

Introduction

[Psychology](#), [Behaviorism](#)



INTRODUCTION Culture is a term that is used regularly in workplace discussions. It is taken for granted that we understand what it means. In their noted publication *In Search of Excellence*, Peters and Waterman (1982) drew a lot of attention to the importance of culture to achieving high levels of organisational effectiveness. This spawned many subsequent publications on how to manage organisational culture (eg. Deal & Kennedy 1982; Ott 1989; Bate 1994). If organisational culture is to be managed it helps first to be able to define it, for definitions of culture influence approaches to managing culture.

CULTURE IN A BROADER SOCIAL CONTEXT In its very broadest sense, culture serves to delineate different groupings of people on the basis of the extent to which each group is perceived and perceives itself to share similar ways of seeing and interacting with the animate, inanimate and spiritual world (Benedict 1934; Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck 1961; Trompenaars 1993). Australian culture, for example, may thus arguably be described as more similar to that of the United States of America than to that of Malaysia. Cultures are based in history, developing over time as groups establish patterns of behaviour and belief that seem effective in helping them to interpret and interact with the world in which they find themselves. Australian ‘mateship’ behaviour, for example, served early male white settlers in a harsh and sparsely populated world much better than the maintenance of the hierarchical class distinctions typical of the world from which they had come. From such new, adaptive patterns of behaviour arise new beliefs, such as a belief in egalitarianism. These new behaviours, values and beliefs, together with the associated rituals, myths and symbols that arise to support them, combine over time to establish and then to reinforce

the core assumptions of the culture. In addition to providing implicit guidelines for behaviour and the channelling of emotion (Trice & Beyer 1993), cultures serve to give people a sense of belonging through collective identity and thus break down the intrinsic isolation of the individual. It is also important to realise that culture can also define differences between groups. Culture identifies particular groups by their similarities as well as their differences. Although cultures are dynamic to the extent that changed circumstances can lead to the incorporation of new patterns of behaviour or ideologies, typically these are overlaid on existing core assumptions and thus a culture may exhibit what seem to be complex ambiguities or paradoxes (Trice & Beyer 1993) until such time new behavioural adaptations to the environment give rise to a new belief system and set of core assumptions. This can be clearly seen in the case of egalitarianism, a value that is probably associated with a core assumption that life should be lived cooperatively, rather than competitively. While most Australians continue to proclaim egalitarianism as an Australian value, under the changed circumstances of greater urbanisation and commercialisation of labour, they also now display enthusiasm for job or salary-related status which tends to be associated with competitive behaviour. It may be that over time, as behaviours and values move towards competitiveness, deeply held assumptions about the viability of cooperative relationships will also shift to emphasise the greater viability of competitive relationships.

DEFINING ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Like wider delineations such as national culture, an organisational culture may be generally described as a set of norms, beliefs, principles and ways of behaving that together give each organisation

a distinctive character (Brown 1995). Like national cultures, organisational cultures form and are transformed over time. There is broad agreement amongst writers that around the time of its inception, an organisation responds to and reflects industry characteristics such as the competitive environment and customer requirements, together with the wider community values held by its employees, and also the values and behaviours of its founders or early leaders (eg. Schein 1985; Ott 1989; Gordon 1991). What may happen some years from the time of inception, however, is warmly debated, for at this point organisational culture writers and change agents divide into separate camps formed on the basis of distinct paradigms and perspectives. CONCLUSION What constitutes organisational culture and its perceived role in organisational success are contested, resting on perceptions of culture either as a historically-based, change-resistant, deep social system which underpins all organisational strategy and action, or as just one aspect of the total organisational system, manipulable through surface structures such as rewards. The paradigm adopted will determine which of the key points of leverage are deemed most likely to achieve the desired outcome of cultural maintenance or change. The perspective adopted will determine the focus of cultural change, development or maintenance activities, that is, whether they are to involve the whole organisation, identified sub-cultures, or small cells brought together for specific projects. There are no definitive answers to questions about the most appropriate way to change or maintain an organisational culture in order to provide for success or, indeed, whether change or maintenance is

required in a given context - to answer these question is the essential challenge facing the strategic leader.