

## LILA Theme for 2016-2017

### **Adaptive Cultures: *How institutions set conditions for success***

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When an organization is doing better than its rivals, we are often quick to attribute performance to its **organizational culture**. We say we admire companies for their culture, and we worry what might happen to a company's culture when there are mergers and acquisitions. When an organization is struggling or a shift in strategy is desired, we are often quick to say what is needed is a **culture change initiative**. But what do we mean by "culture"? What does an organization's culture really consist of? Where does culture come from? And how does it change? Can culture really be changed by an "initiative"?

This theme will explore these questions and more. This is a timely theme, because the nature of organizations and organizing is actively fluctuating. The rise of hybrid organizations, holocratic organizations, and emergent organizations, as well as diverse social movements, are challenging the ways we define, understand, and experience organizational life. The idea of **culture as a tool** to drive goal attainment may be worth a second look. Approaching culture from both a macro-systems perspective as well as a micro-local perspective—where each influences the other—may be a useful way of approaching the puzzle.

With this theme, we explore culture at a variety of levels of analysis, focusing on those factors that lead to the establishment of **adaptive cultures**—cultures that lead to human and organizational flourishing even in the face of change. We will look at questions such as How do organizations work to change an existing culture? What does "culture change" really mean? How does it manifest?

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#### **October: Understanding culture in organizations**

In this session, we will lay the groundwork for our exploration of this theme by studying culture at its most familiar level of analysis: the macro-level, including national cultures, sub-cultures, and organizational culture. We will explore how sociologists and anthropologists understand culture, and we'll dig into the literature on cultural change in organizations. We'll ask about the relationship between multiple cultures, implicit vs. explicit cultures, and the relationship between culture and structure. We'll also explore the cultural and emotional "tone" of organizations, the role of organizational identity, reputation, and character, and the role of story-telling and sense-making as a way that meaning spreads through organizations. Here we may draw insights from social networking, civility at work, and grass-roots movements to explore how the characteristics of an adaptive culture—such as engagement, motivation, and a sense of meaning—spark and trend across populations, and what can be done to change the narrative. This session will explore questions such as what is culture, what does culture mean in a global world? What is the relationship between culture and structure? How do cultures emerge via complex systems dynamics, alongside of (or regardless of) what leaders do?

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## February: Creating cultural contagions

In this session, we'll look at culture at a more "meso" level, focusing on cultures that arise more locally, such as within teams or groups. We'll explore the literature around social networks, and how ideas, behaviors, and emotions spread (via "contagion") through networks. To do this, we'll look at social network theory, social movements, and team dynamics, asking what is the role of culture in creating both positive and negative contagions across a network. How do you propagate or spread a desired culture from small enclaves into the entire organization (or beyond)? How do organizations amplify or downplay cultural elements depending on the current demands *while* creating a consistent sense of purpose and meaning? How do leaders work to support the most adaptive and efficient cultures? We'll also explore the role of conflict at work. How does conflict harm a culture, and how is it a source of tension that *creates* a culture? How can we transform conflict into a culture-booster instead of a culture-sapper?

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## April: Connecting cultures

What does culture look like at the individual level? How are macro, meso, and micro-level cultures connected? Here, we'll explore issues around individual fit or resonance with the dominant culture, and how individuals might resist cultural forces or seek individualized ways of finding fit with the culture. We'll look at the individual practices that build culture or change culture, asking in particular how best to engage individuals in cultural change initiatives. We'll also explore the role of meaning and purpose in an individual's fit with broader cultures. How might we design a culture of meaning, purpose, and engagement for the changing world of work? How can we use purpose to align different parts of the organization? How do we support employees in their search for purposeful work?