

St. John's University
EDU 5300 – Organizational Theory and Planned Change
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Unit VII. Part 3 --Culture

What are the competing metaphors/ theories about how organizations work?

On a Sunday evening in 1980 NBC broadcast “If Japan Can, Why Can't We?” The White Paper program presented W. Edwards Deming's impact on Japanese management, whose quality products had been undermining American dominance in electronics and automobile production. The show gave voice to a major shift in thinking about organizations. Instead of thinking about organizations in rational, structural terms with an emphasis on hierarchical authority, job descriptions, and compliance with work rules, Deming taught the Japanese to think of organizations as systems with processes supporting continuous improvement that engaged smart workers in hypothesis testing regarding variation in the quality of their own work.

Immediately after the show, American executives began searching for the secret to Japanese management. They recognized that not all businesses were operated under the traditional, rationalist paradigm. In short, they noted that Japanese businesses operated with a different organizational culture or set of beliefs about how leadership should be exercised and work conducted. Their practical interest stimulated scholarly work in describing and comparing differences in organizational culture.

In discussing the Popkewitz team's study of the exemplary IGE schools, we noted that their expectation that the schools would all be alike as exemplary models was not verified by their observations in the schools. Instead of being alike, the schools differed in significant ways. They concluded that these differences in observed practices, especially the use of the skills array wall charts, represented different assumptions, values, or beliefs about organizational answers to three basic questions, as noted below.

What it means to know: construction of meaning and understanding
vs. recall of true answers

What it means to work: collaborative interaction
vs. isolated individuals

The rationale for authority: we do this in order to achieve our purpose

vs. we do this because they told us to

In effect, the researchers discovered the cultures of the schools. The existing beliefs in each school gave meaning to the new IGE practices. In no school did the staff study the difference in the assumptions embedded in the IGE model and the beliefs previously established in their school. In other words, they never did examine the cultural meaning of the two different models: the one in their school and the one incorporated in the IGE model. As a result, they made the supposed universal IGE model into “our school model” -- several being traditional/technical, several illusory, and one constructivist.

In commenting on the nature of organizational culture, Shafritz and Ott (Classics of Organization Theory, 5th edition, 2001) note that organizational culture “is composed of many intangible phenomena, such as values, beliefs, assumptions, perceptions, behavioral norms, artifacts, and patterns of behavior. It is the unseen and unobservable force that is always behind the organizational activities that can be seen and observed.”

In summarizing their review of the work on organizational culture, Bolman and Deal (Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership, 2003) make this statement.

In contrast to traditional views emphasizing rationality and objectivity, the symbolic frame [cultural] highlights the tribal aspect of contemporary organizations. It centers on complexity and ambiguity in organizational phenomena and on the many uses of symbols to mediate the meaning of organizational events and activities. Myths, values, and vision bring cohesiveness, clarity, and direction in the presence of confusion and mystery. Heroes and heroines are role models for people to admire and emulate. Stories carry values and serve as powerful modes of communication. Rituals and ceremonies are ways to take action in the face of success or calamity. Metaphors, humor, and play offer escape from the tyranny of facts and logic; they stimulate creative alternatives to old choices. in *The Feast of Fools* [p. 131969], Cox summarizes the importance of symbolism in modern life: “Our links to yesterday and tomorrow depend also on the aesthetic, emotional, and symbolic aspects of human life – on saga, play, and celebration. Without festival and fantasy, man would not really be a historical being at all.”

In discussing organizations as cultures, Gareth Morgan (Images of Organization, 1997) notes that the “fundamental task facing leaders and managers rest in creating appropriate systems of shared meaning.” He emphasizes that culture is “socially constructed” and results from the daily interactions of people in the organization. People in the organization are constantly reconstructing their social reality to provide a sense of meaning and continuity as the world around them and their work shift.

Edgar Schein in 1993 gave a definition of culture and explained how cultures arise. First, his definition.

The most useful way to think about culture is to view it as the accumulated shared meaning of a given group, covering behavioral, emotional, and cognitive elements of the group members’ total psychological functioning. For shared learning to occur, there must be a history of shared experience, which in turn implies some stability of membership in the group. Given such stability and a shared history, the human need for parsimony, consistency, and meaning will cause the various shared elements to form into patterns that eventually can be called a culture... The culture of a group can now be defined as a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved 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 in relation to those problems.

According to his definition of culture and the process by which it is created, one can say that culture operates at three different levels: the artifacts that one observes; the patterns of behavior that people enact; and the unstated assumptions that underlie all action.

Morgan discusses the relation between culture and change efforts.

...the challenge of creating new forms of organization and management is very much a challenge of cultural change. It is a challenge of transforming the mind-sets, visions, paradigms, images, metaphors, beliefs, and shared meanings that sustain existing business realities and of creating a detailed language and code of behavior through which the desired new reality can be lived on a daily basis.

Viewed in this way, the creation of a particular corporate culture is not just about inventing new slogans or acquiring a new leader. It is about inventing what amounts to a new way of life.

In other words, Morgan and Schein say that true change is cultural change and represents more than a manipulation of artifacts and observable behavior. True change is a cultural and requires changes in basic assumptions. In the context of our discussion, they would say that changes within the traditional school design represent changes in artifacts and perhaps in patterns of behavior, but not in the basic assumptions about the model itself; namely, about the function of the secondary school to sort out students in terms of their probable destinies based upon innate intelligence and interests and then to provide a differentiated education that befits each subgroup of students; namely, college prep, general, and vocational.

Shafritz and Ott's summary of Bolman and Deal's analysis of scholarly work on organizational culture posits the following basic tenets of the perspective.

1. The meaning or the interpretation of what is happening in organizations is more important than what actually is happening. The meaning is in people's interpretation, not in the action itself, e.g. using the wall chart.
2. Ambiguity and uncertainty, which are prevalent in most organizations, preclude rational problem-solving and decision making processes. Project planning and teacher evaluation systems are more like dramatic productions than they are truly functioning activities.
3. People use symbols to reduce ambiguity and to gain a sense of direction when they are faced with uncertainty.

The cultural perspective is often referred to as the symbolic frame, because at its center is reference to the generation and use of symbolic items, whether signs, stories, myths, heroes/heroines, or other emotional laden symbolic forms. Bolman and Deal refer to the "spiritual magic of symbols."

