibility to communicate with other teams, but you are not entitled to shape how others work.»

### Autonomy of circles

Autonomy of circles is very much related to the new understanding of the participation value, as it orients the team member on the decisions that s/he can shape, participate in, and only be consulted.

*«We are organized in circles, and circles are autonomous for things that concern them. But for things that concern the whole organization, like our approach, or culture, or values, alignment is important, and the conversations happen at the organizational level.»*

### Accountability

*«Azza, AWA founder, is a profoundly loved and respected leader; she could effortlessly manage the team with kindness and minimal follow-up. However, with practice, we realized that not all AWA managers could do the same. Further, we realized that the organization didn't even have the processes and tools to ensure accountability. This realization led to the discussion of what accountability means to the AWA team, and then to the painful process of learning both to be accountable and to hold others accountable, give and receive feedback, ask others to hold up to their agreements, etc. We are still learning that.»*

### From «positions» to «role-based» jobs and from a «task list» to a «role objective»

*«... We applied what we learnt from the «reinventing organization book» advice, and started moving from closed positions to a list of roles that need to be fulfilled and can be divided based on interest/experience. For example: instead of having a specific team member with the title of space manager and is responsible for certain tasks. Now we have a list of responsibilities, and these responsibilities are organized into different roles. So, each team has the autonomy to divide the tasks among themselves per interest and per skills/experience. Hence, each of AWA spaces got the chance to organize themselves differently.»*

### What are the primary enablers of organizational culture?

In AWA practice, there were several enablers, starting with the leadership, having a team member that is responsible for the whole project, and most importantly, the shared belief within the organization of the importance of the organizational culture project.



A true belief in the importance of having a clear organizational culture is the real enabler for all our efforts, said Ines Khedira, member of the AWA leadership circle.



**Leadership** played a vital role in **sensing** the need for culture alignment, whether it was because of misalignment on the organizational level or a personal issue. Additionally, leadership took the first steps in **mapping** out what other organizations are doing. And putting things into perspective through: 1) identifying a clear process for discussing the organizational culture; 2) assigning roles for who will be leading the process and who will participate; 3) allowing the time for the discussion to happen and for the deployment of the values to be grounded; and finally, 4) ensuring that all practices are documented, shared, and evaluated.

**Focal point** who is the owner of the project and doesn't have to be in the human resources team. In AWA practice, it was the curriculum development consultant with the support of the leadership circle. The role of this focal point was mainly to make sure that practices were going down to the ground through coaching both team leaders and team members.

**Culture time:** Tuesday morning was the allocated time for collective staff meetings to discuss any related matter to organizational culture, especially points of disagreement or tension, which allowed the unfolding of each team member's understanding. This weekly practice enables the building of a shared understanding of each value and its practice.

**Resources:** The «reinventing organizations» book represented a primary reference for AWA to craft their own organizational culture and map out what other organizations did.

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The reinventing organization book showed us it is possible; it described plenty of tools; it lays out a road map for cultural evolution that fits our organizational values and worldview, said Yasmine El Rifai.

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### What are the main challenges or factors that made AWA consider revisiting their existing organizational culture and taking concrete steps to crystalize what they have?

AWA has a heritage spanning more than 18 years. AWA started their first concrete steps to identify the organizational culture in 2008-2010. This contributed to the first challenge they faced: the lack of **proper documentation** for the first ten years of the AWA journey. The only source of this inherited culture was the old team members who were genuinely living the culture.

What added to this challenge was the rapid **expansion** of the organization. The organization hired new team members who worked in new spaces. The newly hired team members didn't witness AWA culture; additionally, they will be working in new places, so they won't have the chance to interact with old members to see how culture is practiced.

This resulted in the growth of **subcultures** within the organizations. Subcultures entailed the evolution of certain values and related practices in specific spaces or teams without being agreed upon on an organizational level. The subcultures grew further due to team members' interactions with the **new communities** that AWA started to serve. So, each space started to create its **own separate identity** and accumulate a set of new practices that weren't necessarily part of the collective organizational identity.







This led to some **tension** between the current team of AWA, which has an implicit understanding of the «core identity» of AWA that isn't written and split out, and the new team members, who would like to bring new ideas and try them out and assess how things will evolve.

Accordingly, this resulted in a **misalignment among team members on organizational culture and identity.**



This challenging time made the work on the alignment and documentation of organizational culture a top priority, continued Yasmine El Rifai.



### What are the main lessons learned based on AWA practice?

According to Yasmine El Rifai; there are seven lessons learnt from the organizational culture creation and change;

#### One change at a time

*«Change is not an easy process, not only because it can create moments of confusion and chaos but also because it may involve emotional weight for some people. So, one lesson learnt was to introduce one change at a time and allow it to settle. This includes introducing new policies and procedures, so we now learnt to add a «pilot time»: employees are invited to note the efficiency and issues of the policy in practice, to be collected, reviewed and taken into account in the policy finalization.»*

#### Culture change requires time

*«It is beautiful to realize and accept that giving time to people and processes really can make change happen. Comparing month to month, we may not realize the team capacity or culture changes, but we are happily noticing significant differences when comparing year to year.»*

#### Less is more

*«It has been the Ezbet El Nasr team motto for a while, and its wisdom is slowly paving its way into the organization's culture. AWA tends to do too much, and in doing so, it weakens itself and its service. By doing less, we take the time to do things better and to enjoy them more.»*

#### Autonomy and self-management must come with responsibility and accountability

*«Trying to activate autonomy before having clear accountability mechanisms led to severe management and performance issues.»*

### What works for someone may not work for everyone

«Despite having «diversity» as one of AWA core values, it is wise to recognize that there is no place, system, or team that can fit everyone. Personality types, personal rhythms and work preferences can make a person thrive or drown in a team. Therefore, it is essential to recognize the signs early enough before burnout and accept that absolute inclusion is impossible as a fact of life.»

### Consistency

«Organization's leadership needs to be consistent with its practices for those to take root.»

**In conclusion**, the consultancy team concludes that AWA has crafted its unique way of developing, deploying, and revisiting the organizational culture. The whole creation process and the related decision-making mechanisms were truly guided by the AWA central organizational values: respect, participation, consistency, continuous learning, appreciation of diversity, and responsibility.

This case study was written by Amira H. Abdel-Aziz

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This case study is a byproduct of a larger consultancy mission to assess and document the «Youth in Action» project implemented by the AWA organization and funded by the Drosos Foundation. The consultancy team applied primary data sources, including interviews, focus groups, and workshops with AWA and Drosos team members, children, young people, mothers, service providers, clients, and partners. And secondary data sources that included the project's reports, relevant documents from AWA, and relevant literature.

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