

Chapter I

Organizational Culture and the Management of Organizational Memory

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes how organizational culture is both a “vessel” for preserving organizational memory and a force that conditions the way organizational memory is managed by other means. A detailed breakdown of the specific elements of organizational culture is conducted in order to describe this dual relationship. It is argued that the goal of managers should be the creation of a learning-oriented culture while avoiding the politicization of culture. Given that culture can not be manipulated directly, managers need to develop a sophisticated repertoire of leadership skills and a keen sense for socio-psychological dynamics. Specific advice on this count is offered at various points.

INTRODUCTION

More and more managers are using the language of organizational culture and corporate culture. It is not difficult to imagine why. Many managers want to know how people come to share perceptions, interpretations, and attitudes, as well as how workplace symbolism shapes the way people feel and act. The goal may not be conformity *per se*, as there are countless benefits to intellectual diversity. Nonetheless, there is a widespread belief

that certain types of intellectual commonality can reduce unproductive conflict, promote collaboration, and align work towards a single purpose—all without the need for overbearing supervision. There is also something about cultural pride that can lift the heart and inspire the mind to better serve the common good. Organizational culture is a potentially powerful force.

That potential goes largely unrealized. It is partly due to the *non-instrumental nature* of culture. An organization’s culture can not be

manipulated directly, as a manager might allocate resources or dictate a course of action. Culture is influenced indirectly and evolves erratically over time. The deliberate influencing of culture requires a sophisticated repertoire of leadership skills and a keen sense for socio-psychological dynamics. Organizational culture also goes largely untapped because of its *multidimensional nature*. When we speak about culture, we are actually referring to several distinct things: from the shared principles people espouse to the open secrets people feign ignorance of; from fickle fads and fashions to enduring taboos and norms; from arduous rites of passage to the status symbols of power; the list goes on. This complexity is not widely recognized. Despite four decades of scholarship on organizational culture, the term is used in countless ways, usually without precise meaning. In the workplace, wherever conceptual laxity and empty buzzwords reign, sloppy thinking and cynicism are sure to prevail. Much needs to be done to rehabilitate the concept for general consumption.

Knowledge managers have a big stake in this rehabilitation. Organizational culture relates to the management of organizational memory in two ways. First, organizational culture is a means by which meaning is transmitted over time within a workplace. Workers pass down lessons through oral histories. Knowledge is embedded in collective work habits. The shared assumptions and mental models that evolve within a collective frame the way work is understood and decisions are made. These are all examples of how organizational culture is a “vessel” that contains ideas and experiences from the past. Second, organizational culture influences the way information and knowledge is shared and preserved by other means. For example, the bonds of trust formed within a workplace affect how candid and direct workers dare to be. Social boundaries, such as those which surround cliques, can undermine the flow of information. Values and norms can affect people’s willingness to reflect on work and

codify worthwhile lessons. These examples show how culture is part of the work environment that conditions the way people think and act.

This chapter will explore the complexities of how organizational culture and organizational memory intertwine. This includes a discussion of the cultural features that help or harm the management of memory. One particular set of features is helpful: a *learning-oriented culture* of candor, constructive debate, joint reflection, respect for the past, and habitual knowledge sharing and preservation. A very different set of cultural features is harmful: a *politicized culture* of internecine conflict, territoriality, fad surfing, and sharky, egoistic careerism. What can a manager do to cultivate the good and weed-out the bad? The chapter will provide answers to that question at various points. Some comments about the future will round-out the discussion.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

If you ask a sample of managers about what they think “organizational culture” means, two typical responses will emerge. The first response is the notion of culture as a *unified social and ideological orientation*. For example, the managers may talk about an organization as having a “bureaucratic culture” or an “entrepreneurial culture.” They are speaking metaphorically about an organization as having a general attitude, disposition, or “personality.” The culture may be described as “strong” or “weak” (i.e., more or less coherent, evident, and changeable) but, other than that, any specific features will likely be described in vague, impressionistic terms. The second typical response is the notion of culture as a *social milieu or climate*. This can include any aspect of the social and physical context that influences the way people feel and think about their workplace. The culture may be described in terms of the general “currents” (or other environmental metaphor) that push and pull individuals in particular directions

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