Step One: Understanding the Concept of Culture

Constructing the Set

*Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs.*

—Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 1973, p. 5

Objectives:
- Understand the concept of culture
- Realize the significance of different images and metaphors in understanding organizations
- Understand three “levels” of organizational culture
- Realize that most organizations do not have a single commonly understood “culture”
- Learn the approach to defining culture used in this workbook

Stage Terms:
- Culture as a variable
- Levels of culture
- Culture as a root metaphor
- Metaphor

Good News, Bad News

To enhance our performances on the stage, we have to be clear about what play we are performing. The set construction will be determined not only by the play but also by the director’s interpretation of the work. In short, in order to construct the set, we need to define the term *culture*. The good
news is that culture can be defined. The bad news is that different ways of defining the term can sometimes lead to confusion. The examples below are just a few of these differing takes on the term culture.

- Culture is the way things are done in the organization (Deal & Kennedy, 1982, 2000).
- Culture is “a basic pattern of assumptions . . . that has worked well enough to be considered valid, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to these problems” (Schein, 1992, p. 9).
- “Culture is a system of shared symbols” (Geertz, 1973).

The differences in definitions betray important assumptions about what to study when analyzing culture. Each definition may produce different but useful views of organizational culture. Popular literature on organizational culture may not make the differences clear, and consultants and managers may not realize the importance of these differences. For example, if culture is just one more facet of an organization, then it may be changed as easily as a strategic plan or office layout. If culture is something an organization is, then it may be harder to change and should be considered in all other decision making within the organization.

The Concept of Culture

Smircich (1983) provides a good beginning place for defining culture by raising the key question concerning organizations and culture: Does the organization have a culture or is it a culture? According to Smircich, there are two major ways culture has been studied in organizations: as a variable and as a root metaphor. Most current research and consultation on cultures take one of these approaches or a combination of both. These two approaches indicate the richness and diversity of ways to study culture. Understanding these approaches will aid you when you pick up other books or articles on the topic of organizational culture in that you will better understand their focus. Furthermore, these differing approaches provide a backdrop for the approach we take in this workbook.

Culture as a Variable

The culture-as-a-variable approach focuses on causality. Culture is thought to be able to predict and thus cause certain outcomes. You might view culture as variable “X” (values, norms, etc.) that is influencing variable “Y” (productivity, for example). This relationship, as you might imagine, is complex due to the fact that culture is not an easily defined variable. For example, try to answer the question, What make a culture “good” or “strong”? and you will find that the answers are not easily placed in a formula. Based on the variable approach, a manager who does not have a clear understanding of the complexity of the culture variable might say something like: “If we could just get our culture stronger, our productivity would go up.” The challenge or potential problems arise when this same manager attempts to strengthen
the culture without a clear sense of what is to be strengthened and how culture influences productivity. Are values to be strengthened? Rules? Norms?

In the above example, the complexity of the variable of culture is evident. Within the variable approach, however, there are two lines of inquiry: internal variable and external variable. The variable approach may focus on internal variables thought to influence culture. In this instance, organizations are viewed as producing culture as evidenced in such cultural artifacts as rituals, heroes, and norms. Consultants and researchers are therefore interested in exploring aspects of culture (e.g., leadership values, norms, structures) that predict organizational survival and effectiveness (Collins, 2001; Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982).

The variable approach is also evidenced in comparative or cross-cultural management research that takes into account culture as an external variable. As an external variable, culture is seen as a map for navigating differences across organizations and differences in national cultures. For example, Mexican organizations have been compared with U.S.-based organizations in their orientation to time and relationships (Condon, 1997). In this example, the values of the larger national culture influence the organization in connection with communication surrounding time and relationships. This approach focuses on ways to tap into national cultural differences to win out over the competition (Harris & Moran, 2000; Ouchi, 1981). Hofstede (2003) has done extensive research on the underlying value assumptions that help to differentiate workers in one national culture from another. Thus, for instance, U.S. culture shares common assumptions about the value of individualism in contrast to Japanese or Hispanic cultures that tend to be more collectivistic. Given the widespread recognition of international economic interdependence, the importance of understanding national cultural influences will only increase.

Understanding the influence of national culture on organizational culture is an important, and often overlooked, aspect of organizational culture analysis. Many of the deepest unconscious assumptions we bring to our work life are often rooted in our cultural socialization. As Figure 3.1 indicates, some researchers have focused on cross-cultural organizational studies. The approach to cultural analysis that we take in this text, however, involves delving into the unique patterns of an organization. In organizational cultural analysis we seek to describe the patterns of assumptions, beliefs, practices, and artifacts that make an organization unique.

**Root Metaphor**

This second major approach to the study of culture focuses on understanding how organizational members create cultures and how the culture affects the members who are a part of it. It is more about culture as process than as product or variable. The core idea of this approach is that culture is something an organization “is” versus culture as something an organization “has.” Thus, for example, if someone were researching or consulting with Enron, consultants using the variable approach would explore links between the culture and the problems Enron faced. They might say, “To solve the problems at Enron we must change the core values of the culture.” In contrast, consultants using a root metaphor approach would attempt to describe various aspects of the culture, including the resultant outcomes. They would seek to describe as fully as possible the entire Enron organization since they
assume that the terms organization and culture are interchangeable. Their end product would be a description, rather than a set of cause-effect variables. Yet as you might infer from the Enron example, both see the pragmatic value of understanding culture.

There are three major research traditions within the root metaphor approach. Researchers in these traditions formulate or focus on different aspects of culture.

1. **Culture as shared cognition.** In this tradition, the beliefs or assumptions of the members of the culture are the focus of the inquiry (Harris, 1979; Schall, 1983). Researchers examine how employees think and what patterns of logic are shared among organization members. Researchers, for example, might describe assumption differences between members of the same organizations who come from different national cultures (Driskill & Downs, 1995).

2. **Culture as systems of shared symbols.** This research places a focus on the actual language, nonverbals, and other organizational symbols (Geertz, 1973; Smircich, 1983). A consultant or researcher using this approach might observe and record interaction patterns to understand and describe the way members use language to manage conflicts or build friendships (Driskill & Meyer, 1994).

3. **Culture as the expression of unconscious processes.** This focus involves an exploration of the way symbols reflect underlying beliefs and assumptions of the members. Such research might explore the deeper unconscious meaning of a common metaphor used in the organization or on the underlying archetype that predominates the lives of the members (Jung, 1964; Levi-Strauss, 1967).

A visual depiction of these approaches captures the contrast (Figures 3.1 and 3.2). The internal variable approach assumes that culture is one element of an organization that can be studied and used to make predictions about organizational effectiveness. In the same vein, the external variable approach addresses culture as a force outside the organization, such as the norms of the larger national culture (e.g., Japanese vs. U.S. culture). In contrast, the root metaphor approach assumes that the organization is the
culture and therefore, depending on how culture is defined, various aspects of the culture may be explored.

Connections: Definitions, Metaphors, and Our Approach

These contrasting approaches or definitions to the study of culture suggest the three particular connections. First, definitions matter. Definitions guide analysis. Definitions determine what we pay attention to and ignore. Therefore, it is important to keep several questions in mind before you embark on an analysis. You need to determine the following:

1. How will you define culture? For example:
   - As a variable? Internal? External?
   - Root metaphor?
   - Shared beliefs? Shared symbols? Unconscious processes?
2. How will the results be used? For example:
   - Change the culture?
   - Adapt to the current culture?
   - Assist multinationals via cross-cultural comparisons?
   - Describe good and bad communication action/patterns?
   - Make unconscious processes part of our conscious?

These basic questions, if bypassed, can lead to trouble. For example, if you operate with a definition of culture that is limited to one aspect of culture, such as values, you may fail to capture and understand other dynamics at work, such as the rituals or norms. Furthermore, if you are not clear about the use of your cultural analysis results, you may find employees slow to get on board with change efforts you hoped would flow from your analysis. For instance, employees typically resent efforts by management to manipulate their behaviors. If they sense your study is directed at them to gain information that will be used to make a change that is management driven without employee involvement, they may work to sabotage the effort. In summary, if a cultural analysis begins with an overly simplistic definition of culture and the relationship of culture to productivity, then other key aspects of culture may be missed, such as a better understanding of how employees are socialized.
Rehearsal 3.1 How Do You Define Culture?

Purpose: Identify commonly held definitions of culture as well as your own definition.

One way to keep theoretic and definitional discussions from being meaningless is to engage in writing your own definition. Based on the review of perspectives above, answer the following questions:

1. What definition of culture do you believe to be most commonly held in your own organization?
   
2. How do you define the term culture?

To understand culture, the reader should understand that not only are there varying definitions of culture, but also that culture can be understood as having different levels. Schein (1992) describes organizational culture as consisting of three levels:

- Artifacts and creations such as technology, art, and behavior patterns (what we describe in this text as elements of culture)
- Values held collectively by the group
- Basic assumptions held by group members concerning relationship to the environment; the nature of reality, time, and space; the nature of human nature and activity; and the nature of human relationships

Schein explains that the deepest levels of culture, basic assumptions, operate at the preconscious level and affect our behavior without our critical awareness. We are more aware of our values, and can observe our artifacts
and process, but often we do not understand their connections to our values and assumptions.

To illustrate Schein’s levels, you might observe an organizational ritual in a factory of workers clocking in and out as they begin and end their workday. To fully understand the cultural meaning of that behavior, it would be necessary to dig deeper into values and assumptions. The time accountability might be based on assumptions about time, the inability to trust the honesty of workers, and accountability of employees to supervisors.

A second way to understand cultures, in addition to definitions and levels, is through metaphors. Morgan (1986) presents a multitude of images as a way to understand and capture our experience in organizations. These images range from common metaphors such as systems or cultures to less common images, such as prisons. Bolman and Deal (1998) take a similar approach but focus on four specific metaphors or frames for viewing organizations. Each frame (structural, political, human resource, and symbolic) represents a way of viewing organizations. For example, the structural frame focuses on organizational charts, work processes, and role definitions. Managers operating within this frame will tend more readily to see organizational problems and possible solutions in terms of role uncertainty versus role clarity. The political frame focuses on the use of power in the organizations and how interactions are structured to maintain or challenge power. The human resource frame directs attention to the training and motivation of employees. The symbolic frame is similar to what we present in this workbook as culture and views the organization as enactment of theater through symbols, stories, and performances that create meaning for employees.

Rehearsal 3.2 Playing With Metaphors

1. What is a metaphor you would use to describe your organization?

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2. What are implications, both positive and negative, of this metaphor?

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The value of reflecting on images or metaphors should be clear: Metaphors capture the assumptions we hold about ways to think and communicate about problems and solutions in organizations. Metaphors correspondingly provide clues to alternative ways to think about how we manage our communication behavior. For example, an image of an organization as a prison captures the reality of certain political restraints in an organization. Members of an organization or unit in such an organization might say things like, “I feel trapped here” or, “We don’t hear much besides where to move next, never why.” Such comments reflect the constraints members of this culture see in their organization. Leaders seeking to work with employees operating with this image of the organization may run into difficulty if they try to deny these perceptions. Saying, “You have no reason to feel trapped” would do little to change things. Instead, the challenge for leaders and employees in this situation would be to explore the aspects of the culture that are influencing these perceptions (e.g., history, norms, rituals). The core challenge is to remember that we live by the images we hold; thus, we are both constrained and enabled by what we view as possible or impossible in our communication behavior.

The cultural analysis process can serve to make us aware of the dominant images held in an organization as well as the images we hold: These images or metaphors influence our communication behavior every day. Cultural analysis can be used to learn how our images of organizations can be obstacles as well as how we can use insights from cultural analysis to become better problem solvers and leaders. For example, if managers became aware of their excessive focus on the structure of an organization (e.g., roles and routines), they might be more likely to explore other metaphors or ways of thinking about their organization. If they were to include reflection on the political frame or power issues (a political metaphor), they might be more likely to reflect on structures in terms of how communication roles need to be clarified as well as communication norms about why and how decisions are being made.

Metaphors matter, and a cultural analysis can help reveal the implicit metaphors influencing the way we communicate and coordinate our behaviors. Part of the power and value of a cultural analysis comes from the fact that organizational members not only create, but also maintain and transform organizational meanings and expectations. Thus, the challenge for individual members is how to use insights from an analysis to improve their own use of messages as resources for growth and change for themselves and their organization, rather than focusing on only the constraints embedded in the messages. Such a shift from constraints is made more likely if we understand and reflect on the metaphors operating under the surface. Chapter 4 further explores metaphors as one of the elements of a cultural analysis.

*Third, this discussion of definitions of culture sets the stage for the approach taken in this workbook. Are we left with the choice of variable versus root metaphor approaches? We do not see the two approaches as incompatible. We draw from both perspectives in examining the implications of organizational culture, while developing a comprehensive and complex interpretation of culture. Managers and consultants using a variable approach make claims indicative of a desire to introduce changes in organizational*
outcomes via culture. Given that managers are most often concerned with how knowledge of organizational culture can help their bottom line, the variable approach makes sense. However, the descriptive/root metaphor approach does not preclude the use of cultural information relevant to important organizational outcomes. For example, it is not hard to conceive of the value of thorough descriptions of a culture. An insider or outsider with such descriptive data would be able to understand the assets and liabilities of various cultural patterns.

Our focus is on using qualitative research skills to capture cultural elements, themes, and definitions that have practical significance for the organization you study. In Chapter 4 we introduce cultural elements that are foundational to the study of a culture. We believe that studying multiple elements encourages a valid and credible analysis as opposed to an exploration of a single feature of the culture. The focus on qualitative research skills (i.e., observation, systematic analysis of organizational texts such as newsletters, and in-depth interviews and open surveys) does not preclude you from using other types of quantitative data (e.g., a standardized survey on job satisfaction). It does suggest that culture is not a concept that can be easily captured through brief or easily constructed surveys. Beginning in Chapter 5 we review various qualitative research skills aimed to sharpen what you do throughout your day—observe, read, talk to others, ask questions.

Our approach has a bottom line of enhancing your performance as well as that of your organization. We will do this by enhancing your awareness of various cultural elements (Chapter 4), sharpening your ability to collect data about these elements (Chapters 5–8), and then guiding your application of insights from the cultural analysis (Chapters 9–14). Our experience and that of our students and clients has proven valuable for improving our understanding of organizations and our ability to lead and serve these organizations. Our hope is that the cultural analysis process will assist us in our efforts to be better observers, interpreters, and thus leaders and managers who not only survive, but thrive in the organizations that greet us at birth and carry us to the grave.

Summary

We can easily get tangled in the web of culture if we do not pause to understand it. A failure to pay attention to how the set is constructed, how the construct culture is defined, can lead to problems. A practitioner, for example, might pick up a cultural survey, measure the culture, and then assume changes suggested by survey results will result in a payoff for the company. Although well intended, such efforts may fail from a lack of understanding of what is being measured. Several major ideas were introduced in this chapter to head off such problems and to lay the foundation for the rest of this workbook:

1. The “culture as a variable” approach focuses on internal (values, rules, etc.) or external (national culture) variables that are thought to predict important organizational outcomes (productivity, employee satisfaction).

2. Cultures should be understood as having multiple levels or dimensions. Some levels exert influence on organization members at an unconscious level.
3. The “culture as a root metaphor” approach focuses on describing the organization. These descriptions differ depending on the way culture is perceived (shared beliefs? shared symbols? shared unconscious processes?).

4. The dominant images or metaphors (prisons, structures, etc.) that are held by members of the organization influence their communication behaviors, for example, the way problems and solutions are identified.

5. Culture is often complex and thus not easily captured through brief or easily constructed surveys. Therefore we will rely on a combination of qualitative research methods to improve the validity of the process of cultural analysis.

6. Our goal is to guide you in the “how to” of conducting an analysis as well as the “how to” of applying insights for improving such important aspects of organizational life as managing change and ethics.

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**Rehearsal 3.3 Writing a Cultural Analysis Proposal**

**Purpose:** Develop a formal proposal for conducting a cultural analysis in an organization.

**Steps:**

1. Identify the person (CEO, HRD manager, etc.) whom you know to be the person to contact concerning the analysis. It might be useful to have some informal visits first, before sending the formal proposal.

2. Develop a 1- to 2-page proposal in which you:
   - Identify who you are and your relationship to the organization
   - Review the basic goal of a cultural analysis
   - Discuss the advantages or value of the analysis—be specific and when possible connect it with relevant issues within the organization (i.e., if you know turnover has been high, you could discuss the way an analysis often uncovers socialization practices)
   - Gain agreement on confidentiality of individual responses or identifying data collected during the cultural analysis

3. Have a trusted colleague critique or review your proposal before sending it.

4. Schedule an interview to discuss your proposal.

**Note:** A formal letter of permission is required for your project, even if you are studying your own organization.