

Types of Organisational Cultures –

Handy's Typologies

The power culture

A power culture has a single source of power from which rays of influence spread throughout the organisation. These rays are connected by functional and specialist strings which facilitate coordinated action. The structure of a power culture may thus be pictured as a web. In Handy's terminology this is a 'club' or 'Zeus' culture, Zeus being the omnipotent leader of the gods on Mount Olympus.

The internal organisation of a power culture is highly dependent on trust, empathy and personal communication for its effectiveness. There are few rules and little need for bureaucratic procedures, with control being exercised from the centre through the selection of key personnel and edict. Resource power and to a lesser extent charisma are the main bases for the exercise of authority here. For the most part individuals are encouraged to perform their tasks with few questions asked, though important decisions are likely to be made as a result of political manoeuvring. The greatest strength of power cultures is their ability to react quickly, but their success largely depends on the abilities of the person or people at the centre. Size can also be a problem, as the web can break if it is spread over too many activities and too great a geographic span. These cultures are often tough, abrasive and more interested in ends than the means used to attain them. Employees who are naturally political animals confident about the use of power and unconcerned about taking risks or issues of job security will thrive in this environment. Failure to recruit appropriate personnel, however, may lead to low morale, high turnover in middle management positions, and decisive action to move in an inappropriate strategic direction.

The role culture

A role culture is a bureaucracy, the organising principles of which are logic and rationality. The strength of a role culture lies in its functions or specialities (finance, purchasing, production and so forth) which can be thought of as a series of pillars which are coordinated and controlled by a small group of senior executives (the pediment). The structure of a role culture may therefore be pictured as a Greek temple, and its associated god is Apollo, the god of reason.

Rules, procedures and job descriptions dominate the internal environment of a role culture, and promotion is based on the satisfactory performance of individuals in their jobs. Position power and to a lesser extent expert power are the main bases for the exercise of authority here. Role cultures are likely to be most successful in stable and predictable environments over which the organisation is able to exert some control or where product life spans are long. In those organisations where economies of scale are more important than the ability to adapt and technical expertise is more useful than product innovation the role culture will thrive. The civil service, the oil industry and retail banking are often cited as examples of role cultures. The main problem with role cultures is that they can be slow to recognise and react to change. For many individuals who value security and predictability these sorts of organisation are highly reassuring, while for those who are ambitious or power oriented they can be extremely frustrating.

The task culture

A task culture is one in which power is somewhat diffuse, being based on expertise rather than position or charisma. This form of culture often develops in those organisations which can focus on specific jobs or projects to which teams may be assigned. Structurally the task culture may be thought of as a net or matrix, some strands of which are thicker than others, with power being located at its interstices. Originally, Handy ascribed the god 'Athena' to these sorts of organisations, but he later decided that no specific god was totally appropriate to this culture.

Task cultures focus on accomplishing the job in hand, and the internal organisation of such institutions centres on bringing together the appropriate people and resources to make the project successful.

At its best this is a team culture in which work is the common enemy. Flexibility, adaptability, individual autonomy and mutual respect based on ability rather than age or status are the most important organising principles here. In those environments where the market is competitive, product life spans are short and constant innovation a necessity the task culture can be highly successful. Advertising agencies would seem to be a good example of this sort of culture. The problems with task cultures are, however, equally strong. Such organisations cannot easily maximise economies of scale, do not usually build up great depth of expertise and are heavily reliant on the quality of the people involved. Furthermore, when things go wrong and control needs to be exercised from the centre the task culture can quickly change into a role or power culture with either rules and procedures or political influence coming to dominate organisational life. In either case, morale tends to decline. Despite these potential difficulties the task culture is probably the most preferred form of organisation for middle and junior managers.

The person culture

A person culture develops when a group of people decide that it is in their own best interests to organise on a collective rather than an individual basis. This is often the case with barristers, doctors and architects who band together in order to share the costs of office space, equipment and secretarial assistance. Such organisations exist solely for the individuals who comprise it, and may be represented diagrammatically as a cluster in which no individual dominates. The god of the person culture is Dionysus, the god of the self oriented individual.

In the person culture the individuals themselves decide on their own work allocation, with rules and coordinative mechanisms of minimal significance. Unlike other cultures in these organisations the individual has almost complete autonomy, influence is shared, and if power is to be exercised it is usually on the basis of expertise. While there are relatively few organisations that possess a person culture many individuals may be found with a preference for this form of organising. For example, university professors and technical specialists in R&D departments are often noted for their loose affiliations to the organisations they belong to.

Harrison's Four Types of Organisational Culture

Roger Harrison in "Organisation Culture and Quality of Service" describes organisation culture in terms of four archetypal cultural orientations:

Power Culture

The Power oriented organisation is authoritarian and hierarchical. It is dominated by a strong leader who often runs the organisation as though they owned it (often they do). People in the organisation strive for status and influence, and they endeavour to build close relationships with power figures. Political skill is important in getting ahead. People high on the totem pole are usually motivated by the drive for personal power, and those at the bottom by fear and dependency. At best the fear is mitigated by a benevolent paternalism, where the strong feel responsible for looking after the weak. At its worst the organisation is rent by struggles for power, and people exploit or tyrannise those under them. In either case, pleasing the boss is a major concern and aim for most organisation members.

In the power organisation at its best, leadership is based on strength, justice and paternalistic benevolence. The leader is firm but fair, and may be generous and indulgent to loyal subordinates. The leader is required to be all-knowing as well as all-powerful. Subordinates are expected to be compliant and willing. They are often lacking initiative. The leadership of the power organisation may, however, rule by fear, with abuse of power for personal advantage on the part of the leader, their friends and proteges. When the organisation becomes large, or when the leaders struggle for dominance, it may degenerate into a hotbed of political intrigue.

Role Culture

The role organisation is hierarchical also, but power is exercised through rules, systems and procedures. Personal power is replaced by formal, legalistic structures. Written and unwritten rules and contracts specify job requirements, rewards and disciplinary procedures. Those who stay within the rules are usually safe from the exercise of arbitrary power. The organisation values and rewards consistency, order, predictability and correctness. Doing things right is the goal of the person who wants to do well in the organisation. The role culture is the dominant culture in the Western world. We experience its bureaucratic forms and processes from the cradle to the grave.

Achievement Culture

The Achievement oriented organisation is geared towards "making a difference" in the world. Its thrust is outwards, onwards and upwards toward some valued goal or ideal. The organisation provides opportunities for its members to use their talents and abilities in ways which are intrinsically satisfying, which advance a purpose or goal to which the individual is personally committed. Thus people are internally motivated, rather than being controlled from the outside by rewards, punishments or systems.

The Achievement oriented organisation assumes that people enjoy working at tasks which are rewarding or which advance the shared purpose. At their best such organisations tend to evoke a sense of passion and commitment to the work, a sense of calling which can be deeply satisfying. However, the organisation usually makes high demands on its members' time and energy which can lead to burnout and disillusionment over time. Most of us have experienced an Achievement oriented work experience, if only for a short time. They are found in organisation start-ups, in task forces and project teams, and in many high-tech companies.

Support Culture

The Support oriented organisation motivates and bonds people through close warm relationships. People learn to trust and care for one another and for the organisation. They trust the organisation to take care of them, to be responsive to their needs and in turn they are responsible; they take care of the organisation.

At its best the Support culture can evoke extremely high commitment and loyalty in the service of the group and the organisation. Like the other cultures, the Support orientation has the weaknesses of its strengths. People tend to avoid conflict in order to preserve harmony; tough decisions about people may be postponed out of regard for people's feelings; the organisation may over-value consensus to the point where it is unable to take any decisions in a timely fashion.

What's my organisation's culture?

Although Harrison identifies four archetypal cultures, many organisations are mixtures, hybrids and half breeds of these archetypes.

The following diagram is a way of visually expressing the balance between the four styles in any particular organisation.

Consider the organisation in which you work and plot where you think it stands on the scale for each cultural type. Join up the lines diagonally to give a diamond shaped representation of your organisation. Compare your shape with those drawn by your colleagues.

