

A Critical Review on Organizational Culture in Educational Settings

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Abstract

One of the most interesting fields or aspects of study among corporations, educational institutions, firms and businesses, whether it be small scale and large scale is the topic on organizational culture. In this research paper, the concept of organizational culture will be discussed in a greater detailed context. The researcher will basically be going into personal details on what he thinks is the organizational culture the organization where he belongs practices. In addition, this paper will be comparing and contrasting the functionalist and interpretive perspective of organizational culture. Moving beyond its definition, the researcher will also be taking the interpretive perspective and examine the interpretive perspective of organizational culture and its relevance in the organization where he belongs on top of the details on how that institution administers such perspective in its own organization. Particular examples will be provided by the researcher in this research paper based on his own personal experiences.

Key words: *Organizational, Institutional, Culture, Interpretive, Functionalist*

1. Introduction

One of the most standard definitions of the organizational culture concept is that it is considered a field of organizational management and studies that vividly describes or depicts the attitudes, beliefs, experiences, values and psychology of an organization (Hill & Jones, 2001). As a matter of fact, the reason why organizational analysts consider the concept of organizational culture such an interesting one lies primarily in the reason that it does not only involve an organization's internal aspects but also its external aspects particularly, the way it deals with the outside stakeholders (Hill & Jones, 2001).

An organization's culture may be described and depicted in a thousand ways depending on the person interpreting, observing and experiencing how a specific firm, business or organization works and defines itself. The main essence of the concept of organizational culture lies at the fact that an organization's behavior is being closely watched when defining what the culture of the firm is all about; not to mention, this also includes the values, actions, beliefs, moral and ethical standards, as well as how a company faces and confronts an issue both defines and reflects what kind of culture an organization has (Cummings & Worley, 2005).

But the question is, why is organizational culture a very important concept in education? Why is organizational culture such a big deal that various theorists and organizational analysts seem to be obsessed with it? The truth of the matter is that there is really no standard definition on the concept of organizational culture (Harris, 1994) and this has already been agreed upon by several 'constructs'. In fact, it is one of the most difficult concepts to define especially if one is referring to the context of a particular organization.

What theorists only know is that organizational culture is ‘historically determined’, ‘holistic’, socially constructed’, and may prove to be quite difficult to change (Harris, 1994).

Interestingly, when defining the concept of organizational culture, Hill & Jones, (2001) could not simply avoid or take out the concept of organizational values being closely linked to organizational culture. By definition, organizational values refer to the ideas and beliefs that an organization pursues and implements within the firm defining the behaviors and actions of its members. What the authors are trying to point out is simply the fact that organizational values form an organization’s culture. They further state that out of a firm or a company’s organizational values develop the various norms, expectations and guidelines which prescribe the various types of behaviors among employees in specific situations. In addition, it is the organization’s values that dictate, if not control, the particular behaviors of every organizational member towards each other (Handy, 1985). This goes to say therefore that whatever the organizational values of an organization are, that determines the firm’s organizational culture.

2. What is a *Positive* Organizational Culture?

It is an undeniable fact that it is very hard to determine a firm’s or an educational organizational culture at one glance. This is because an assessment on a firm’s organizational culture requires actual experiences and direct observation on how it is to live under such company culture. What may be considered “healthy” for some may be “unhealthy” for another and what may be “positive” for some may be “negative” for another. Nevertheless, there are still unwritten standards that define what a healthy or a positive organizational culture really means and what its specific characteristics are (Parker, 2000).

According to Parker, (2000), the so-called “positive” organizational culture must be something that works for the best not only of the firm but also of all the organizational members that comprise it. For one, positive organizational cultures must be capable of increasing the growth and productivity of every member of the organization. It must reflect efficiency and strong motivational levels among the firm’s members that lead to a huge reduction on employee turnover as well as other productive behaviors (Black, 2003). In fact, among the most notable characteristics that define a positive culture include the following:

- High level of appreciation and acceptance for diversity
- Fair treatment and respect for every organizational member
- Recognition on the employees’ enthusiasm and pride for the organization
- Equal opportunity for all employees
- Strong clear communication among employees
- Strong sense of purpose and direction among company leaders
- Exceptional ability to compete in the specific industry where the business belongs
- Training, knowledge and learning investments for organizational members

In this conceptualized article, the author of the paper intends to disclose and share his own personal experiences on the institution. In fact, as a background on his professional experiences, the author is currently a college teacher in one of the known colleges in Malaysia which he considers the most challenging yet most enjoyable career he has ever taken in his life so far. He narrates that based on his experience of teaching, he has learned a lot not only about how he may be able to achieve a successful career as a teacher but also how he may be able to strive and flourish his career given the kind of organizational culture the college has.

As a backgrounder, the author of this paper is a teacher that is in charge of designing, developing and implementing curricula to meet the individual needs of a diverse group of learners. He is also in-charge of planning and conducting instructional programs based on student data that determine the appropriate teaching strategies and learning styles in certain individualized teaching methods including individual guidance, peer tutoring, cooperative learning, media instruction, large and small group instruction and behavior modification plans. In addition, as a teacher, he selects, orders and uses instructional materials intended to enhance student learning through the use of hands-on teaching and exciting curriculum. He also develops individual instructional plans that cater to each student needs specifically in the areas of behavioral, emotional and academic. Moreover, he tracks student progress through progress monitoring to determine how the students grow and glow in their academic levels of learning. In relation to the organizational culture of the organization, the author of this paper as a teacher is very dedicated in pursuing excellence in learning because this is the very culture of the organization where he belongs. The Malaysian college where he is teaching aims to have the best educational culture in the entire country which the institution instills among its teachers.

3. The institutional Organizational Culture

Based on the description and definition provided by Owens (2007) in the book *“Organizational Behavior in Education”* organizational culture is pertained to be one of the important dimensions that contribute to an organization’s overall climate. However, it was also described to be complex, subtle and pervasive and is not only limited to the tangible aspects of an organization but also includes its intangible aspects such as the values, beliefs, social norms, goals and aspirations and attitudes in relation to the relationships that exist between the organizational members. One interesting fact about organizational culture is that while the intangible characteristics of an organization may lie ‘below the surface’, they may actually be considered critical in the organization’s business processes. Also, another interesting definition of organizational culture is what Brown (1998) stated as the various patterns of values, beliefs and learning experiences which may have shaped the history of an organization and are outwardly manifested in the behaviors of the organization’s members.

In the context of managing a college/university or school organization, organizational culture also serves as a very critical domain that heavily influences total makeup of the organization. Deal (1985) states that this is because culture is “intangible” and therefore is intended to influence the values, attitudes and perceptions of people specifically in the way they see and make sense of things in the organization. Also, it is undoubtedly interesting to know that the concept of organizational culture is critically relevant in the context of managing Colleges or other school organizations. Apparently, the concept of organizational culture is not strictly limited to the context of the corporate or business realm but may also be highly-useful in the context of educational institutions such as the College as just like any other organizations, Colleges are also indirectly guided and shaped by its own culture.

As a teacher/educator, the author of this paper considers the specific organization where he is currently teaching as a very “culture-specific” organization which simply means that the College carries in itself a distinct set of practices, values, standards, beliefs and attitudes which are being embodied, strengthened and enhanced by every member of the organization This would indicate a Functionalism paradigm. You need to say that.. Also, another interesting part about the culture of the college where the author is teaching is that the college’s structure and overall culture remains relatively the same for the past 30 years of its existence. In fact, most

of the employees of the college who have been there for over ten years claimed that the college's culture has remained the same from the way it was before. Interestingly, the college's long-time employees love the college's organizational culture which was primarily the reason why they have stayed loyal to the organization for so many years (College annual report 2014).

The author of this paper agrees with his own co-employees in the college and also attests to the positive and healthy organizational culture that the college possesses. In fact, he describes the culture of this organization as "family-centered" and somewhat conservative and traditional when it comes to its values. He thinks that this kind of culture may be attributed not only to the length of years of its existence but also the type of management to which the college has been subjected under for the past three decades. Apparently, the Founder of the school was the great grandfather of the current President of the college who may have inherited the strong conservative, moral and ethical values of his own great grandfather. Again an indication of a functionalist perspective. You need to point that out here as well. For the college's employees, such organizational value was one of the reasons why they remained loyal in the organization for many years. For most of them who have spent over ten years of service in the college, its existing culture was quite effective and remains effective until today because of its strong emphasis on holistic education and values-formation among the students. Above all, these strong organizational values are also unparalleled for them because they could not find any other college that does not tend to compromise their values and principles for the love of money.

In addition, the college's employees assert that the family-centered culture of the college is also admirable and is actually ideal for most of the staff who are juggling their priorities at work and at home. What they particularly like about the college's culture is that it distinctly promotes work-life balance as well as upholds the value of the family which is the reason why majority of the staff in the college loved their jobs in the college. Functionalist perhaps?. The author of this paper also states that it was quite obvious indeed that the employees in the college stay to work for the college for many years because they are generally satisfied with the management style, the vision, values and the overall culture of the organization.

4. The Interpretive and Functionalist Perspectives of Organizational Culture in Educational Settings

Morgan, (1980) defines the functionalist paradigm as a theoretical underpinning that emphasizes on the specific roles that human beings play in the society, that is, in the development and continuous growth of a specific society; it also seeks to understand further the specific roles and behaviors of individuals including how these are affected by the society they are involved in. However, Holmwood, (2005) argues that the functionalist paradigm actually lacks deeper explanation on the significance of each of the functions and members of a specific structure which other theories such as the interpretive paradigm are capable of explaining. Putnam, (1983) in the article "The interpretive perspective: An alternative to functionalism" defines the interpretive paradigm on the other hand as an approach that involves organizational members constructing and sustaining their unique social worlds by means of symbolic interaction. In addition, the interpretive approach is characterized with its placement of the centrality of meaning in social action.

In the context of organizational culture, it may therefore be distinguished that the functionalist perspective's view on organizational culture in terms of the specific functions that a particular culture carries out in an organization. It basically asks the question "what functions does the culture fulfill in an organization?". In addition, the functionalist paradigm provides

“functional” explanations on the existence of organizational culture. It prioritizes the specific functions that an organization needs to fulfill in order to survive. Hence, in line with this fact, it is therefore the ultimate goal of “organizational survival” which serves as the main reason why the functionalist approach is often utilized by organizations (Schultz, 1995). For example, the Malaysian college where the author of this paper teaches needs to embody the functionalist approach in order to be able to not just fulfill its basic roles and functions and survive but to also attain organizational success.

The interpretive approach or paradigm on organizational culture on the other hand takes an interesting approach on cultural perspectives as it allows the organizations to conceive cultures as “socially constructed systems of meanings”. Consequently, the structure, strategy as well as power relations of an organization are expressions of its culture. Also based on the interpretive approach culture is viewed as a means of “social control” wherein it becomes quite impossible for the organizational members to control it as well as change it in a specifically pre-determined way. Another implication of this is that culture becomes an unpredictable side of cultural evolution as well as an ongoing and natural structuring process as opposed to an “episodic” intervention of the managers (Schultz, 1995). For instance, the functionalist paradigm usually has deeply held values, beliefs, and assumptions that are fixed but are not socially constructed while the interpretive paradigm has ceremonies, rituals, symbols and patterns that members participate in and understand (Robbins & Barnwell 2006; Burrell & Morgan 1979).

5. Interpretive Approach to Organizational Culture: Application to Organization

Given that for the interpretivists, an organizational culture is mainly a socially constructed form of system comprised of various meanings, it may therefore be noted that interpretive colleges or universities have the tendency to focus more on the meanings and symbols which are also “socially constructed” (Schultz, 1995). Based on the author's experience, one of the important things that he has noticed in his time of teaching in this Malaysian college is the fact that since the culture of the organization has already been established and is already stable, this implies that the organizational culture of the college has already long been “socially constructed” enough for the college to have readymade symbols, concepts and meanings that the organizational members in the future may not be able to simply change (Jex & Britt, 2008). For example, the interpretive approach of the Malaysian college states that it “is” an educational institution characterized with outstanding employee behavior and pursuit to excellence as opposed to it simply having those characteristics. For the Malaysian college, based on the author's experience the college stands for excellence in all aspects of learning and as a matter of fact, the college utilizes various means or methods in order to communicate that the college stands for this kind of meaning or symbol. The question is how have symbols, rituals, patterns and ceremonies added to the “organizational culture” of where you work? Regardless of the feedback or what other people perceive on what the school stands for, it ensures that it delivers the excellence in learning in all its aspects of service to its students (source?).

Interestingly enough, most of the staff and even the management itself may prove to be resistant or unwilling to undergo any significant organizational changes, especially with regard to changing what the “socially constructed” meaning of the college has been for so many years now. This is because based on the interpretive paradigm, the college is excellence in itself or in all aspects of it and does not simply have it. In this context, it may be seen that the good thing about the college is the fact that it stands for what it believes it is regardless of the negative consequences. It was able to go beyond its simple basic functions and even went deeper to the

essence and purpose of the college and what it stands for. Most importantly, applying the interpretive approach, the organizational members of the college was able to know and conceive what their college is for and what it stands for (Glaser, 1983). Hence, the interpretive approach goes beyond the surface of attaining survival of the organization as it enables the college to identify its main identity as an organization. For instance, the college where the author of this paper is teaching stands for excellence and applying the interpretive approach, the college embodies excellence in the way all the faculty members and school administrators value education and improve their teaching methodologies to address the needs of the students. Putnam (1983) clarifies that being conscious of the interpretive element will not completely free the organization from managerial bias, but the adoption of pluralistic perspective will integrate other individual viewpoints in pursuing organizational processes.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the main essence of the concept of organizational culture lies at the specific values, actions, beliefs, moral and ethical standards of an organization. Also, an organizational culture of a company or a firm is also reflected on how a company faces and confronts an issue as it is during the tough times that an organization's true culture is both defined and reflected. However, it has been proven many times before that an organization's culture is hard or difficult to identify and assess because it does not only comprise of tangible but also its intangible aspects including the values, beliefs, social norms, goals and aspirations and attitudes of an organization.

Interestingly, there are two ways by which an organizational culture may be assessed and that is through the functionalist and interpretive approaches. The functionalist perspective approach views organizational culture in terms of the specific functions that a particular culture carries out in an organization and asks the basic question of "what functions does the culture fulfill in an organization?" while the interpretive approach or paradigm on organizational culture takes an interesting approach on cultural perspectives as it allows the organizations to conceive cultures as "socially constructed systems of meanings" with the structure, strategy as well as power relations being the foremost expressions of an organization's culture. For most theoretical experts, it is the interpretive paradigm which provides a deeper meaning and purpose on an organization's culture as it enables every member to conceive what the organization stands for and what it is as opposed to what it should to and how it should do it.

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