

Culture analysis

What is corporate culture?

Beneath the surface of everyday organisational life there are powerful forces shaping and constraining behaviour: the force of tradition, views and values about how things "should be done", the unspoken prioritisation of different activities together with beliefs about how to deal with people.

Collectively these forces create an informal, yet mostly hidden, set of understandings about how to operate that represents a backdrop against which the "action" of organisational life takes place.

Ways to consider culture

Culture is . . .

- the source of a family of concepts ...
- symbol, language, ideology, belief, ritual and myth (Pettigrew, 1979)
- the ways of thinking, speaking and (inter)acting that characterise a certain group (Braten, 1983)
- the taken-for-granted and shared meanings that people assign to their social surroundings (Wilkins, 1983)
- values and expectations which organisational members come to share. (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979)
- the social glue that holds the organisation together (Baker, 1980)
- how things are done around here. (Ouchi and Johnson, 1978)
- the collection of traditions, values, policies, beliefs and attitudes that constitute a pervasive context for everything we think and do in an organisation. (McLean and Marshall, 1983)

Why does it matter?

Corporate culture is sometimes described as "the glue that holds the organisation together"; it can also represent the glue that keeps things stuck when there is mounting pressure to change.

Why use a cultural approach to organisations?

- Because cultures profoundly affect our actions, form our perceptions and influence our values.
- Old solutions, however elegant, can become insufficient to achieve the nature and scale of adaptation required by changing circumstances.
- Because of organisations' propensity to recreate problems through their solutions.
- When trimming the sails is no longer sufficient, it may be time to build a hovercraft instead.
- When considering strategic change, it is an essential accompaniment to structural change - otherwise the risk is that old patterns are merely redistributed.
- To ensure continuing learning and development in an organisation.
- To reconcile and accommodate sub-cultural differences between parts/ sections of an organisation, or to accelerate the process of mutual adjustment between them.
- Because learning about culture safeguards against becoming a prisoner of it.
- Because cultural phenomena are becoming recognised as being of core significance to organisational success.

Basic beliefs

Our work with cultures is based on the following beliefs:-

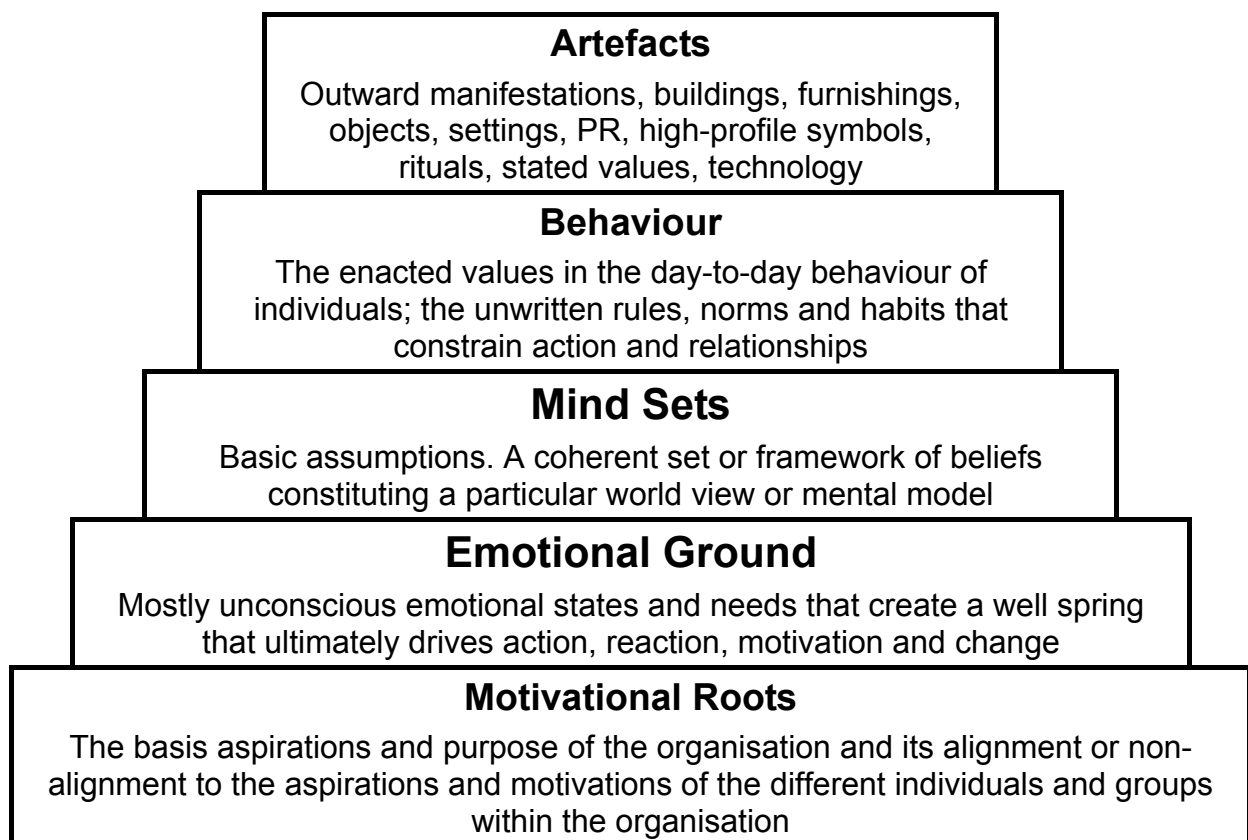
- Every organisation has its own unique culture (and sub cultures) in the same way that individuals have personalities.
- For the successful development of an organisation, an appreciation of cultural forces is essential. The success of major initiatives or important changes such as mergers, reorganisations or attitude change programmes often rests on cultural factors.
- The enormous potential for natural development and creativity inside all organisations is contained and channelled by cultural forces.
- Cultures can and do evolve. While cultural change cannot be forced or engineered, an organisation's natural capacity to change can be released, shaped and cultivated.

Levels of culture

Cultures are expressed in symbolic forms. Some are conspicuous and even carefully fashioned - a deliberate expression of recognised and accepted cultural norms. These high profile symbols will include logos, slogans, mission statements, publications and the like.

Others are more low profile, residing in the acts of individuals and departments, defined by the theories in use rather than those espoused.

We find it useful to consider aspects of culture, including the symbolic, as tending to operate on one of five levels, and we have used this to develop the following model:-



Most cultural change processes start by changing the artefacts. If the organisation does not quickly move on to also changing daily behaviour, there is likely to be an increase in cynicism, as there will be a growing gap between the espoused culture and what is being enacted. If there is not a subsequent shift in both mind sets and emotional ground, the culture change is not likely to be sustained and the "Goliath of habit and convention" will once more take hold.

Analysing the culture

1. Artefacts

Review the organisations logo, strapline, brand images, formal mission statements including vision, strategy and core values, and list the espoused brand image of the corporation.

Review the key rituals and formal events such as company conferences, AGM's, ways of receiving visitors, company buildings, etc and list three things that these tell you about the culture of the organisation.

2. Behaviour

Review how people dress, greet and engage with each other, behave at internal meetings and meetings with suppliers, customers and other stakeholders. How different levels of the hierarchy and different functions interact with each other. Also list the most critical and unwritten rules that operate within the company – what one has to do to be accepted as “one of us”.

3. Mindsets

Note the typical phrases, adjectives or metaphors that are used by the organisation to describe itself and to describe its customers and other stakeholder groups.

Now note what is the typical way that challenges or problems are addressed. Notice the way issues are framed and from this look at the perspectives and mindsets through which they view themselves, their stakeholders and their work.

4. Emotional Ground

Note down what is the dominant emotional feeling of how people engage with others, both internally and externally.

Note down what are the dominant emotions that are expressed at internal meetings – which of the following emotions are a) expressed, b) felt in the room but not expressed, c) not felt in the room.

- Anger
- Hatred
- Grief
- Love
- Excitement
- Joy
- Celebration
- Appreciation

Where is passion most evident within the organisation and where is the passion directed.

5. Motivational Roots

What motivates individuals to: a) join the company, b) work beyond the call of duty, c) in terms of where they want to go in their future.

Reviewing the whole cultural picture

Now review the data on each of the five cultural levels and list where there is alignment and misalignment across the organisation and its wider system (e.g., including its stakeholders), within each of the cultural levels. Within this review one should be able to not where there are significant subcultures in parts of the system and where there are contradictions within the organisational culture.

Also review where there is alignment and misalignment between the five levels of culture. This review should look at where there is a rift between the rhetoric of the organisation and the lived reality, which is between its espoused culture and its enacted culture. Also where aspects of the culture at the motivational and emotional levels are not aligned with what happens in behaviour and in the presentation to the outside world. Misalignment in this final area will lead to the organisation not fully utilising its deeper resources of energy.