

# Organisational culture and sub cultures



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One's organisations culture and its subcultures present an image of their values and ethics to onlookers. These may be scrutinised, both externally and internally, reevaluated and the image refined. How are these values and ethics developed within the organisation and how are they communicated? What role do subcultures have in shaping these values and ethics?

This essay will argue that the kind of role a 'management culture' has to play in the development and communication of one's organisations values and ethics is dependent upon several factors, the most pertinent; the style of communication utilised by the organisation's leadership/leader.

I will discuss the contribution of subcultures within an organisation to the organisation as a whole, whether that contribution may be positive or negative and whether the influence of the subculture is strong, withstanding, dominating or weak, subsiding, and to its demise.

Communication styles within an organisation between management and employees are discussed. A case study within a social organisation penetrates deeper into the management culture and their chosen communication method to illustrate how leadership can affect the outcome of a sexual harassment complaint. The organisation this study focuses on is a local tennis club which has affiliations with the district association, the state association and ultimately the national association.

Media reports regarding a sexual harassment case in a large private organisation are also discussed and analysed in the context of the development of the organisations values & ethics and the communication

systems in place available for the staff to report such cases to the management.

## **Organisational Culture and Sub Cultures**

Many researchers have investigated the phenomenon that is known as organisational culture, Pettigrew 1979; Schein, 1985, 1992, 2004; Martin, 2002; Sathe 1983, Pepper 1995; Shockley-Zalabak (2009) amongst them.

Shockley-Zalabak in her book *Fundamentals of Organizational Communication* defines organisational culture as:

‘ Unique sense of the place that organizations generate through ways of doing and ways of communicating about the organization; reflects the shared realities and shared practices in the organization and how they create and shape organizational events’ (p. 47)

While culture is often presented as a unitary entity, Miller’s (2009) approach follows others that most organisations have a dominant organisational culture but that they are made up of a few or many subcultures. Pepper (1995) states ‘ any large group of people who regularly interact within a workforce can expect subgroups to form on the basis of shared understanding and interpretations of events among members.’ (p. 38).

Meyerson & Martin saw this dominant culture made up of a ‘ diverse set of subcultures that share some integrating elements of the dominant culture’ (1987, p. 631). Of interest is Pepper’s 1995 reminder that these subcultures are ‘ often competing’ (p. 38) and Meyerson and Martins’ contention that these subcultures can lead to organisational conflict. Located throughout the organisation they can support or oppose an organisations dominant culture.

This idea of conflict being a negative attribute to harmony is considered in a 1996 report by Lewis, French, & Steane in *A Culture of Conflict*. Their opinion is that ‘ conflict can be positive force’ (p. 6) insofar as it ‘ stimulates interest and creativity, identifies and assists in resolving problems and promotes group cohesion (p. 6). Pascale, 1990 thought that it ‘ can also be a stimulus for organisational learning’ (cited in Lewis, French, & Steane 1996, p. 6)

There may be many sub-cultures within an organisation. There may be sub-cultures which are very active in contributing to the overall culture of the organisation and sub-cultures which continue their business with very little impact on the organisation. If an active & dominant sub-culture has conflicting views in regards to the values & ethics of the organisation a power struggle may ensue. This would very much depend on the sub-culture of the management of the organisation. What is the management’s style, how does it communicate with their employees, their own image and the systems in place to deal with conflicts of various guises.

As a sub-culture, the management culture has a residing impact within all cultures of an organisation due their power of influence and decision making capabilities. There are many forms of management cultures depending on the style chosen to lead/manage the organisation. Shockley-Zalabak (2009), Miller (2009) and others have discussed various management styles and the communication therein. At this point I will focus on the styles: Autocratic, Laissez-faire, Paternalistic, and Democratic, associating each with the role the styles play in the communication and development of the organisations values and ethics.

**Autocratic:** In an organisation with an Autocratic style of management the communication occurs top down from management to employees. This may assist with constant and similar decision making, allowing visible transference of desired values and ethics from the management but could also lead to unmotivated employees and the possible formation of a sub culture fervent with a ‘ Yes, Sir’ attitude and the diminution of the organisations values as a whole.

**Laissez-faire:** A relaxed almost non-management style which accepts broad avenues of communication. This style is often not deliberate in approach but an example of poor management. The role of management utilising this style of communication would be minimum in terms of their influence on values and ethics, however, this management style may yield greater effectiveness in small organisations or subcultures where all staff are professional in nature and have an interest/investment in the organisation/group, even if in the short term whilst management transitions to another style.

**Paternalistic:** In this style, communication occurs top down from the management to the employees, as in the Autocratic style of management, however channels are put in place for communication/feedback from the employees back to the management. The two styles are similar, though employees are likely to feel slightly more engaged under a Paternalistic management. The values and ethics of the management may be accepted to a greater degree due to the modest emphasis on their employee’s interests.

**Democratic:** The Democratic management style embodies a participative and involved directorship. Communication occurs vertically and laterally, and

employees are encouraged to take part in the decision making processes of the organisation. Under this style, decisions may be slowed, and the best action for the organisation not necessarily taken. The role of management under a Democratic style of leadership would be important in the communication and development of values and ethics, though due to the communication pathways there may be changes in the values whilst a consensus is reached within the organisation.

## **Values and Ethics**

Values impinge on every activity that mankind deals with. In the personal framework Johannesen (2002 p. 1) states that ' values can be viewed as conceptions of the good or the desirable that motivate human behaviour and that function as criteria in our making of choices and judgements'. From the organisational viewpoint Deal & Kennedy 1982, (cited in Shockley-Zalabak 2009, p. 103) describe values as ' the essence of a company's philosophy for achieving success, values provide the sense of common direction for all employees and guidelines for their day-to-day behaviour'. Shockley-Zalabak's (2009) own view is that ' values are part of the shared realities generated through organizational communication' and are ' reflected in organizational myths, stories, mission statements, physical surroundings, slogans and decision making, for example.' Further she suggests that ' organizational values are transmitted, maintained, and changed through organizational communication processes' (p. 103).

Ethics concern those values beyond societal norms, customs, virtues or values that spread through the human race. Shockley-Zalabak describes ethics as:

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...’Ethics, although related to values, are the standards by which behaviours are evaluated for their morality: their rightness or wrongness. When applied to human communication, ethics are the moral principles that guide our judgements about the good and bad, right and wrong, of communication, not just communication effectiveness or efficiency’, (2009 p. 111).

Johannesen, in *Ethics in Human Communication* (2002), writes that ethics shape individual and therefore organisational and societal values and standards. Concepts of ethical behaviour for an individual, a business and society may vary. An individual may hold views on standards and ethical behaviour that can evolve through both work and life contexts. In many cases standards and values that underpin work may conflict with the individual’s ethical basis.

Keeble (2005) draws attention to the fact that ‘ the presence of a code alone cannot guarantee ethical behaviour from employees’ (p. 80). Fritz et. al (cited in Keeble 2005, p. 80) concludes, for effective implementation of codes of behaviour they must be ‘ articulated by the organisation in its day-to-day routine activities’.

### **The local tennis club and its affiliations**

Tennis Australia is the governing body for all its members and affiliates within Australia. They are in partnership with their member state and territory associations and share the same aims and objectives. Tennis Australia and Tennis SA have developed the same member protection by-laws which revolve around practices and procedures, all to protect the members of the association. The district clubs which are affiliated with

Tennis Australia are directed to formally adopt and comply with the by-laws, make amendments to their constitution as appropriate, and ensure that their members are aware and have access to the by-laws.

The Tennis Australia Code of Conduct is ‘ designed to reinforce conduct which Tennis Australia considers is appropriate and to discourage behaviour which Tennis Australia considers inappropriate. It sets criteria to help those to whom it applies to distinguish between correct and incorrect moral judgments.’ (Tennis Australia, 2001)

Tennis Australia has developed a Member Protection By-Law. Member Protection (Tennis Australia, 2001) is all about practices and procedures, which protect a sports organisation’s members including athletes, administrators, coaches and officials. Member Protection is more commonly referred to as protecting members physically and emotionally from harassment, such as sexual harassment and racial discrimination.

The communication and development of the values at Tennis Australia (Tennis Australia, 2001) are aimed at internal and external stakeholders.

Values they consider important are:

Integrity underpins everything: From directors through to volunteers, all are expected to act with the utmost integrity and objectivity, striving at all times to enhance the reputation and performance of the organisation.

Our people are our strength: The importance of motivating and rewarding staff and of capturing intellectual capital and maximising the benefits of this capital by sharing it throughout the organisation are recognised.



They also have values concerning quality, accountability and customer priority.

These values are implemented through the Tennis Australia By-Laws (2001) which are communicated to the Regional Associations and Affiliated Clubs to ensure effective implementation and enforcement of the By-Law. It is mandatory for the Regional Associations and Affiliated Clubs to formally adopt and comply with the By-Law and if need be make appropriate amendments to their constitution. The Regional Associations and Affiliated Clubs also have the responsibility of ensuring that their members are aware of the existence of the By-Law and must make the By-Law and any amendments easily accessible.

The 'local' Tennis Club conform to this instruction by having a copy posted in the Club House to communicate this information to their stakeholders.

Their own values are:

Co-operation: To work as a team, valuing everyone's contribution and our partnerships

Excellence: To strive for excellence in all areas and provide opportunities for the achievement of quality outcomes

Fairness: To demonstrate fairness and equity in all activities with an emphasis on educating all on the principles of fair play

Integrity: To present as role models with honesty and trust evident at all times

Respect: To value every individual's participation, promoting and considering their rights while celebrating their successes.

Responsibility: To lead, plan and manage to ensure that sport is valued.

To fulfil these values, the club has adopted Tennis Australia's Member Protection By-Law; the aim is to ensure that everyone involved in the 'local' Tennis Club gets the greatest possible enjoyment from participating at the club and is safe from harm. If the club were not affiliated with Tennis Australia the member protection would only be that stated within the club's policy and not governed by a higher body.

## **Sexual Harassment & Case Studies**

A case study from personal experience concerning sexual harassment at a local tennis club and media reports of a sexual harassment case involving a large corporate organisation will consider the way the organisation's values and ethics have been employed by various levels of the organisation and downfalls in the communication systems in place to ensure the values and ethics are adhered to and correct disciplinary action taken.

The Equal Opportunity Commission of South Australia fact sheet (2009) on sexual harassment defines sexual harassment as:

' Sexual harassment is sexual behaviour which makes people feel offended, afraid or humiliated and in the circumstances, it is reasonable to feel that way'

The Legal Services Commission of South Australia Law Handbook (2009) website builds upon this meaning:

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‘ Sexual harassment includes unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature that a reasonable person would find offensive, humiliating or intimidating. The conduct can be spoken or written words, pictures or actions’.

Common examples of sexual harassment from the Equal Opportunity Commission of South Australia and the Legal Services Commission of South Australia Law Handbook include:

making remarks about a person’s appearance or attractiveness

asking a person questions about their relationship or sexual activity

sending emails with sexual content

showing a person pornographic pictures e. g. on a phone or computer

staring or leering in a sexual manner

unnecessarily touching the person

offensive jokes based on sex, pregnancy, race and so on

offensive gestures based on sex, pregnancy, race and so on

The Law Handbook continues that ‘ this behaviour is unlawful because it is a form of bullying or intimidation that affects a person’s ability to participate in public life.’

## **Case Study 1: Sexual Harassment Case at the ‘local’ Tennis Club**

In brief, a female member of the club (Jacky) was playing in a mixed doubles competition match with a male partner (George). During the course of the match George is alleged to have made numerous remarks about her body shape, told her jokes that had sexual innuendo, and whilst his partner was in the net position was allegedly positioned to watch her posterior as she prepared to play a shot. At the end of the match Jacky sought out the President of the club and made a verbal complaint about the incident. The Presidents initial response to the complaint was to point out that George was just ‘being himself’ and that he was a club hero and that she should not take it personally because he was like that with everyone. The President did not mention that George was a habitual harasser, that he was a close friend, or that there had been disquiet within other subgroups of the club towards his behaviour.

Not satisfied with the response she received, Jacky made a formal complaint in writing to the club’s organisational management citing the on court incident. The management comprised the President himself and seven other committee members. It may be noted that the initial reaction of the President to Jacky’s complaint was informal and did not bear too much concern for Jacky’s well being. Also, Jacky’s immediate complaint was informal and may seem rash, an action that could yield a similar response as received.

Shockley-Zalabak (2009, p 216) mentions the importance of leadership and management communication. She states that it effects all aspects of

organisational life, that managers are expected to be leaders and that leadership takes place through communication – a process of influence’. In this instance, the President of the club was not acting as a leader and illustrated this in his style of communication.

The case resulted in both Jacky and George leaving the Tennis Club with the President remaining and his image/respect untarnished. I am not sure what was discussed during the management meeting when the case was heard, but I do remember the general discussions around the club once this case was in the open. Many members felt sympathetic towards Jacky and had similar sentiments regarding George. Many though, still thought ‘ George is just being George’. The sighs of relief when George actually left the club tell a different tale.

## **Case Study 2: Sexual Harassment Case at PwC**

A case reported in the Age online newspaper by O’Dwyer (2005) involved PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) former partner Christina Rich. M’s Rich alleged that over a period of years she was subjected to a ‘ boys club’ culture, kisses on the cheek by her boss, and comments that she was only effective at work because of her figure. This was a landmark case which was settled in 2008.

Keeble, (p 81) states ‘ unethical behaviour on the part of managers, in terms of unmet promises to employees, results in employee action which can harm the organisation. This affects loyalty and involves internalisation of organisational values’. I would argue that irrespective of unmet promises any

unethical behaviour towards an employee could harm the organisation, especially if over a period of time.

During this case, PwC lost credibility of its aspired cultural values, both internally and externally and eventually settled with an incredible sum of money. It seems that there were adequate communication channels in place for complaints to be made. The issue was the way the management dealt with the complaints. A sub-culture with negative tones that did not uphold the values and ethics of the organisation was spreading its influence on the management and gaining greater momentum/power. In an interview with Daily Telegraph reporter Lisa Davies in 2008, Diana Kelly, Wollongong University associate professor said, ' it could be inferred that the settlement was in part recognition by PwC that there was at least some problem'. She continued that ' Without proper & focused attention, discrimination of all varieties could flourish and that it would ' take leadership from the top...it's about attitudes, process and behaviours.'