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CULTURE TYPOLOGIES AND CULTURE SURVEYS

In the previous several chapters, I reviewed a great many dimensions that have been used to characterize cultures. I chose to focus on those that are useful for describing *organizational* cultures in particular. Other dimensions have been proposed, and these are often presented as universal typologies or as *sets* of dimensions that can be presented in combination to give a more complete profile of the organization. Many of the typologies and profiles proposed are based on questionnaires or surveys of members of the organization. We will therefore discuss typologies both as theoretical constructs and as labels derived from factor analyzing a lot of perceptual data. The fact that there are a number of different models built around questionnaires requires us to consider how to evaluate the relative validity and utility of such models. Before reviewing some of those models, we need to understand what role typologies play in trying to understand an abstract concept such as organizational culture and what the advantages and disadvantages are of using them.

Why Typologies and Why Not?

When we observe the “natural” world, what we see, hear, taste, smell, and feel are potentially overwhelming. By itself, “raw experience” does not make sense, but our own cultural upbringing has taught us how to make sense of it through conceptual categories that are embedded in our language. What we experience as an infant is a “blooming, buzzing confusion” that is slowly put into order as we learn to discriminate objects such as chairs and tables, mother and father, light and dark and to associate words with those experienced objects and events.

By the time we are young adults, we have a complete vocabulary and set of conceptual categories that allow us to discriminate and label most of what we experience. We must not forget, however, that these categories and the language that goes with them are *learned within a given culture*, and such learning continues as we move into new cultures such as occupations and organizations. The engineer learns new categories and words, as do the doctor, the lawyer, and the manager. The employee going into DEC and the employee going into Ciba-Geigy learn different things.

New concepts become useful if they (1) help to make sense and provide some order out of the observed phenomena, (2) help to define what may be the underlying structure in the phenomena by building a theory of how things work, which, in turn, (3) enables us to predict to some degree how other phenomena that may not yet have been observed are going to look. However, in the process of building new categories, we inevitably must become more abstract. As we develop such abstractions, it becomes possible to develop models, typologies, and theories of how things work. The advantage of such typologies and the theories they permit us to postulate is that they attempt to order a great variety of different phenomena. The disadvantage and danger is that they are so abstract that they do not reflect adequately the reality of a given set of phenomena being observed. In this sense, typologies can be useful if we are trying to compare many organizations but can be quite useless if we are trying to understand one particular organization.

The typologies and models that we use gradually come to be our view of reality, and this simplifies the daily work of making sense of lived experience. Such simplification is useful in reducing anxiety and conserving mental energy. The danger is that we narrow our attention span and become more mindless with respect to what we are observing. Such narrowing can be very useful if we are dealing with phenomena of little consequence. Labeling restaurants or banks as being “command and control” type organizations is okay if we are just occasional customers. However, if it becomes critical in an economic downturn to decide whether or not to continue to keep our money in the *particular* bank in our neighborhood, the “type” of bank it is may become critical, and we may then need a broader set of dimensions around which to analyze the culture of that particular bank. If we have relied too much on a given typology, we may not have the conceptual tools to analyze our particular bank.

A third issue in using typologies concerns the question of how we arrive at the abstract label. A number of the culture models we will review gather data by asking employees how they *perceive* their organization. The perceptions are then aggregated and combined into a more abstract concept. The concept is often derived from factor analyzing a broad set of questionnaire responses to determine which items hang together and, therefore, suggest a category that hangs together in the employee's perceptions. Those "factors" are then labeled and described in summary fashion. For example, the label "strategic direction and intent" (Denison, 1990) and the culture score on that dimension is based on combining employee ratings of their own organization on the following items:

- There is a long-term purpose and direction.
- Our strategy leads other organizations to change the way they compete in the industry.
- There is a clear mission that gives meaning and direction to our work.
- There is a clear strategy for the future.
- Our strategic direction is unclear to me (reverse scoring).

That final score can be a *reliable* measure of employee perception and a *valid* indicator of the degree to which a given set of employees believes that their organization has a strong or weak strategy, but the question remains whether that score can be a measure of *culture* as defined in this book.

Problems in the Use of Surveys

A number of the typologies we will review depend upon employee surveys that are scored in the manner described so we need to ask what are the problems and issues in the use of surveys as culture measures.

- **Not knowing what to ask.** If we define culture as covering all of the internal and external dimensions that have been reviewed in the past several chapters, we would need a huge survey to cover all of those possible dimensions. What this means for a particular organization is that basically we would not know what questions to put into the survey.

Unless we did some other form of deciphering first, we would not know which dimensions are salient for the organization and part of their deep cultural “DNA” and which dimensions are basically irrelevant. If we used one of the existing surveys, we would not know whether or not we had picked the right one in terms of what was important in that organization. Each survey would claim to analyze “the culture” or important “dimensions of the culture,” but there would be no *a priori* way of knowing how to evaluate those claims.

- **Employees may not be motivated to be honest.** Employees are always encouraged to be frank and honest in their answers, usually supplemented by the assurance that their answers will be kept completely confidential. The fact that such assurances need to be given in the first place implies that our original assumption is that employees would not be open if their answers were known. Because culture is a living reality, we ought to use a method that allows people to be open. Too many questions in the surveys require evaluations and judgments that cause employees to be careful in how they answer.
- **Employees may not understand the questions or interpret them differently.** “There is a clear strategy for the future” presumes that the employees have similar definitions of the word “strategy.” If we cannot make this assumption, then amalgamating their answers does not make sense. It is therefore very difficult to infer a “shared” concept from individual responses.
- **What is measured may be accurate but superficial.** It is difficult to get at the deeper levels of a culture from paper and pencil perceptions. Culture is an intrinsically shared phenomenon that only manifests itself in interaction, so whatever dimensions are measured by the survey are bound to be superficial.
- **The sample of employees surveyed may not be representative of the key culture carriers.** Most survey administrators assume that if they have done a careful job of sampling and testing their sample against total organizational demographics, that they can validly describe the whole based on the sample. This logic may not work for culture because the driving forces in a culture can be the executive subculture, and, as Martin has pointed out, the culture may be fragmented and