Leadership and culture

Author: Naomi Stanford . October 2021

Thanks to a chance conversation I had in the week, someone pointed me towards Edgar Schein talking about 'cultural islands'. Schein says,

'To help leaders deal with multi-cultural teams ... two things need to happen - leaders have to become much more humble and learn how to seek help, because the subordinates under them will be much more knowledgeable than they, and secondly leaders will have to create **cultural islands** where people from differently occupational and national cultures can spend suspend some of the rules and talk to each other more directly, for example, about how they view trust, how they view authority, or how they deal with bosses that make mistakes. If leaders can't create those kinds of cultural islands, they won't be able to create teams that can actually work.'

This idea was useful to me on two counts – first because I am working on a culture audit testing a hypothesis that we will find different cultures at different locations and in different functions and we need to develop an approach that honors what Schein calls the micro-cultures within the macro culture. (Schein talks about macro and micro-cultures which is similar to my thinking on culture as a climate metaphor).

In the fifth edition of his book Organisational Culture and Leadership Schein says 'I have emphasized that every organizational culture is nested in other, often larger cultures that influence its character; and every subculture, task force, or workgroup is, in turn, nested in larger cultures, which influence them. I have enhanced the discussion of how one can begin to work across national culture divides. (5th edition)'

Second, the idea of cultural islands was useful because in a workshop we were discussing organization structures and networks, and I was showing the Rob Cross slide (see image at top of this blog) which shows the traditional organization chart compared with its network analysis. As Cross says,

> Organizational network analysis (ONA) can provide an x-ray into the inner workings of an organization — a powerful means of making invisible patterns of information flow and collaboration in strategically important groups visible.

One of the groups, who I was showing the image exclaimed 'Cole is the leader'. You'll see in the ONA side of the image, as Cross points out the 'central role that Cole played in terms of both overall information flow within the group and being the only point of contact between members of the production division and the rest of the network.'

What the workshop participant's statement did was start a discussion on leaders. I think the implication in Schein's book is that leaders are those with positional/hierarchical power. Schein remarks, 'In an age in which leadership is touted over and over again as a critical variable in defining the success or failure of organizations it becomes all the more important to look at the other side of the leadership coin – how leaders create culture and how culture defines and creates leaders.' (3rd edition)

I may be wrong because I see he's written another book (2018) Humble Leadership – which I haven't yet read, that tells us 'The more traditional forms of leadership that are based on static hierarchies and professional distance between leaders and followers are growing increasingly outdated and ineffective.' He calls 'for a reimagined form of leadership that coincides with emerging trends of relationship building, complex group work, diverse workforces, and cultures in which everyone feels psychologically safe.' But is he still talking about CEOs, senior managers, team leaders, and so on. Or is he verging into the territory of 'everyone a leader?'

In the 1986 edition of Images of Organisation (Figure 6.2 – I have an ancient photocopy!) Gareth Morgan lists fourteen of the most important sources of power. Formal authority is the first one. Others are:

- Control of scarce resources·
- Use of organizational structure, rules and regulations
- Control of decision processes
- Control of knowledge and information
- Control of boundaries
- Ability to cope with uncertainty
- Control of technology
- Interpersonal alliances, networks, and control of 'informal organization'
- Control of counter-organizations
- Symbolism and the management of meaning

- Gender and the management of gender relations
- Structural factors that define the stage of action
- The power one already has

You can see each of these with an explanation, developed by Changing Minds

If we assume that leadership involves control of a power source (or having the means to control a power source) as Cole in the organizational network map may do, does that mean that there are many types of leadership power and control that influence the culture? Isn't it a reality that 'leaders' with positional power, are not the only, or even key, influencers of culture. Culture influences the realm of anyone who has any type of power.

Perhaps the strongest influencers of culture are those who use the power they already have (the last item on Morgan's list) – just being in the culture wielding our behaviors and personalities could be enough to influence it. Schein says (again 5th edition) 'our own socialization experiences have embedded various layers of culture within us. The cultures within us need to be understood because they dominate our behavior and, at the same time, provide us with choices of who to be in various social situations. These choices are only partially attributable to "personality" or "temperament"; rather, they depend on the situational understandings that have been taught to us by our socialization experiences. '

However, Schein goes on to talk about this only in relation to 'leadership', saying, 'I have introduced as an important element for leadership choices a description of the social "levels of relationship" that we all have learned as part of our upbringing. We can be formal, personal, or intimate and can vary that behavior according to our situation. In that way, recognizing and managing the cultures *inside* us becomes an important leadership skill. (5th edition)'

If we were all more aware of the various types of power we all have access to, including our own personal power, then we could use this (hopefully wisely) to positively influence culture and our cultural islands. We'd reach a position where developing healthy organizational cultures - micro and macro - becomes everyone's conscious responsibility and is not delegated to positional leaders.

Do you think the culture is shaped by everyone, on their different cultural islands, or by some groups

over others on them? Let me know.

*The post "**Leadership and culture**" was first published by Dr. Naomi Stanford here* https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/leadership-culture-naomi-stanford/

About Dr. Naomi Stanford

Dr. Naomi Stanford is an organization design practitioner and author. During her earlier UK career, Dr. Stanford was an employee of large multinational companies, including Price Waterhouse, British Airways, Marks & Spencer, and Xerox. She moved to the US mid-career working as an organization design consultant to a range of organizations in the government, non-profit and private sectors. She then returned to the UK to work in the government sector. Naomi is now free-lancing as an organization design consultant/adviser. Additionally, she writes books, articles, and a weekly blog (over 800 so far). Naomi speaks at conferences and tweets regularly on organization design. Currently, she is writing the third edition of her Economist book 'A Guide to Organisation Design', to be published in March 2022.

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