A review of literature on organisational culture and its relation to the library sector

Michael Pawlus, MA Librarianship Student, University of Sheffield, {michael.pawlus [at] gmail [dot] com}

Abstract

Literature on organisational culture is reviewed using sources which specifically address issues relevant to librarians as well as sources from other disciplines. The information gathered is ordered thematically and includes investigations into different models used for typologies, the affects organisational culture has on performance, the measurability of organisational culture, and ways in which organisations can manage cultural change.

Introduction

Organisational culture was once seen as “how things are done around here” (Drennan, 1992) but has since evolved into a facet of management with a robust range of literature affording a far deeper understanding. Schein’s definition (1985) remains one of the most often used and can be summed up as the learned product of group experience which affects the behaviour of individuals. Organisational culture is differentiated from organisational climate in that it is not as overt. Organisational culture is also differentiated from organisation structure in that structure has more to do with the relationships between individuals in an organisation.

The study of organisational culture rose to prominence following the Japanese Miracle where academics tried to understand Japan’s rapid economic recovery following World War II. Culture was pinpointed as an essential element of their resurgence and as such gained traction as an important area to study for organisations from all sectors with libraries being no exception. This literature review looks at work from many disciplines in addition to that which specifically deals with libraries to see what prominent authors in the field of organisational culture have identified as models for understanding the differences between culture types, the effect that organisational culture has on performance, the methods by which organisational culture can be measured and how cultural change can be managed effectively.

Differing Models of Organisational Culture

Models for categorizing cultures have evolved over time. Handy (1978) provided one of the earliest typologies, which used picture as examples. His simple illustrations made conceptualizing the categories very easy. He used the images of a web, temple, lattice, and cluster to show examples of cultures based on whether power was heavily centralized (web) or dispersed (cluster). The problem with Handy’s model is that whilst it can be seen as a linear progression the use of different pictures enforces metaphors for the different culture types which imply a sense of distinct delineation where no middle ground could exist.

Deal and Kennedy (1982) were the next to make a model. This model looked outside of the organisations being described to include external forces. Their model uses the degree of risk (high or low) and feedback speed (fast or slow) to create groups. The resulting groups are: the tough-guy, macho culture (high risk/quick feedback); the work-hard/play-hard culture (low risk/quick feedback); the bet-your-company culture (high risk/slow feedback); and the process culture (low risk/slow feedback). Since, this model uses two sets of opposing values it could be graphed to show relative weighting. However, the groups used, whilst not as concrete a set of abstractions as seen in Handy’s model, still lend themselves to an all-or-nothing categorisation.

The next model has been widely used amongst librarians (Faerman 1994. Holloway 2004, Varner 1996). This model, created by Quinn and McGrath (1985), charted organisations based on the nature of information exchanges with stability or a highly controlled information exchange structure on one side of an axis and flexibility or a more relaxed, informal information exchange structure on the other. On the perpendicular axis, one extreme is an internal focus or a large amount of information
exchanges within the organization and on the opposite side is an external focus or small amount of information exchanges. Budd (2005) notes that organisational culture is not a force which only acts in one direction upon the individuals in an organisation but is also acted upon by the individuals within an organisation. Quinn and McGrath’s model seems to enjoy so much success still because it accounts for both directions of influence.

**Effect on Performance**

Whilst many different models exist for the categorization of cultures, the next area to explore is whether any one culture type is better than any other. Early research suggested that strong cultures, or those with widely accepted beliefs within the organisation, performed better than those with a lack of shared values (Peter and Waterman, 1982; Pascale and Athos, 1986; Deal and Kennedy, 1982). However, when culture is too strong it can lead to stagnation and a reduced ability to adapt to changes in the environment (Cloke and Goldsmith, 2002). Schein (1985) actually predicts in *Organizational Culture and Leadership* that the culture of the future would be the one that heavily promoted active learning and training.

For librarians, before the idea of what constitutes the best culture can even be considered, the idea of what is meant by performance must be addressed. Early papers on the link between culture and performance show that the culture of libraries was effectively one without goals (DuMont, 1980). This prompted Martell (1989) to advocate libraries adopting a business model in order to increase productivity. However, a business model is too incongruent since performance for commercial organisations is often so tied to profits. For libraries, performance is best related to service quality. Holloway (2004) makes a case for the use of LibQUAL+ or the Balanced Scorecard to measure the service quality, and thus performance, of academic libraries. Edgar (2006) is a little more cautious, emphasizing the need for libraries to balance LibQUAL+ results with other factors which affect them uniquely.

However, one problem concerning culture’s effect on performance remains. Even if performance is clearly defined and links are established, organisations do not exist in a vacuum. Amidst the overall organisational culture are a series of subcultures and demographic cultures, which can cause members to experience a limited adherence to the dominant culture (Tsui, 1992).

**Measurability**

Given that organisational culture does appear to have an effect on performance, the next question is how can that effect be measured? Several tools have been introduced. O’Reilly III (1991) developed the Organisational Culture Profile which showed the relationship between an employee’s values and an organisation’s values. This is a useful tool but is limited by the assumption that people would be more productive in organisations where there is a value match, which ignores the ability of staff to influence an organisation’s culture.

A tool for only measuring the organisational culture is the Competing Values Framework, created by Quinn and Rohrbaugh (1983), which established a system for plotting an organisations culture against a chart of competing values. The competing values were the same as the chart later developed by Quinn and McGrath (1985) moving from a focus on people to a focus on the organisation along one axis and from a stable culture to a flexible culture along the other. The resulting quadrants are: clan (flexible/person-focused), which is like a family; adhocracy (flexible/organisation-focused), which is an innovative, risk-taking culture; market (stable/organisation-focused), which is results-driven; and hierarchy (stable/person-driven), which is a controlled, efficient culture. Using a series of multiple-choice questions on an organisation produces a set of results, which can then be plotted on a chart creating a graphic representation of the relative degree to which that organisation fits into the four aforementioned quadrants.
This model was later augmented to become the Organisational Culture Assessment Instrument, which allowed organisations to chart their current values against the values that staff would like them to have (Cameron and Quinn, 1999). This tool has been used by several librarians (Kaarst-Brown, 2004; Shepstone, 2007; Varner, 1996) with the results indicating that most staff wished to work in a culture that was part-clan and part-adhocracy. However, Schein (1996) warns against putting too much faith in any measurement system as they all seek to measure an abstract term by introducing further abstract terms.

**Changeability**

Once an organisation is measured, the next area to explore is the extent to which those measurements can be used to help facilitate change. It appears that most writers on the topic are sceptical of an organisation’s ability to make changes to the underlying culture (Lundberg, 1985; Dyer, 1985; Schein, 1985). Instead, these authors put forth models that show how an organisation can respond to radical, large-scale changes usually following a major environmental or internal crisis. However, one model (Gagliardi, 1986) articulates the need for gradual, incremental change. In this model, a vision is put forward and accepted until it fades into the background or becomes, as Schein (1985) would put it, an assumption. When any assumption is shown to no longer work, then the current culture is reinterpreted so that the negative psychological effects resulting from change (Toffler, 1990) are mitigated.

Articles on libraries have posited the need for both changes. In one case, the large-scale technological changes occurring outside libraries is creating a need for a drastic cultural change (Jurow, 1996; Lewis, 2004; Giuse, 1999) with calls for increased collaboration amongst all staff and further opportunities for junior staff to engage in self-directed learning. On the other hand, after acknowledging that libraries are currently in the middle of a seismic redefinition, many are calling for libraries to continue periodic realignments to remain ahead of trends going forward (Lakos, 2004; Wei, 2005; Lewis, 2004). However, libraries will need to be careful to ensure that senior staff feel like they are still valued highly during this process of increasing the role and responsibility of library assistants. Research has shown that during changes of this magnitude senior staff may act in accordance with changes but their underlying beliefs, what they may believe to be the proper class distinction between librarians and support staff, may remain unchanged (Sathe, 1985; Ogbonna, 2003).

**Conclusion**

The literature reviewed shows that organisational culture is important and does affect an organisation’s performance in a meaningful way. However, whether or not culture can be measured is debatable because it is hard to establish causal relationships and to identify one correct set of cultural values to use as a global benchmark across all sectors. However, within the library community writers seem to believe that creating and maintaining a fit between staff values and organisational values is important. In addition, a willingness to continually provide training opportunities to all staff so they are better situated to help the organisation adapt to a rapidly changing environment is also seen as a vital component of organisational culture in the current climate.

**References:**


