

The Idea that organizational culture can be managed is preposterous. Discuss.

The debate over the possibility of a successful management of organizational culture is not new (Ogbonna and Harris, 1998). The competing arguments generally differ on the grounds of the level of culture in question. As I will show in the following discussion, the critical point in the debate is the question of what exactly constitutes culture. It is this key, definitive element that divides researchers and thus, debaters on this subject.

My examination of this subject will begin with a brief definition and description of organizational culture (hereafter OC); then, the components of organizational culture will be highlighted. After a brief discussion of the meaning of organizational culture management (hereafter OCM), the competing perspectives are presented and discussed, case studies and empirical work presented and compared, and finally the question of how preposterous the management of organizational culture is, is addressed.

Numerous opinions on what culture is exist (Harris and Metallinos, 2002). Denison (1990:2) views OC as the underlying values, beliefs and principles that serve as a foundation for an organization's management system as well as the set of management practices and behaviours that both exemplify and reinforce those basic principles. Pettigrew (1979) views it as a combination of beliefs and ideologies, and for Deal and Kennedy (1982); it is the way we do things around here.

It is generally assumed by OC researchers that there are three levels of organizational culture analysis: observable culture (or what Schein, 2004 describes as artefacts), shared values and beliefs, and common assumptions. (Schermerhorn, *et al* 1994; Schein, 2004; Ogbonna, 1993). This classification is important as we shall see later; our classification determines our interpretation of the results of culture change efforts.

OCM researchers do not share a consensus about the signification of culture management. The more common interpretation of culture management is to equate it with culture change. Seihl (1985:139) views culture management as management's attempt at articulating a possible culture, coming to agree that it is desirable and then attaining it through the sharing of desired values. Perhaps most illuminating is Ogbonna's caveat that managing culture is not synonymous with changing it, and may include "creating it, changing it, maintaining it and abandoning it. (Ogbonna 1993:8)

The competing views in the debate have been variously classified. Martin (1985) identifies the 'purists' and the 'pragmatics'; Legge (1995) recognizes 'protagonists' and 'detractors'; and Ogbonna and Harris (2002) adopted the classification of 'optimists', 'pessimists' and 'realists.' In this essay, I will be adopting the latter labels as I consider them more apt to capture all the sides of the argument.

The main theses of the three perspectives are that the optimists believe that OC can be managed; the pessimists insist that OC cannot be consciously managed and the realists opine that OC may be manipulated in certain circumstances (Ogbonna and Harris, 2002).

The optimists adopt a functionalist view of culture, and this was popularized by management writers in the 80's and 90's as a means of directly improving organizational performance. (Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Peters and Waterman, 1982).The optimists view OC as a variable and, by extension, believe that it is within the whims of managers to direct and control in line with their organizational goals (Bate, 1994; Brown, 1995; Ray, 1994).The rationale for this stream of research is the assumption that the conscious manipulation of culture in a predetermined desired direction is linked to business performance.

The pessimists are mainly academics whose main aim appears to be a description of theoretical soundness of the possibility of OCM rather than the utilitarian rationale of the optimists. These researchers view culture management techniques as a vehicle of control than as a means of performance improvement. (Alvesson and Wilmot, 1992). Wilmot, for instance, argues that culture control methods have served as potent means of management's control and domination of workers. They concede that the cultures of organizations do indeed change, but they insist that the direction and sustainability of change is not subject to the whims of management. The argument here is that culture is embedded at an unconscious level, thus untouchable by management intervention techniques. On purported claims of successful cultural management by the optimists, these authors argue that such ventures merely manipulate the tangible manifestation of observable culture, leaving the deeper unconscious assumptions of true culture unchanged (Anthony, 1990; Legge, 1994)

The realists view culture as metaphor, rather than as a variable. These authors argue that culture cannot be directly managed because it is what an organization *is* as against what it *has*. (Smircich, 1983:347). Martin (1985) contends that culture cannot be changed but that it may be manipulated under certain circumstances, such as during leadership change, periods of crises or during the formation of an organization. Meek (1988) argues that within certain limits, it is possible for management to influence certain aspects of an organization's culture. Thus, the realists seek a balance between extreme optimism and excessive pessimism. They are neither for nor against OCM. Rather, they insist that the application of the concept should be more fully explored so as to develop a better understanding of the dynamics of culture change (Ogbonna and Harris, 2002).

The above analysis reveals the plurality of positions on OCM. Ogbonna and Harris (1998) attempt to explain the difference in results by noting that the results depend on the level of culture considered. In essence, the lens adopted by the researcher determines his/her position about culture management. Thus, where culture is defined broadly to include artefacts, culture manipulation is often presented as feasible. Conversely, where it is viewed narrowly, as assumptions (as in Schein, 2004), culture management is seen as impossible.

A notable criticism of the optimistic view of OCM is that it advocates the inculcation of organizational values to lower level employees who lack sufficient power and status to participate in the process of determining organizational values and to develop appropriate and legitimate means of resistance. Thus, there is a question about the ethics of such control programmes, notably, exploitation and emasculation (Ogbonna and Harris, 1998). This criticism is both tenable and well founded.

Silvester et al (1999) note that there is no point just being critical of the notion of controlled cultural intervention without providing alternatives to the process, thus legitimizing the realist position.

Empirical work in this area noted significant findings. Rosenthal et al (1997) noted a case of successful culture change in a retailing organization. Ogbonna and Harris (1998) reported a degree of success in culture change management at a food retailing organization they studied (Westco). Their findings suggest that although there was significant alteration in the behaviour and values of Westco staff, this might be explained by the imperative of compliance with management change agenda rather than because of a genuine willingness to change. In any case, they note that the basic assumptions (which Schein, 2004 refers to as culture) of Westco staff remained intact.

The single-company focus of the above study and its concentration within a single industry raises questions of the extent to which these findings can be generalized.

A similar study by Harris and Metallinos (2002) in a Greek food retailing concern (Islaco) again reported that artefact and behavioural change occurred, even though management will like to

believe that culture change actually occurred. They noted that even where culture change (of assumptions) occurred, such change could not be attributable to management's change efforts. Overall, they conclude that the assumptions of Islaco workers were not managed. This study confirms the work of Ogbonna and Harris (1998) in a different national context.

In response to the limitations of their earlier work, (Ogbonna and Harris, 2002) attempted to see if the results of their 1998 study held true in a different industry -the hospitality industry. It is also noteworthy that this study was based on four companies, thereby overcoming a core criticism of their earlier work. This study is remarkable in that it reports a more realist view of organizational culture management. The authors suggest that a range of cultural changes were recorded. They then argue that it appears more practical to conceive of culture change as a continuum rather than as a dichotomous event. The implication of this is that the earlier framework that determined the occurrence of culture change as having polar possibilities is challenged, thus making the description of the possibility of culture management as 'preposterous' a non-issue. By this framework, a possible spectrum of outcomes can be accommodated, thus the argument should be the degree of change in question and not whether or not change has occurred.

In summing up, it is noteworthy that although the optimists will have us take for granted the possibility of OCM and the pessimists insist that this line of thinking is fundamentally flawed, the argument of Ogbonna and Harris (2002) appear particularly compelling. If the allowance could be made for a plurality of possibilities as they suggest, then the debate is needless. On the basis of the evidence available, the conceptual possibility of accommodating a more encompassing definition of culture makes this theoretically possible.

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