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ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE: ITS RELEVANCE IN ORGANIZATIONAL FUNCTIONING

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Abstract

In the past few years, attempts to understand the work organization have been based upon images, metaphors, paradigms and theories of organizations developed over time. In this paper, we are invited to see the work organization from the perspective of culture, which is our action frame of reference towards understanding the hidden and complex aspects of organizational life. This paper reveals that, organizational culture offers a shared system of meanings, which is the basis for communications and mutual understanding towards attainment of organizational goals. It is therefore recommended that, managers of organizations should include the positive aspects of organizational culture to improve the performance of their organizations and this should be backed by policy.

Introduction

In the past few years, culture has been used by some organizational researchers and managers to indicate the climate and practices that organizations develop around their handling of people or to refer to the espoused values and doctrine of an organization. In this context, managers speak of developing the "right kind of culture" or a "culture of quality", suggesting that culture is concerned with certain values that managers are trying to inculcate in their organization (Schein, 1988). However, organizational culture will be more useful a concept if it helps us better understand the hidden and complex aspects of organizational life.

According to Iyayi (2003), for a very long time, attempts to understand the work organization have been based upon images, metaphors, paradigms and theories of organizations developed over time. Morgan (1986) has detailed at least eight of such images or paradigm statements on organizations. These are: (i) Machines (ii) Organisms, (iii) Brains (iv) Cultures, (v) Political systems, (vi) Psychic prisons, (vii) Flux and transformation, and (viii) Instruments of domination.

Morgan (1997) posits that organizations are cultures. Iyayi (2003), shed light on Morgan's (1997) submission that: if organizations are culture – bound, it follows that to be adequate, any explanation of organizational functioning within, as well as between, societies must be constructed out of an analysis of the differential impact of cultural variable.

In this paper, we are invited to see organization from the perspective of culture, which is our action frame of reference towards understanding the hidden and complex aspects of organizational life. In achieving this, the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 spells out culture and organization. Section 3 outlines the meaning of organizational culture. Organizational subcultures are examined in Section 4. In addition, section 5 presents models of organizational culture.

Cultures and Organization

Culture is so pervasive, yet complex that it is difficult to define it in short simple terms. Although it may seem easy to define culture for the fact that everyone can probably identify it when seen, but understanding in the form of a definition is more complex. As a result, culture has been defined differently by different academics (Warner, 1981). It seems there are as many definitions of culture as there are anthropologists and social scientists, each defining it to suit his understanding and interpretation. To some, from a Nigerian perspective, the term culture refers to finesse in self-comportment. A cultured person is one who behaves in a becoming way according to his society's standard of behaviour, a gentleman, a well brought up lady, one that is so holistically educated that he is at home with any given subject of discussion, is admirable and worthy of the human spirit (Umoren, 1996).

To others, culture refers to masquerades, traditional dances, festivals, traditional marriage, etc. In this instance, fierce arguments in defense of polygamy, violence in masquerades, violence in extraordinary spending in the burial of the dead, etc, are heard of in the name of "our culture".

According to Howard & Sheth (1996), culture refers to the collective mental programming which people in a society have. This means that every individual's activities are directed by his or her own culture. Culture is also seen as selective man-made way of responding to experience, a set of behavioural pattern which means that culture influences or affects performances, motives, brand comprehension, attitudes and intention to use. Thus, culture is not only a narrow view of man's activities, but to include all the activities, which characterized the behaviour of particular communities of people – the way they eat, how they talk, look and general behavioural pattern.

Culture has been defined in several ways; according to Zakaria (1997), culture is the totality of socially transmitted behaviour patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought. According to Lundberg (1990), culture is the predominating attitudes and behaviour that characterize the functioning of a group of organization.

Furthermore, culture has been defined as the integrated pattern of human behaviour that includes thought, speech, action, and artifact and depends upon the human capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations by customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group (Iyayi, 2003).

The Meaning of Organizational Culture

For the purpose of this paper, organizational culture which is also known as corporate culture would be defined as follows: Organizational culture is the pattern of values, norms, beliefs, attitudes and assumptions that may not have been articulated but shape the ways in which people behave and things get done (Armstrong, 2001).

Basically, organizational culture is the personality of the organization. Culture is comprised of the assumptions, values, norms and tangible signs (artifacts) of organization members and their behaviours. Values referred to above refer to what is believed to be important about how people and the organizations behave. Norms are written rules of behaviour (Gesteland, 1999).

Members of an organization soon come to sense the particular culture of an organization. As stated earlier, culture is one of those terms that are difficult to express distinctly, but everyone knows it when it is sensed. For example, the culture of a large organization is quite different from that of a hospital, which is quite different from that of a university. One can tell the culture of an organization by looking at the arrangement of furniture, what members wear, etc… similar to what one can use to get a feeling about someone's personality.

According to Schein (1985), organizational culture is created in part by leaders, and one of the most decisive functions of leadership is the creation, the management, and sometimes even the destruction of culture.

Organizational culture can be looked at as a system. Inputs include feedback from, e.g. society, professions, laws, stories, heroes, values on competition or service, etc. The process is based on people's assumptions, values and norms, e.g., people's value on money, time, facilities, space and people. Outputs or effects of culture therefore are, e.g. organizational behaviours, technologies, strategies, images, products, services, appearance, etc. (Clegg, 2002).

Organizational Sub-Cultures

Many authors (Trice and Beyer, 1993; Riley, 1983; Louis 1985; Gregory 1983; Dalton 1959; Hofstede, 1998; and Jernier, et al, 1991) seem to share Martine and Siehl's (1983) view that instead of viewing culture as a monolithic phenomenon, one should view culture as composed of different subcultures.

Van and Barley (1985) define subcultures as a subset of an organization's members who interact regularly with one another, identify themselves as a distinct group within the organization, share a set of problems commonly defined to be the problems of all and routinely take action on the basis of collective understandings unique to the group. In broader but similar way Trice and Beyer (1993: 174) define subcultures as "distinctive clusters of ideologies, cultural forms and other practices that identifiable groups of people in an organization exhibits"

According to Trice and Beyer (1993), four conditions encourage the development of subcultures. The first condition (differential interaction) refers to the degree to which some persons interact with one another more frequently than with others. Factors such as size, geographic dispersion, departmentalization, divisionalization, hierarchies of authority, workflow, technical processes, physical location of workers, rules and regulations, occupation, demographic character of workers, etc. may facilitate or inhibit interaction (Trice and Beyer, 1993). Shared experiences are the second factors that lead to the creation of subcultures because shared experience represents a common context that stimulates shared patterns of behaviour and beliefs (Trice and Beyer, 1993). The third factor, which is of most paramount importance to this paper, is called personal characteristics and these are associated with age, ethnicity, occupational training, education and social class (Trice and Beyer, 1993). These three factors may encourage the formation of friendliness and social cohesion among some members and therefore the development of the fourth condition.

Martin and Siehl (1983) recognize that, types of subcultures are classified according to groups' attitude towards the dominant culture of the organization. According to them, artifacts, core values and underlying assumptions that are shared by the majority of people help to identify a dominant culture. They recognize the existence of 3 types of subcultures which are differentiated based on or whether they support and encourage the core values of the dominant culture (enhancing), support the dominant culture and retain some values of their own (orthogonal), or have completely different values than the dominant culture (counterculture). This serves as the most highly organized distinctive and pervasive sources of subcultures in work organizations and people's occupations (Trice and Beyer, 1993). Because occupations carry ideas that have their origins outside organizations; they are referred to as imported subcultures. Occupations are regarded as influential since people derive much of their distinctiveness as persons and their social status from them.

Schein (1984 a, b) recognizes the existence of three kinds of subcultures, two of which are based on occupational communities. The two kinds of subcultures that are based on larger occupational communities are the operators and the engineers. The operators are the line managers and workers who make and deliver the products and services that fulfill the organization goal. The engineers are those that design elements of the technology underlying the work of the organization and have the knowledge of how that technology is to be utilized. The last type of subculture is the executive subculture. In other words the CEOs and their immediate subordinates share a common set of assumption based on the daily realities of their status and role (Schein, 1984a, 1984b).

Apart from occupational subcultures, two kinds of groups (formal and informal) may appear in work organizations (Trice and Beyer, 1993). Informal groups such as friendship groups and cabals and coalitions arise spontaneously without direction from formal authorities, whereas formal groups such as those that are a result of technology and work flows, hierarchical differences, line and staff distinctions act arise because people are grouped by authorities in certain ways (Trice and Beyer, 1993). Various subcultures occurring in organizations originate in their environment: a general managerial subculture, subculture based on fields of knowledge and demographic groupings as well as the occupational subcultures (Trice and Beyer, 1993). The last type of subculture identified by Trice and Beyer (1993) is a counterculture, which shares the same characteristics with that identified by Martin and Siehl (1983).

Models of Organizational Culture

The literature reveals that many authors suggested several models or typologies on organizational culture.

Schein's Model

Schein (1988:9) provides a model, which is based on the following definition of culture: "a pattern of basic assumptions-invented, discovered or developed by a given group as means 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 in relation to those problem.

According to Osaze (1997), as groups, over time they face two basic challenges: integrating individuals into an effective whole, and adapting effectively to the external environment in order to survive. As groups find solutions to these problems over time, they engage in a kind of collective learning that creates the set of shared assumptions and beliefs we call "culture". The external environment referred to is made up of the cultural, legal, political, economic, and social sub-environments; its inputs – raw materials, skilled and unskilled workers, production capacity and others.

Although the external environment is largely uncontrollable, it is still manageable with the organization's resources. The effective interaction between an organization's internal controllable resources, objectives, policies and strategies and those uncontrollable sub-environments, which have a direct impact on the functioning of the organization, determine to a large extent the degree to which the organization achieves its purpose.

The model shows that organizational culture exists at several levels, from the very visible to the very tacit and invisible. Artifacts are considered and the most visible level since they can be observed very easily as soon as one goes into an organization and hangs around for a few minutes (Schein, 1988). Some examples include the constructed environment of the organization, its architecture, its technology, its office layout, the manner of dress, visible or audible behaviour patterns and public documents such as charters, employee orientation material, stories, language, etc. (Schein, 1984).

Schein (1988) argues that although at the level of artifacts culture is very clear, one does not really know why the members of the organization are behaving as they do and each organization is constructed as it is. This is why one should analyze *the next level of culture (values)* and get informed about the values that determined behaviour in the first level (Schein, 1984, 1988). However, Schein (1985) notes that the values may represent the espoused values of the culture rather than the real values. In other words the values may predict well enough what people will say in a variety of situations but which may be out of line with what they will actually do in situations where these values should be operating. Due to the fact that the underlying reasons for peoples' behaviour at the second level remain concealed or unconscious, one ought to delve into the underlying assumptions, which are typically unconscious but which actually determine how group members, perceive, think and feel (Schein, 1984a). This is an imperative step, if one wants to really understand a culture and so ascertain more completely the groups' values and overt behaviour.

Hatch's Model

Criticism of Schein's model comes from Hatch (1993) who argues that although Schein's model continues to be relevant it needs to be changed. She believes that the model leaves gaps regarding the appreciation of organizational culture as symbols and processes. She also believes that symbols need to be introduced together with the rest elements of Schein's model and the symbolic interpretive perspective. She further argues that the second change that needs to be made relates with the centrality of the four elements.

She believes that the relationships linking the elements are so important that as a result they should be emphasized more than any other element (Hatch, 1993). She argues that the relationship

between cultural elements, which are described as processes, transform Schein's model into a dynamic model. Hatch states that the advantage of a dynamic version of organizational culture theory lies in the new questions it poses.

In contrast with Schein's model that focuses on what artifacts and values reveal about basic assumptions, Hatch's model asks how culture is constituted by assumptions, values, artifacts, symbols and the processes that link them. Another difference between the two models is that, whereas Schein's model explored how culture changes or can be changed, the dynamic view recognizes both stability and change as outcomes of the same processes. The four processes that appear in Hatch's model are referred to as manifestation, realization, symbolic and interpretive processes. Hatch (1993) argues that, "although Schein (1985) used manifestation and realization processes, a broader view led to incorporating symbolic and interpretive approaches, which suggested the inclusion of symbols and the processes of symbolization and interpretation.

In the model a clockwise or counter-clockwise direction is possible. Moreover, apart from the fact that all of the processes co-occur in a continuous production and reproduction of culture, none of the processes can stand on its own.

Conclusion

Following from the above, it is obvious that organizational culture offers a shared system of meanings, which is the basis for communications and mutual understanding. If these functions are not fulfilled in a satisfactory way, culture may significantly reduce the efficiency of an organization.

Culture is becoming more important in the managerial aspects. This is because culture affects the behaviour of the members of the organization, which in turn has a significant impact on performance. Culture is therefore an important variable in explaining an organization's performance or success. In other words, an organization's culture, which differs from one organization to another, is the key to its performance and these cultures can be manipulated to ensure that employees are enthusiastic, committed and compliant; without any need for tight control by managers.

In the light of the foregoing, it is recommended that, managers of organizations should include the positive aspects of organizational culture to improve the performance of their organizations and this should be backed by policy.

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