

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE: UNDERSTANDING THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

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Summary

The following essay explores the meaning of organizational culture in the context of modern public administration theory and its most prominent theorists. It details the early history and recent developments in the study of organizational culture and explores the different levels of culture: artifacts, espoused values and basic assumptions. It concludes by discussing the role leaders play in shaping a public sector's organizational culture.

1. Introduction

Organizational culture has many meanings and definitions. For purposes of this essay, organizational culture is understood as a stable system of beliefs and assumptions that exist and persist overtime within an agency. In essence, organizational culture can be viewed as the personality of the agency. In 1938 Chester Barnard argued that “informal organization” and its “personality” harmonizes work within an organization. If members internalize common values and meanings of the organization and its mission, they will intuitively pursue organizational interests. Culture, in other words, can be a strong source of motivation and behavioral control towards collective ends.

Organizational culture consists of premises that members share and hold in common. It implies structural stability and is embedded throughout the organization's language, customs, traditions, ritual and policies. You can tell an organization's culture by looking at what people wear, what time they come to work, what they brag about, even by how office space is distributed. Therefore study of culture may focus on deciphering artifacts such as organizational taboos, jargon, metaphors, humor, gossip, and any concepts that underlie the informal relationships between operators, managers, executives and their clients.

An organizational culture is a product of both the organization's internal and external

environment for public agencies. Internally, bureaucrats develop and shape norms and basic assumptions that persist overtime and affect the relationships between executives, managers, supervisors and workers. Organizational culture permits the daily functioning of the organization. Culture often times manifests itself in the form of standard operating procedures that members follow, even though there are no written or codified agreed upon rules stating the procedures.

Externally, organizational culture is shaped by the political environment, which often controls the level of funding, the people employed in the agency (such as the appointment of top officials) and the overall mission of the agency. Ultimately, the external political environment controls the agency's creation, status and demise. The higher one is in the organization's hierarchy, the more concern they have with the influence of the external organizational culture. Likewise, the lower one travels in the organizational hierarchy, the further one is removed from external, or political, culture.

Organizational culture in a public organization is composed of the truths and realities, including assumptions, beliefs, ideologies and values, that are constructed by the bureaucrats and followed by its members who have been socialized into that particular culture. Culture is passed on to the new generations of group members via the socialization process. This is similar to the way people would think about how their nation's distinct culture or heritage is passed from generation to generation.

The culture of an organization is a collection of the shared assumptions and beliefs that are typically arrived at implicitly and subconsciously, as members of the agency work together and learn how to confront challenges to their agency's mission and survival. It is the accumulated learning of a group that shares a common language enabling transmission of the culture to others. Over time, these assumptions and beliefs "thicken" and slowly come into existence as a culture which ultimately goes unquestioned, and influences behavior of the organization's members. It thus becomes so central to the agency that it is often taken for granted and is rarely spoken or written explicitly.

One of the ways to discover or uncover an organization's culture is to observe how the assumptions and beliefs are transmitted to new members. They typically learn the organization's culture by a member's jargon, such as stories and myths that are told repeatedly as well as via nonverbal signals and symbols. The holistic composite of these interwoven, socially constructed assumptions and beliefs are the organization's culture.

2. Early History and Recent Development of the Study of Organizational Culture

The study of anthropology has recognized the concept of culture since its inception. Several schools of thought and methodologies within the discipline have influenced the formal definitions of culture such as the work of anthropologists Kroeber, Kluckhohn and Jaques in the early 1950s. However, the study of organizational culture in public agencies did not really become established in the discipline of public administration until the 1970s and 1980s. The first documented extensive study of the concept of organizational culture appeared in 1971 with the work of English sociologist Barry A. Turner. Within the field of public administration, the origins of the study of organizational culture can be found in the earlier work of institutionalists such as Barnard, Selznick, Kaufman, and Thompson.

The modern study of organizational culture for public organizations primarily developed in the 1980s, stemming from the systems approach, which focuses on the organization as something that acts. This perspective contradicts previous ideas which emphasized the importance of formal organizational structure. It is this approach that we will now explore.

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Biographical Sketch

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