Tracy, S. J. (2009). Organizational Culture (2,300 words). *Encyclopedia of communication theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture can be defined as the shared assumptions, values, beliefs, language, symbols and meanings systems in an organization. This approach views organizations as a set of loosely structured symbols that are maintained and co-created by a pattern of individual psychological factors and various interactional factors (such as language, behaviors, espoused values and physical artifacts) that shape shared (and unshared) values, beliefs and assumptions within a given organization.

This entry overviews the history of the concept, the interpretive and management approaches and the way organizational cultures vary by level and type. A discussion of cultural management reveals a focus on the inculcation of values and norms through communication processes of organizational identification visioning and framing. The entry closes with ongoing controversies about the theoretical approach.

History

The organizational culture movement rose in the early 1980s in response to previous system-oriented explanations. Researchers began to move beyond the transmission model of communication and instead examine how relationships, cultures, and organizations are constituted by communication. This *linguistic turn* not only signified a methodological shift from studying communication as a measurable outcome, but a fundamental change in the way organizations were interpreted and known. Communication came to be viewed not just another organizational variable to control, but as an important phenomenon in and of itself. From this point of view, researchers began

to see how meanings do not reside in messages, channels, or screens; but rather are socially constructed through interaction and sense-making activities.

Management and Interpretive Approaches

Organizational culture stems from two different camps. The management approach focuses on the way organizations can control and improve their corporate culture. From this approach, culture and communication is something the organization *has*. The interpretive approach, in contrast views and studies organizations as cultures constituted by communication. Communication is what the organization *is*.

In the 1980s, managers began to notice that organizations with strong cultures—such as, Disneyland, Coke-a-Cola, IBM and Japanese car manufacturers—were extremely successful. This spurred the notion that by being able to engineer an appropriate corporate culture, managers could increase the productivity. A number of groundbreaking management books encouraged American corporate leaders to focus on organizational values, visions, rites and rituals and leadership. Perhaps most popular was Tom Peters and Robert Waterman's *In Search of Excellence* which featured extremely successful organizations and found that they had in common strong cultures with close customer relations, employee empowerment, clear missions, and a flat organizational hierarchy.

Pioneering players for the communication study of organizational culture drew from Clifford Geertz's *interpretivism*. An interpretive approach examines organizations as tribes, and views the familiar as strange, wondrous, and exotic. Specialized meaning is not waiting to be discovered, but is socially constructed through organizational values, folk tales, rituals, and practices. The interpretive approach frames the organizations as a

stage or a text. Understanding comes through analyzing performances, scripts, and props from the point of view of participants.

Cultural Levels and Types

Cultural Levels

Organizational cultural levels include national/regional cultures, professional cultures, corporate cultures, and subcultures. At the macro level, leaders are aware of the national or regional context. The values and norms of a company based in Spain, where it is normal for employees to take an afternoon siesta, will be much different than those in Japan, where long hours are testament to employee loyalty.

Professions also have unique cultures. Engineers value precision, managers value leadership, and salespeople value good publicity. Such values are taught in graduate school and reinforced by day-to-day activities, rituals, and ceremonies.

Corporations also have a distinct culture. Disney is well-known to value fun, performance and creativity; 3M corporation rewards employee risk-taking (as evidenced by the invention of post-it notes). IBM values consistency—so much so that it almost went out of business when Apple and its innovative culture barreled onto the scene.

Subcultures emerge across hierarchical levels, departments, social groups— sometimes for reasons as simple as a group of employees attending the same church or joining the company softball team. High-ranking executives may value posh presentation, as evidenced by their business attire and fancy lunchtime reservations. Union workers may value hard work, as evidenced by ritualized overtime and boxed lunch.

Types of Culture

Cultures also vary by type. *Power cultures* are found in organizations where power is centralized in several founders, managers or executives. Power cultures have easily identified leaders who make quick dramatic changes based in intuition. Such cultures thrive on personal loyalty with reward and punishment structures often reflecting favoritism and perceived loyalties.

Role cultures are bureaucratic and emphasize logic, rationality, achievement and efficiency. Policy manuals and one's predefined role are key constituents of meaning. Role culture employees are status conscious and competitive. Such cultures are especially resistant to change and often do not adapt well to new environmental conditions.

In *achievement cultures,* the task is the primary organizing feature and team decision making is valued. Such cultures are characterized by flexibility, high levels of autonomy and few formal structures. Control and coordination tend to be ad hoc, aiding innovation but also challenging quick response, especially in times of crises.

Finally*, person/support cultures* are egalitarian, emphasizing personal growth and development as equally important as business objectives. Such cultures value and invest in employees over the long-term. Decision making is collective and based on multiple needs.

Leading Organizational Culture

A good cultural leader is charismatic, playing the roles of cheerleader, nurturer, and coach. Cultural leaders strategically consider how to manage intrinsic values such as employees' underlying beliefs, assumptions, and unconscious mental frameworks. Leaders manage values through understanding and communicatively shaping external factors through strategic use of everyday language, rituals, and vision statements. Culture

is implicated in both what employees and leaders say they do (espoused values) and what they actually do (values in use). Cultural leaders determine espoused values through *visioning* and help determine values in use through *framing*.

Visioning

Visioning refers to formal mission or goal statements—the espoused values of an organization. Organizational visions reflect the organization's future. For years, the vision of Bill Gates at Microsoft was to put a computer on every desk, in every home, all running Microsoft software.

Visions serve a coordinating function, providing a framework that allows organizational members to make sense of the particular tasks that they are responsible for performing. A vision is designed to inspire, motivate, and create a sense of purpose that organizational members can buy into. Furthermore, a vision is meant to complement ongoing activities and behaviors in the organization.

Framing

Framing refers to communication that leads others to accept one meaning over another. Framing is accomplished by cultural leader's strategic use of a variety of organizational symbols, including: metaphor, stories and myths, rituals and ceremonies, jargon and strategic use of artifacts. All of these symbols are created and maintained through communication.

One of the most complex organizational symbols is the *metaphor*, a word or phrase that shows a subject's or program's likeness with something else. Examples of metaphors may include suggesting that a new program is only a Band-Aid on the problem—or a baby step. These metaphors draw attention to some aspects of the situation

and hide other aspects. The Band-Aid metaphor connotes a plan that is simplistic, plastic and short-term while the baby-step metaphor connotes hope and new beginnings. The metaphor used *frames* the situation in very different ways.

Stories and *myths* provide vivid images or social maps about how things should be done. Whether or not they are really true, stories teach valuable lessons and warn others about potentially dangerous topics and behaviors. Stories also justify beliefs and paths of action—they explain why certain behaviors are more acceptable than others.

Rituals, rites, ceremonies and *celebrations* symbolically pattern and define organizational values. *Rituals* are informal routine traditions, such as the boss walking around and saying good morning to every employee. Employees engage in *personal rituals* to define themselves, such as a Disney employee doing a cartwheel to differentiate herself from other employees. *Social rituals* are standardized performances that affirm relationships among members of organizations, such going out to lunch with the same group each day. *Task rituals* are repeated activities—such as the weekly team meeting—that help employees perform their jobs.

Rites and *ceremonies* are dramatic planned sets of activities that bring together various aspects of an organizational culture in a single event. *Rites of passage*—such as moving into a bigger office—mark entry into a different hierarchical level. *Rites of integration*, such as holiday parties, affirm and enhance the sense of community in an organization. *Rites of degradation*, like being put on probation, punish members and show disapproval. *Enhancement rites*, through activities such as employee of the month, show praise and glory. *Renewal rites*, such as retreats, aim to revitalize.

Jargon, catch-phrases, and *slogans* also communicate organizational values. Such symbols bring about a familiar, insider, meaning and differentiates one group from another. Slang is useful and interesting precisely because usually it is not controlled by management. However, cultural leaders use specialized terminology to strategically change meaning, as evidenced in the following different examples: clients vs. customers, janitors vs. custodians, secretary vs. office manager, a house vs. a home.

Finally, organizational *artifacts*—or the physical vestiges of an organization such as the building, the office layout, the types of products—say a lot about organizational culture. Simple material items and structural set-ups, such as the shape of a boardroom table, communicate how an organization values creativity, control, teamwork and hierarchy. By varying such symbols, leaders can engage in cultural control.

Unobtrusive Cultural Control

From a cultural approach, employees are controlled through *organizational identification*, considered to be loyalty, commitment, feeling of belonging, and pride in a certain group. Cultural leaders aim toward identification by creating a team atmosphere, recognizing employee contributions, talking up the company, and providing frequent integration and enhancement ceremonies (e.g., retreats, parties). Because identification is strongest when there is something to identify against, leaders may also purposely create a company enemy (e.g., the big three American automakers vs. the Japanese).

Through identification, employees adopt the core values of the organization. When employees adopt organizational values, then management does not have to tell them what to do. They do it anyway. This type of *unobtrusive control* is very effective, and is associated with increased morale, increased loyalty, and less need for constant

supervision. However, because unobtrusive control is invisible, it is very difficult for employees to resist potentially unfair company structures. So, unobtrusive control also raises ethical concerns.

Ongoing Controversies: Integration, Differentiation or Fragmentation Approaches

Researchers differ in regard to whether they view organizational cultures as unified wholes, differentiated subcultures or an ambiguous set of fragments. Scholars with an *integrationist perspective* look for ways that cultural members have consistent values that are in consensus. When conflict or inconsistency is discovered, it is considered evidence of culture deterioration. As such, organizational change is conceptualized in terms of establishing or returning to a unified self. Integrationist studies are often written for a management audience and move quickly from description to prescription.

A *differentiation perspective* examines inconsistency and how organizational subcultures hold different values and beliefs. This approach unveils power, acknowledges conflict and attends to differences in opinion. It examines inconsistency between espoused values and values in use, differences in opinion between labor and management, and considers how different organizational symbols contradict each other. Differentiation researchers often take a critical point of view and examine how marginalized peoples maintain qualitatively different cultural realities than do privileged groups.

The third *fragmentation* approach focuses on ambiguity, contradiction and a multiplicity of interpretations. Values and beliefs are dispersed amongst myriad organizational task and hierarchical groups. Scholars from this perspective—many who

consider themselves as *postmodernists*—examine layers of meaning, accumulation, and consumption. They examine how gaps and silences are just as important as visible beliefs.

There is ongoing disagreement about the value of the varying perspectives. Nevertheless, drawing together the organizational culture theoretical approach is its focus on communication as central for understanding, managing and constituting the organizing process.

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See Also Framing Theory, Identification, Organizational Communication Theories, Organizational Control Theory, Social Construction of Reality.

Further Readings

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