

Culture in Business: Using a Symbolic Approach to Connect Organizational and Corporate Cultures

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Introduction

In trying to understand the modern business organization, few concepts have been applied (and misapplied) by management and organizational theorists as frequently as culture. The genesis of this is likely the publishing of Deal and Kennedy's *Corporate Cultures* and Peters and Waterman's *In Search of Excellence*, both best-sellers in the early 1980s (Hamada 1998:1; Gamst 1989:15; Jordan 1989:2). Both non-anthropological works had a considerable impact on business thinking and in many ways challenged the idea of what culture is. Since then, the idea that culture exists in organizations has grown in acceptance to the point where most business leaders now take it for granted. And herein lies a significant problem for organizations: over the past thirty years the richness and salience of the culture concept has been diluted and devalued by the prevailing conventional wisdom. It is considered yet another faddish management tool rather than a valuable social process that reveals the holistic nature of human group behavior.

Today, when management talks about culture within their organizations, they often focus on tacit qualities they want to encourage among their employees or they use culture as a branding tool for attracting new employees and retaining current ones. While I don't want to completely disparage the intent behind these efforts, I do argue that these simplistic and directive efforts ignore the complex symbolic and individualistic meanings that exist within

an organization. It's these symbols that help define the structure of the culture and ultimately guide the behavior of the organization's employees.

In this paper I explore how culture has come to be defined and applied in the business organization and how this differs from the more traditional concepts of culture as developed by anthropologists. This contrast will be important as I examine organizational culture as viewed from a symbolic analysis. This paper will show how the theories of symbolic anthropology can provide a useful understanding of culture that reveals how organizational actors formulate meaning and reality in their collective work.

Culture in the Business Organization

The study of culture has been an essential part of anthropology since the field's inception more than a century ago. However, that has not bestowed anthropologists with an exclusive ability to define the concept. Borofsky highlights the wide range of definitions when he notes that culture tends to be "increasingly illusive" the more we examine it (2001:432). Perhaps anthropology's inability to articulate a common understanding of culture fostered the conditions for the more mainstream business concept that has become prevalent over the past 25 years. Whatever the case, what can be agreed upon is that culture remains (and likely will remain) a nebulous and controversial term.

But for those of us who continue to pursue culture as a vehicle for better understanding group behavior and analyzing people-systems in the business environment, we still need to come to grips with what culture is even if we add yet another definition to the mix. For the

purposes of this paper, let's adopt Michaelson's position in which he argues that Boas's definition should be the fundamental concept for discussing organizational culture:

Culture may be defined as the totality of the mental and physical reactions and activities that characterize the behavior of the individuals composing a social group collectively and individually in relation to their natural environment, to other groups, to members of the group itself and of each individual to himself. It also includes the products of these activities and their role in the life of the groups. The mere enumeration of these various aspects of life, however, does not constitute culture. It is more, for its elements are not independent, they have a structure (Michaelson 1989:11).

While surely not his intent, Boas offers us a fairly constructive map for approaching culture in business. The most salient element here is its focus on a holistic perspective that encompasses the relationships between individual and group; culture is not a listing of traits and attributes, but a structured connection binding attitudes, behavior, and action. Viewed from this perspective, culture is both wider and deeper than most managers and other organizational actors might appreciate.

The Corporate Culture Problem

If we accept this premise of organizational culture (or at the very least that organizational culture represents a totality of the individuals and groups contained within it), then we're presented with an intriguing and vexing problem: integrating organizational culture with what has come to be known as *corporate culture*. On the surface, these may seem to be synonyms for the same concept. However, examining closer we see that they are two very different ideas.

If organizational culture shares similarities to more traditional forms, then we can just as easily consider corporate culture to be a distinct version unique to the business world. It

appears to be a more or less direct descendent of the culture concept proposed in the early 1980s through Deal and Kennedy's *Corporate Cultures* and Peters and Waterman's *In Search of Excellence*. Both mainstream best sellers brought an organization development application to culture and shaped it in ways that anthropologists might argue is inappropriate. Now, rather than applying a Boasian holistic view of individuals and their behaviors, culture assumes more of an ancillary business function. This actually gives management a distinct advantage since it can use culture to manipulate employees toward focused strategic objectives while continuing to separate soft personnel issues from the "hard business aspects of technology, finance, and corporate control" (Batteau 2001:726; see also Michaelson who argues that culture in this form is bastardized or otherwise confused for basic business concepts 1989:11).

The Dilution of Culture

As anthropologists have taken a closer look at corporate culture, one significant question that has emerged is whether this is actually culture or whether it's simply another management tool intended to measure performance. Walck argues that it actually dilutes the efficacy of culture as a concept. One of her primary arguments is that management all too easily reduces it to a crude tool to measure a "culture gap"; one that can be judged to be either correct or in error based on management strategy (1989:2). As if to further illustrate this point, Michaelson discusses three common categories that organizational consultants use to classify these culture gaps in corporations: structural, evaluative, and prescriptive (1989:11). Based on this top-down management perception of how culture can be fixed to

solve most organizational problems, Gamst may be accurate in his assertion that corporate culture merely produces another form of ethnocentrism. (1989:14)

The problem we're faced with is that there is no longer a clear distinction between corporate culture and organizational culture in the thinking of management. There is usually only corporate culture which reflects reality in very limited ways. Culture becomes a pale imitation of what the organization should look like based on the often-detached perspective of senior management. What's needed is a refreshed view of culture that takes into account a more holistic understanding of how all social actors within an organization operate. I propose that such a bridge between the concepts may be found through a symbolic approach.

Enter Symbolic Anthropology

There are several possible anthropological and non-anthropological theories we can utilize to examine this question of culture in modern business. For the purpose and scope of this paper, I'm concentrating on the theories of symbolic anthropology, which focus on the role of symbols and how they can lead to a more effective interpretation of organizational culture.

Description and Primary Themes

While there have been a few prominent theorists in symbolic anthropology, Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner are arguably the two individuals most often cited as key architects of this school of thought. Each created different and independent variants that continue to

influence thinking around culture, society, and the relationship each has to an overall sense of meaning.

The focus of Geertzian anthropology has consistently been the question of how symbols shape the ways social actors see, feel, and think about their world. He argued that "culture is not something locked inside people's heads, but rather is embodied in public symbols, symbols through which the members of a society communicate their worldview, value-orientations, ethos, and all the rest to one another and future generations" (Ortner 1984:129). Culture is a product of acting social beings trying to make sense of the world in which they find themselves, and if we are to make sense of a culture we must situate ourselves in the position from which it was constructed. In this model, we move away from the management-centric and monolithic corporate culture to a more egalitarian, holistic, and descriptive organizational culture (1984).

Turner, on the other hand, proposes a different perspective that has more in common with a functional/Marxist approach. Rather than examine how culture contributes to solidarity and harmonious integration, this school is more interested in understanding how this sense of solidarity is constructed and maintained over the conflicts and contradictions that are the natural outcome in groups of people. Symbols become operators in the social process and can be "investigated for the ways in which they move actors from one status to another, resolve social contradictions, and wed actors to the categories and norms of their society" (Ortner 1984:130; She notes that neither Geertz nor Turner actually termed their

theories under the umbrella of symbolic anthropology and postulates this was probably an action from those who opposed their theories).

The Nature of a Symbol

What exactly constitutes an organizational symbol? Gamst describes them as the atomistic unit for collective culture (1989:14). On a broader level, they are the espoused beliefs, ideologies, stories, myths, rituals, ceremonies, and artifacts of the society. It's not hard to imagine how these elements typically arise in anthropology. A symbol is an object; the power of the object lies in its shared public meaning. Further, a symbolic anthropologist – particularly one from the Geertz school – will argue that once the meaning of an object is brought into the social arena, that symbol takes on a stability and objectivity that “considers both the functions and dysfunctions of organizational culture” (Hallett 2003:129).

Application of Symbolic Theory in the Organization

Symbolic theory offers anthropologists and non-anthropologists alike a rich way to examine and understand culture in organizations. Business organizations can be wildly different. Even organizations in the same industry selling essentially the same products and services display different cultures. This is due to the something that makes Geertz an intriguing philosophy and that's a focus on ethos. It's ethos that differentiates one organizational culture from another.

Dandridge, Mitroff, and Joyce were likely the first to apply Geertz's thinking on symbols to the organization. Their definition of “organizational symbolism” refers to “those aspects of

an organization that its members use to reveal or make comprehensible the unconscious feelings, images, and values that are inherent in that organization. Symbolism expresses the underlying character, ideology, or value system of an organization. In making this character comprehensible, symbols can reinforce it or can expose it to criticism and modification” (1980:77)

The types of symbols we can examine within an organization include functions such as stories, myths, and anecdotes (verbal); ceremonies and ritualized events (actions); logos and physical artifacts (material). Each of these phenomena expresses deeper levels of meaning that go beyond the simple action or object involved; they inform us of the nature and character of the organization’s identity. They relate to the fact that culture is a framework of meaning that actors within the organization use to make sense of what they are doing, what they have done, and perhaps most importantly, what they should do (Dandridge 1980:79; Batteau 2001).

Symbols as Tools for Organizational Culture

To give a better sense of what these functions are and how they manifest themselves in organizational life, here are some examples.

Verbal

Every organization has its share of stories and myths that help define its history, successes, and struggles. They can appear in both written and oral forms and provide a compass for current employees and new employees. These can be ordinary tales emerging from a weekly sales call or legends of how the founders built the company from their garage.

Stories are a powerful tool for helping individuals make sense of their environment and plot future courses (Boje 1991:124).

Actions

In an organization, actions such as rituals and events may seem to be a more obscure source of symbolic meaning. We might not easily consider that staff and company meetings, group lunches, and team retreats hold symbolic value to the organization's culture. One could argue that this is due to a palpable lack of meaning already felt by employees when it comes to events like these. But these feelings still relay valuable information about the culture.

Material

A material object takes on a different quality when a relationship forms between it and the individuals within an organization. Examples of such materials include corporate logos, status symbols, company products, and employee awards.

Dandridge, Mitroff, and Joyce created an informative schema that relates these functions and types of organizational symbolism to three broad categories. The first is descriptive which provides an experienced expression of the work situation and related feelings. The second is energy controlling which considers the extent to which a symbol inspires or demotivates individuals. The third category is classified as system maintenance, which focuses on how a symbol justifies or reinforces the stability of the organization. (Dandridge et al provide an illustrative table demonstrating how functions and categories related to each other 1980:79)

One significant benefit of a symbolic analysis is its aim to undo the connections of culture as a monolithic and ultimately subjective entity. An assumption frequently made by organizational executives and managers is that the workplace climate is comprised of one singular, linear culture when, in fact, it is more complex than that. Organizational symbols offer a basis for multiple, overlapping cultures that can be observed according to how employees publicly relate to them.

Take, for instance, the founding story as a symbol that's intrinsic to nearly any organization, regardless of its age. The circumstances around why and how a company was built provides not only a compelling story but conjures up a certain type of mythology that can fuel individuals through challenging times. It becomes part of the organization's oral tradition. However, this story is not the culture; rather it's how the individuals within the

Symbolic Power and It's Role in the Organization

The issues of control and power are endemic to all organizations and can't be ignored if we want to understand behavior. Hallett argues that organizational culture is a negotiated order that is influenced by those with the symbolic power to define the situation (2003:129). The use of symbolism here is yet another form to consider but owes much to Geertz's work. Employees must first recognize the legitimacy of the power and then act in accordance with the symbol's shared meaning. Symbolic power then becomes a product of social interactions (141; Jordan 1994:6).

This offers us a part of answer to the question of who controls symbolic meaning within an organization. It is not exclusive to management or certain institutional functions such as

human resources. This is where more simplistic views on corporate culture begin to fall apart. Executives may believe their power is innate in their position and gives them the exclusive ability to guide and manipulate their organization's culture. A more honest assessment suggests that control over the symbolic meanings that perpetuate organizational culture is dispersed throughout to each employee.

Summary and Conclusion

What's the impact of symbolic theory on our understanding of organizations? Considering that so much of what passes for cultural analysis is based on a corporate culture perspective, examining how all employees – regardless of their place in the hierarchy – formulate their daily reality is essential when studying an organizational climate. The heart of symbolic anthropology puts the social actor squarely in the middle of the analysis and can be far more objective and enlightening than a management-centric study focused on core objectives and manipulating human resources.

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