

Chapter 56

The Role of Organizational Culture in the Success of Changing Behaviour

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ABSTRACT

Success in meeting the goals of an organization, whether they be business, bureaucratic, administrative, or operational, often depends on the ability of that organization to learn from experience and effect appropriate positive changes as quickly as possible. Some are successful, while others fail. This chapter examines the realities of organizational cultures and describes both roadblocks and facilitators to productive change. In a competitive environment, properly considered change in procedures can often mean continued survival. This requires a collective yet well led effort to pursue the objective of continuous improvement and adaptation. What are the detractors and facilitators in today's world?

INTRODUCTION

Culture is an important foundation in almost all human activities. It results from, and at the same time affects the beliefs, and practices of what we do, and shapes the way we think, interact, and act. Culture is an unavoidable and ever present influence on our actions. This same effect is evident in the way organizations approach lessons learned and organizational learning. In theory an organization with a strong learning culture should be more inclined to benefit from the value added of lessons learned processes. Organizations with less conducive learning cultures will likely stifle learning and be counterproductive to the benefits of organizational learning. The culture of the organization sets the foundation of its ability to learn and the basis for which it incorporates learning into its behavior. This chapter examines the role of culture in enabling organizational learning.

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BACKGROUND

Brown provides the following (as cited by Sun, 2008) as one definition of Organizational Culture:

Organizational culture refers to the pattern of beliefs, values and learned ways of coping with experience that have developed during the course of an organization's history, and which tend to be manifested in its material arrangements and in the behaviours of its members. (Sun, 2008)

This is one of the most concise, yet complete, definitions of the term that fits within the intent and scope of this current work. However concise this definition may be, it also understates the impact that culture has on the organization's success or failure and its ability to learn from its experience or that of others. Several sources encountered during the research indicate the lack of an agreed definition and the difficulty in defining the term without complete context or description of the organization involved. This lack of definition also helps to explain the difficulty that many organizations experience with application of culture in its goal to become a learning organization. As will be examined later in the chapter, the organizations ability to adapt to change, utilize new knowledge, and to successfully administer and utilize lessons learned processes will depend on its rigidity or flexibility within its organizational learning culture.

Organizational culture develops over time and is based on shared attitudes, beliefs, and customs. These are often not defined, recorded or consciously followed in organizations but have come to define its habitual behaviour. Thus the culture may not be apparent even to the members, yet it defines the organization's behaviour. An organizational culture, in its truest form, is tacit in nature in that it is unconsciously carried out by its members, and is usually transferred through socialization within the work environment. "Organizational culture is learned by individuals and groups as they encounter, work through, and resolve problems and challenges." (Bates & Khasawneh, 2005)

The culture is the environment that influences behaviour; decision-making; and the organization's approach to markets, customers, and suppliers. It is the combination of shared history, expectations, unwritten rules, and social mores that affect behaviour throughout the organization (O'Dell & Leavitt, 2004, p. 62).

Organizational culture is a pattern of basic assumptions – invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with his problems of external adaptation and internal and integration – that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members is the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems... Also culture is unifying and refers to the processes that bind the organization together. Culture is thus consensual and not conflictual (Dalkir, 2005, p. 194).

Despite changes in membership and leadership, many organizations maintain certain characteristics, problems are handled essentially in the same way, and behaviour continues to be directed toward the same mission and goals. An organization's culture is often passed on from generation to generation, creating a relatively high level of stability over time. Organizational culture is unique for every organization and one of the hardest things to change.

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