



How would YOU describe the culture of your university in terms of how things are done around here and in what ways does it impact upon your life as a student?

Types of organisation culture

There are a number of ways to classify different types of organisational culture. Two common classifications are those by Handy and by Deal and Kennedy.

Developing the ideas of *Harrison*,⁵ *Charles Handy* describes four main types of organisational cultures: power culture; role culture; task culture; and person culture.⁶

- **Power culture** depends on a central power source with influence throughout the organisation. A power culture is frequently found in small entrepreneurial organisations and relies on trust, empathy and personal communications. There are few rules and procedures, and little bureaucracy. It is a political organisation with decisions taken largely on the balance of influence.
- **Role culture** is often stereotyped as a bureaucracy and works by logic and rationality. Role culture rests on the strength of strong organisational 'pillars' – the functions of specialists in, for example, finance, purchasing and production. Role or job description is often more important than the individual, and position is the main source of power.
- **Task culture** is job-oriented or project-oriented. Task culture can be likened to a net, some strands are stronger than others and with much of the power and influence. An example is the matrix organisation. Task culture seeks to bring together the right resources and people, and utilises the unifying power of the group. Influence is widely spread and based more on expert power than on position or personal power.
- **Person culture** is where the individual is the central focus and structure exists to serve the individuals within it. When a group of people decide to band together to do their own thing and share office space, equipment or clerical assistance, then the resulting organisation would have a person culture. Examples are groups of barristers, architects, doctors or consultants. Many individuals have a preference for person culture, for example university professors and research specialists. Management hierarchies and control mechanisms are possible only by mutual consent.

Every organisation will have its own unique culture and most large businesses are likely to be something of a mix of cultures with examples for each of the four types in varying areas of the organisation. Different people enjoy working in different types of organisation culture and they are more likely to be happy and satisfied at work if their attributes and personalities are consistent with the culture of that part of the organisation in which they are employed.

Four generic types of culture

From an examination of hundreds of business organisations and their environments, *Deal and Kennedy* categorise corporate cultures according to two determining factors in the marketplace:

- the degree of risk associated with the organisation's activities; and
- the speed at which organisations and their employees receive feedback on the success of decisions or strategies.

These factors give rise to four generic types of culture: the tough-guy, macho culture; the work-hard/play-hard culture; the bet-your-company culture; and the process culture.⁷

- **Tough-guy, macho culture** – an organisation of individualists who frequently take high risks and receive quick feedback on the right or wrong of their actions. Examples include police departments, surgeons, construction, cosmetics, management consulting and the entertainment industry. Financial stakes are high and there is a focus on speed.
- **Work-hard/play-hard culture** – characterised by fun and action where employees take few risks, all with quick feedback. Organisations tend to be highly dynamic and the primary value centres on customers and their needs. There is a high level of relatively low-risk activity. Examples include sales organisations such as estate agents and computer companies, mass consumer companies such as McDonald's, office equipment manufacturers and retail stores.
- **Bet-your-company culture** – where there are large-stake decisions with a high risk but slow feedback so that it may be years before employees know if decisions were successful. Examples include oil companies, investment banks, architectural firms and the military. The focus is on the future and the importance of investing in it. There is a sense of deliberateness throughout the organisation typified by the ritual of the business meeting.
- **Process culture** – a low-risk, slow-feedback culture where employees find difficulty in measuring what they do. Typical examples include insurance companies, financial services and the civil service. The individual financial stakes are low and employees get very little feedback on their effectiveness. Their memos and reports seem to disappear into a void. Lack of feedback forces employees to focus on how they do something, not what they do.

Criticisms of cultural typologies

Some writers are critical of the generic typologies of culture that suggests organisations have a single overriding cultural environment representative of management ideology and all stakeholders. The complex nature of organisations may give rise to many different cultures and overlapping and/or conflicting sub-cultures including ways in which members of staff distinguish themselves within the organisation.

A notable critic of a unitary approach to a dominate culture imposed by senior management is *Smircich* who uses the metaphor of a plant root. Culture is something that 'is' and has developed and spread (like plant roots) together with an organisation's history, structure and staff. It is culture that drives organisations and shapes their structure and interactions. Smircich views culture as usually defined hierarchically and is elevated as a critical variable that controls the nature of organisational life, and determines its performance and effectiveness.⁸

Martin contrasts an integrationist perspective of a single unified culture as a basis for organisational effectiveness with a differentiation or pluralistic