

Understanding Organisational Culture

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Defining Organisational Culture

There are no theories that can adequately explain the whole complexity behind the organisational culture. In support of this Deshpande & Webster (1989), stated that there is no consensus on the definition and measurement of organizational culture among researchers and practitioners. It is not surprising that the definitions of [organisational culture](#) are both numerous and varying.

The most widely used [definition of organisational culture](#) is that of Edgar Schein (2004), who adopted the functionalist view describing culture as “the pattern of shared basic assumptions - invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration - that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel about those problems”

Wheelen & Hunger (2010) published a definition of corporate culture, which is based on Schein's 1992 work, as “the collection of beliefs, expectations, and values learned and shared by a corporation's members and transmitted from one generation of employees to another”.

In line with Schein’s definition, Smircich (1983), stated in a particular situation the set of meanings that evolve gives a group its ethos, or distinctive character, which is expressed in patterns of belief (ideology), activity (norms and rituals), language and other symbolic forms through which organization members both create and sustain their view of the world and an image of themselves in the world.

According to Denison (1990), Organizational culture refers to the underlying values, beliefs and principles that serve as a foundation for an organization's management system, as well as the set of management practices and behaviours that both exemplify and reinforce those basic principles.

According to Hofstede (1991), “culture is the collective programming of the human mind which distinguishes the members of one organization from another”. The key term in the definition is the term “programming?”. Culture is not something that is easily acquired but is a slow process of growing into a society. It includes:

- learning values (dominant beliefs and attitudes),
- partaking in rituals (collective activities),
- modelling against heroes (role models), and
- understanding symbols (myths, legends, dress, and lingo)

Why is Organisational Culture Important?

A solid grasp of organizational culture is [important for all leaders](#) because it influences the way that their organizations react to the changing demands of the business environment. That is why many organizations are discovering that successful change requires careful attention to the “soft” side of organizations -- the values and beliefs that are the “*heart of the company*”, the policies and practices that put those values into action. This includes teaching the members of the organization on how they create value for their customers;

- To get a shared understanding, a shared language, and shared expectations concerning culture and its implications for both individual and group results.
- It ensures that the organisation is clear from the outset about its current culture, why it needs to change, and where it needs to go
- It helps to identify those internal cultural strengths which can be leveraged to support success in the changing and uncertain environment ahead

Some research findings show that certain kinds of cultures correlate with economic performance (Denison, 1990; Kotter and Heskett, 1992; Sorensen, 2002). Boyne (2003) suggests a link between organisational culture change and public service improvement. Similarly, Ban (1995) in a study of the US Environmental Protection Agency, found that the agency was more adept than other federal agencies in mitigating the effects of centralised federal human resource policy constraints. This was linked to the agency’s status as an adhocracy with an open culture, focusing on change and flexibility, and characterised by creative problem solving and risk-taking.

Understanding organisational culture and cultural types also help your understanding of why managerial reforms may impact differently within and between organisations. An organisation with a predominantly internal process culture, for example, may be more resistant to reforms aimed at promoting innovation.

Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004), noted that: ‘We would also expect staff in high uncertainty avoidance

cultures to be more concerned with rule-following and more reluctant to risk changing jobs - both factors of some importance for those reformers who want to deregulate bureaucracies and encourage more rapid job change in the public service’

It has dawned upon practitioners in both the private and public sectors that [organisational change](#) often requires changing the organisation’s culture and learning. For example, in terms of improving career progression arrangements in the civil service, O’Riordan and Humphreys (2002) suggest a need for a change in organisational culture in many areas. In particular, O’Riordan (2004) says that ‘developing a culture in which career progression and development of staff is prioritised represents an important [retention](#) and motivation tool’

According to Zalami (2005), culture can either facilitate or inhibit institutional transformation depending on whether or not the existing culture is aligned with the goals of the proposed change. This is also noted by O’Donnell (2006) in terms of culture facilitating innovative initiatives in the public sector and providing a supportive environment for developing ‘enterprising leaders’

A body of academic literature suggests that traditional organisational cultures in the public sector are likely to impede public service modernisation unless they are changed to become aligned with the modern role of government as an engine of economic growth (private sector development, ownership of state enterprises).

Zalami (2005), noted that change proponents have identified attributes of public sector culture focused on its authorities and controls, rules-driven, bureaucratic nature, inefficient use of resources, unaccountable for results, and suggests a new paradigm more responsive to citizen needs.

Du Gay (2000) argues that undermining the bureaucratic ethos is an avowed intention of contemporary reformers, but their understanding of ‘bureaucracy’ and their conception of ‘efficiency’ he feels leaves a lot to be desired (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992; Peters, 1987). He suggests that rather than referring to a form of organisation exhibiting many if not most of the characteristics of Max Weber’s classic ‘bureau’, contemporary reformers use ‘bureaucracy’ as a composite term for the defects (waste, inertia, excessive red tape) of large organisations. They advocate its replacement by more efficient, business-like methods.

Overall, DuGay (2000) feels that it is both misguided and remarkably premature to announce the death of the cultural ethos of bureaucratic office. 'Many of its key features as they came into existence a century or so ago remain as or more essential to the provision of good government today as they did then - as several recent well-publicised cases of improper conduct in governments indicate all too clearly. These features include the possession of enough skill, status and independence to offer frank and fearless advice about the formulation and implementation of distinctive public purposes and to try to achieve purposes impartially, responsibly and with energy if not enthusiasm.

But Litton (2006) noted that the simple structure form favoured by bureaucracies can lead to cultural traits that limit performance. He finds that the modus operandi of government departments 'bears a striking resemblance to the organisational structure identified by Mintzberg (1979) as the 'simple' or 'entrepreneurial' form' and these structures depend on direct supervision as a device to coordinate its division of labour. Litton (2006) explains that it is the 'boss' who deals with the environment and assigns tasks according to the products identified by him or her that will satisfy the customer, and who with the support of one or two trusted middle managers or supervisors, oversees their execution. He explains further that the culture that sustains this form is similar to that which Basil Chubb (1970) used to describe Irish political culture: authoritarian, anti-intellectual and personalist. 'The culture is authoritarian because the boss alone has the command of the big picture that combines both internal and external environments. The boss's role is to handle the uncertainties that attend any organising endeavour. The culture is anti-intellectual because to admit the relevance of new understandings is to greatly increase the complexity the boss must handle. The danger of cognitive overload and the suspicion that the increase in acknowledged complexity would not bring commensurate rewards is enough to discourage open-ended analysis' (Litton,2006).

Conclusion

In the light of the above discussion, it can be strongly argued that organisational culture is the master engine of any organisation and if properly managed it gives any organization a competitive advantage that is paralleled by none and it provides a key battleground for management reform in both the private and public sector.

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