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Cultural problems in organizations

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CULTURAL PROBLEMS IN ORGANIZATIONS

Introduction

Culture can be defined as a human creation (Freire, 1970). It is the human part of the environment (Wang, Brislin, Wang, Williams, & Chao, 2000). In other words, culture is the non-biological aspect of life. It is the process of generating and sharing meaning within a social system. This social system comprises values, norms and ways of behaving and thus culture comprises the ways we interact, behave, and communicate with each another. Culture is something that is learned from parents, schools, the media and the broader community. Singer (1998) defined culture as a pattern of learned, group-related perceptions – including both verbal and nonverbal language, attitudes, values, belief systems, disbelief systems and behaviour that is accepted and expected by an identity group (Singer, 1998) Yet cultures are not fixed. They are changing and interconnected although the change may be slow or irregular. Cultures are dynamic as they are created and recreated through shared interactions (Gudykunst, 1983). As Paige (1993) has pointed out, cultures have an internal logic and coherence and hence their own validity. However, in order to facilitate communication between cultures it is necessary to understand human reality as socially constructed (Berger & Luckman 1967 cited in Paige 1993).

Today the world we live in is *a global village* where no nation, group or culture can remain anonymous. As the world is becoming smaller, we are increasingly interacting with people from many different cultures. While modern technology has made it easier for us to communicate with people anywhere in the world, such interactions can be difficult if we do not know how to deal with people and cultures different from our own (Samovar & Porter, 1991).

Therefore, culture is one of those words that have become increasingly problematic within organizations. Part of the problem is that culture is just too big concept and can encompass too many different themes. The need for intercultural communication is more important today than ever before. There are lots of people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds in organizations who may not share your perspectives or experiences. Understanding how to communicate with people from different cultures can therefore help expand your knowledge of the ways of others. As you learn

more about other people and their cultures you will also discover more about yourself and the influence of your own culture. This will give you a greater appreciation and tolerance of diversity, which can benefit you personally in many ways. Another issue is the goal-based focus of much management practice, a desire to achieve short-term predictable results before committing to a journey (Klopf & Park, 1982).

The 1980s had seen an increase in the attention paid to organizational culture as an important determinant of organizational success. Many experts began to argue that developing a strong organizational culture is essential for success. While the link between the organizational culture and organizational effectiveness is far from certain, it cannot be denied that each organization has a unique social structure and that these social structures drive much of the individual behaviour observed in organizations (Jandt, 2001). This article focuses on the ways in which cultural differences affect the behaviour of organizations' members and the cultural issues in organizations.

After determining the topic of 'cultural problems in organizations', research was made through searching keywords such as 'organizational culture', 'corporate culture', 'cultural problems', 'cultural differences', 'workplace diversity' in Google Scholar site and several articles on the subject were reached. The most relevant issues were selected from these articles.

Findings

Ravasi and Schultz (2006) state that organizational culture is a set of shared mental assumptions that guide interpretation and action in organizations by defining appropriate behaviour for various situations. At the same time although a company may have their *own unique culture*, in larger organizations, there are diverse and sometimes conflicting cultures that co-exist due to different characteristics of the management team. The organizational culture may also have negative and positive aspects which can affect employees' own perceptions and identification with the organizational culture. Schein (2009), Deal and Kennedy (2000), Kotter (1992) and many others state that organizations often have very differing cultures as well as subcultures.

According to Needle (2004), organizational culture represents the collective values, beliefs and principles of organizational members and is a product of such factors as history, product, market, technology, strategy, type of employees, management style, national cultures and so on. Corporate culture, on the other hand, refers to those cultures deliberately created by management to achieve specific strategic ends.

For global organizations there is an increasing need to get groups of managers from different nationalities to work together effectively either as enduring management teams or to resource specific projects addressing key business issues but many organizations have found that bringing such groups of managers together can be problematic and performance is not always at the required or expected level.

In a diverse community composed of two or more ethnic or cultural groups, conflicts are more likely to occur because of:

- Differences in group identity, which is shaped by the group's cultural values, history, socio-economic status, and perceived power.
- History of hostile interaction and discrimination.
- Misinformed stereotypes and perceptions caused by prejudiced attitudes and other external influences (e.g. the media). (Kien Lee, *Transforming Conflicts in Diverse Communities*).

In addressing the issues relating to developing effective international management teams it appears that the following areas should be considered:

- Identifying the nature and implications of national cultural differences within the team.
- Establishing a basis for building understanding and awareness of cultural differences and how they may be managed.
- Formulating a framework for developing a high performing team which takes account of cultural differences and leverages and the diversity present in an international team.

In his original work Hofstede identified four key dimensions which impact on national cultural differences. These are:

a. Individualism/collectivism: These dimensions reflect the extent to which individuals value self-determination as opposed to their behaviour being determined by the collective will of a group or organization.

b. Power-distance: The question of involvement in decision making lies at the core of this dimension. In low power-distance cultures, employees seek involvement and have a desire for a participative management style. At the other end of this scale, employees tend to work and behave in a particular way because they accept that they will be directed to do so by the hierarchy or the organization.

c. Uncertainty avoidance: This dimension is concerned with employees' tolerance of ambiguity or uncertainty in their working environment. In cultures which have high uncertainty avoidance, employees will look for clearly defined, formal rules and conventions governing their behaviour.

d. Masculinity/femininity: This is possibly the most difficult dimension to use in an organization context. In practice, the difficulty is more to do with terminology and linguistics, in Hofstede's work the dimension related to values. In highly *masculine cultures* dominant values relate to assertive-

ness and material acquisition. In highly *feminine cultures* values focus on relationship among people, concern for others and the quality of life. (Hofstede, 2011).

In an article in the *Financial Times* in April 1995 Houlder commented on the apparent feature of organizations to develop managers with cross-border capabilities; in that article Daive McGill of BP points out that: *Making someone aware of cultural diversity is something that has to start at day one when they join the company.*

Results, Discussions and Conclusions

The term *culture*, in this instance, is not as broadly defined as diversity; rather, culture, gender, race, social class and ethnicity. It is these groups' memberships that have had and continue to have significant roles in the country's economic, occupational, political, health and educational institutional structures.

Racial-ethnic groups, women, and people from the dominant (white male, and upper class) groups receive more of the social rewards due to greater political and economic power. It is recognized that organizations, like society, have distinct cultures, also known as *organizational* cultures. The culture of an organization derives from people who create, lead and manage it. If the people who make up the work force of an organization share the same cultural values as the organization, there is a good match between the organization and the individuals that comprise it. Where differences exist between the cultures, or group memberships, of the work force and the organization, the potential for conflict and poor performance exists.

In general, it is agreed that lack of attention paid to cultural issues in organizations can result in great expense, poor performance and untenable conflict among organizational participants. Therefore, it is essential that cultural issues should be addressed by organizational leadership as well as those on the vanguard of change in institutions (Carter, 2000).

In looking at diversity in international management teams it is important not to focus exclusively on the issue of cultural differences. In a recent Cranfield Executive Competences survey which examined management teams on a pan-European basis Kakabadse made the observation that: *To differing degrees, the same sorts of problems are shared across different nation states. The skill is not to be blinded by national parochial differences. Attention should be given to applying those levers that are required to focus on attaining business goals. This study reinforced the need to be clear as to the competences required for effective performance.*

Organization's leaders interested in cultural improvements need to proceed optimistically and yet understand that there are also other factors that will influence their success. When the organization's culture is clear, and cultural choices are being consciously made, both the organization and the individuals in it can achieve their maximum potential (Weisbord, 1978).

Besides the general and specific studies in cultural differences and how those differences impact communication between those from different cultures, other studies addressed global leaders in particular and how they approach issues with employees in the workplace. Two recent studies concerning global leaders in the workplace sought to compare influence tactics and sources of guidance across cultures (Kennedy, Fu, & Yukl, 2003; Smith, 2003). Smith, Peterson, and Schwartz (2002) sampled middle managers in 53 countries to ascertain the degree of reliance on each of eight sources of guidance. Generally, the survey sought to rank nations by their reliance on vertical sources e.g. hierarchical versus participative against their respective tendencies to rely on (a) *beliefs that are widespread in my nation as to what is right* e.g. traditional versus non-traditional; and or (b) unwritten rules as to how we usually do things around here. The results were reported in two tables and applied to the country and individual levels. Ultimately, Smith seems to succeed in his aim to highlight how leaders and co-workers need to have a firm understanding of the differences between themselves in order to work together more effectively.

It is also argued that it is important to draw a distinction between diversity and the individual differences' tradition in organizational studies in order to retain a central focus on power relations among identity groups and avoid diluting the diversity constructed to the point that any group composed of non-identical individuals becomes diverse by definition (Konrad, 1998).

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ABSTRACT

CULTURAL PROBLEMS IN ORGANIZATIONS

Culture includes organization values, visions, norms, working language, systems, symbols, beliefs, and habits. It is also the pattern of such collective behaviour and assumptions that are taught to new organizational members as a way of perceiving, and even thinking and feeling. Organizational culture affects the way people and groups interact with each other, with clients, and with stakeholders.

Workplace diversity is an issue which is focused on differences and similarities that people bring to an organization. It is usually defined broadly to include dimensions beyond those specified legally in equal opportunity and affirmative action for non-discrimination status. Diversity is often interpreted to include dimensions which influence the identities and perspectives that people bring, such as a profession, education, parental status and geographic location.

People from different cultures in the world find themselves interacting and working with individuals and groups from other cultures, operating and communicating according to differing sets of cultural norms, values, and

communication styles. Consequently, researchers and global leadership practitioners stress a heightened need for understanding other cultures and their people, finding possible issues and what factors show potential to impede effective communication within an organization characterized by cultural diversity.