

What is Culture in Organizations?

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Definitions of Culture

We must first define and agree on what **Culture** is before we can deal with cross culture and networking. Like many other behavioral science terms like Leadership, there are many different definitions (or lack of definitions) of culture used in management today. This paper will try to present a very clear and “operational” definition of culture as used by sociologists and behavioral scientists. By operational we mean understandable and useful in analyzing human behavior.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines culture as, "The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought characteristic of a community or population."

The sociologists define culture as "the social heritage, all the knowledge, beliefs, customs, and skills that are available to members of a society." (3)

"The grand total of all the objects, ideas, knowledge, ways of doing things, habits, values, and attitudes which each generation in a society passes on to the next is what the anthropologist refers to as the **culture** of a group." (7)

The famous Dutch behavioral scientist, Geert Hofstede defined culture “as the collective mental programming of a people in an environment”. His later definition was "that culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from another". (6)

Organizational Culture

Kotter and Heskett of the Harvard Business School define organizational culture, "as an interdependent set of values and ways of behaving that are common to a community and tend to perpetuate themselves, sometimes over a long period of time".(9) Robbins defines organizational culture as "a system of shared meaning held by members that distinguishes the organization from other organizations. This is a set of characteristics that the organization values."(12)

The following is an excellent summary of these various definitions of culture: “Culture is a pattern of beliefs and expectations shared by the organization” members. These beliefs and expectations produce norms that shape the behavior of both individuals and groups within an organization. Culture is usually long-term, strategic, and difficult to change. It is rooted in beliefs and values. An organizational culture also represents the shared sense of the way we do things around here, a critical factor in guiding day-to-day behavior and

shaping a future course of action". (2)

What are the common elements to these various definitions? Culture is behavioral patterns transmitted over time to a community that are relatively stable. For an organization, culture is the guiding beliefs that determine the "way we do things around here".

Key Elements of Culture

The three key areas of culture are as follows:

1. **Shared Values**
2. **Beliefs**
3. **Behavioral Norms.**

Cultural **values** are widely held beliefs of what is important. Values are things that are prized in a community and what people feel are inherently important. For example, in many Asian countries people value non-confrontation. The word value is defined by Webster as "a principle, standard, or quality considered inherently worthwhile or desirable". "Values can help employees find meaning and purpose in their work and link their individual efforts to those of the entire company."(13)

Webster's dictionary defines **belief** as "conviction that certain things are true." Beliefs are what one accepts emotionally as inherently true. **Beliefs** are not vulnerable to rational argument. For example many Americans believe a woman has a right to choose while many others believe the opposite.

Norms are based on values and are guides to conduct, usually framed as rules, prescriptions, or standards to be followed by people who occupy specified roles. (3) For example some organizations have a norm that all meetings will start on time. In some Asian countries the **value** of non-confrontation leads to the norm of avoiding conflict.

Other elements we can identify as related to culture are as follows:

Attitudes, Artifacts, Assumptions, Ceremonies, Cherished Philosophies, Customs, Heroes, Manners, Myths, Premises, Principles, Relationships, Rituals, Stories, Taboos, Traditions, Ways of viewing reality, and Ways of thought.

The following quote from an essay by Robert Gillis provides another excellent summary.

Concepts of Culture

"Culture is a basic attribute of society, a familiar concept, yet difficult to define. It is the subject of prodigious research and millions of words by insightful and expressive people. It has many aspects and

exhibits itself in many ways. Any short definition does not capture the complex concepts suggested by the word. Here are some thoughts and suggestions relating to culture and cultural change.

Our culture is inside us - it is transparent to us. It affects everything we do: the way we perceive and interact with the world, the way we relate to one another, the way we cope with our lives, the way we resolve conflicting interests. It is passed on to us through our institutions and traditions, our political and social organizations, our language, our technology, our literature and art, our music and theater, our games and entertainment, our icons. Our culture is the theatre in which we play out our lives. It is imbedded in the synaptic connections in our brains. It is a major part of who we are. "(4)

Dimensions of Culture

Cultures exist at multiple levels in a society. They can be regional, national, societal, ethnic, organizational, or group. For the individual, the various levels of culture (sub-cultures) could result in conflict if norms conflict.

Robbins describes the culture of an organization as performing a number of functions within the organization as follows:

1. "It provides a boundary-defining role separating one organization from another.
2. It conveys a sense of identity.
3. It facilitates the generation of commitment to something larger than ones own self-interest.
4. It enhances social system stability. Culture is the social glue that helps hold the organization together.
5. It serves as a sense making and control mechanism that guides and shapes the attitudes and behavior of employees. Culture defines the rules of the game. "(12)

Various behavioral scientists have defined many different specific dimensions or characteristics of organizational culture. Hofstede in his famous IBM based research in more than fifty countries identified five characteristics of national cultures: (6)

1. Power distance- hierarchical distance between boss and subordinate.
2. Uncertainty avoidance- desire to control the future, common in traditional & authoritarian societies.
3. Individualism- the opposite of collectivism and extended family.
4. Achievement orientation- connected to ambition, desire to achieve vs. focusing on interpersonal relationships.
5. Long term orientation versus short term orientation

Hofstede's four (now five-factor) model has been used as the basis of many research projects and articles on cross-cultural issues. Muriithi used it as a model for analysis of the

applicability of western management concepts to Africa. He posited that Africa was high on power distance, high on uncertainty avoidance, high on collectivism and medium on achievement. The fifth dimension was not used in Muriithi but probably would have been short-term orientation. "Africa's collectiveness nature means that individuals feel heavy moral obligations to family and community."

Robbins lists the following seven primary characteristics that capture the essence of an organization's culture: (12)

1. Innovation and risk taking
2. Attention to detail
3. Outcome orientation
4. People orientation
5. Team orientation
6. Aggressiveness
7. Stability

You could rate an organization as high to low on each of these characteristics.

Handy defines four different types of organizational cultures as follows: (5)

1. The Power Culture - a circular web with the "boss" at the center.
2. The Role Culture- stereotyped as bureaucracy with strong functional groups.
3. The Task Culture- project oriented
4. The Person Culture- each individual is supreme.

Nord identifies six cultural factors that operate in organizations as follows: (11)

1. Culture and perception-Cultural patterns influence perception of reality
2. Culture, space and interaction-In some cultures people stand closer to each other than in other cultures.
3. Time and culture-Americans are more sensitive to being "on time" than some other cultures.
4. Authority and culture-Different attitudes about authority are sources of intercultural variation. "Nations can be ordered on a dimension of preference for authoritarian supervision."(1)
5. Organizational structure, process and culture-Some cultures value hierarchy and

others do not.

6. Motivation and culture-Cultural variables will influence which individual needs are satisfied.

Robbins identifies seven areas where culture impacts on other factors as follows (12):

1. Personality and national culture-For example the culture of a country affects the percent of citizens who believe life is preordained versus those who believe they can dominate their environment. (locus of control)
2. Decision making and culture-All kinds of cultural differences affect the way people and organizations make decisions. Or example, autocratic versus collective decision-making.
3. Values and culture-American children value individualism while Japanese children are indoctrinated to be team players.
4. Motivation and culture -What a culture values will influence what is motivating.
5. Cross-cultural communication-Cross cultural factors clearly can create potential problems in communication.
6. Leadership and culture-Effective leaders adjust their style to the situation. Cultural differences are key factors in any situation.
7. Negotiation and culture-Negotiating styles clearly vary across national cultures.

What should we do about culture in Project Management?

We have looked at several definitions and dimensions of culture. Now we must look at what we do about culture and cross-cultural networking on projects. How do we use a cross-cultural analysis on projects? How do we measure culture on projects? How do we measure changes in culture? How can we change the culture of a system? What are some of the specific cross cultural problems on projects?

The IPMA offers a yearly workshop on "Managing Cultural Diversity in Projects" in Copenhagen, Denmark. In their brochure they list some of the challenges PMs face:

- Communicating so one is understood
- Knowing when you have commitment
- Dealing with time, deadlines and accountability
- Understanding hidden agendas and priorities
- Managing the interface between project and line organization

From the above definitions of culture and listing of various dimensions of culture we can see how and where these problems arise.

Understanding the local culture

If we are going to be effective Project Managers in an environment we must know what the values, beliefs and norms are in that culture. In our own organization we may be well acquainted with our culture. In a new situation however, we need to study and understand the new culture we are about to enter. In a cross-cultural situation we have a double problem because we have two cultures where we must know the **values, beliefs and norms** of each culture and how they might conflict and how we might integrate them.

As an example I am going to take the case of Sub- Sahara Africa where the extended family system is an integral part of the culture. In describing social conditions in Africa, Muriithi states, "The overwhelming patterns of allegiance are to families, clans, and ethnic groups. Within organizations therefore, the western assumption of purposive rationality, leading to commitment to organizational goals does not exist. Individuals are judged and "feel" successful not only by having wealth, but by fulfilling their "moral" obligations to family, clan and ultimately ethnic group."

We have **values, beliefs and norms** that all result in an extended family system where even distant cousins are considered part of the immediate family and require support. In this instance we can see how the three levels of values, beliefs and norms are inter-related. The extended family system is a wonderful social security system in a very uncertain environment. But it is also a barrier to developing a modern economy. It makes accumulation of capital for business difficult. It leads to nepotism instead of an honest civil service system. Instead of fighting these norms, Muriithi recommends, Use of family and community networks improves both contract compliance and performance on the job. Join them, don't fight them.

Changing Cultures

Cultures do change over time. When I taught Project Management Courses in China in the early 1980s it was difficult to get participants to answer questions in class. The culture held that individuals should not place themselves ahead of the group. To solve that problem we would have groups discuss the questions and we assigned one person to be spokesman. That worked fine because it fit with the culture. Now after 20 years I understand that aspect of culture has changed.

Robbins suggests eight approaches to changing organizational cultures:

1. Top management becomes role models for new culture.

2. Create new stories, symbols, and rituals.
3. Select, promote, and support employees who espouse the new values
4. Redesign socialization processes to align with the new values.
5. Change the reward system to support new values.
6. Replace unwritten norms with formal rules and regulations strongly enforced.
7. Shake up current subcultures by transfers and terminations.
8. Work to get peer group consensus through employee participation. (13)

How can we identify and understand the local culture, values, beliefs and norms? The answer is simple. We need to read books and articles. We need to talk to people in the society. We need to look and listen and discuss. We need to try to identify the **values, beliefs and norms** and then try to accommodate to them at the same time being aware of the culture we bring from our own society.

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