

What is Organisation Culture?

Over the last decade I have had several discussions and dialogues with executives, managers and other employers in organisations. These discussions have been in both formal and informal settings. They have been indepth interviews, often in the context of a person struggling intensely to find meaning in his work and discover appropriate role taking processes.

During the course of my interviews I realised that I was listening to that part of the persons experience in the company that he had labelled.

must be blind
cannot be articulated
cannot be owned up
cannot be acted upon

This experience was held within as strong feelings and conclusions about the nature and processes of the company. Being unable to bring these feelings and perceptions into the company they stay unresolved in the person and erode his role taking processes and his feeling of partnership with the company.

In the organisational context these issues accumulate and cascade downward. Urgency and time consciousness, decision making, quality of work, ability to confront issues, ability to listen and respond and the like get affected adversely.

Further each person's narration of his experience of the organisation was like one part of a jigsaw puzzle.

It contained the experience and resultant feelings that he carries from his year of working in the organisation :

his experience of other people
his experience of the technology
his experience of the systems
his experience of the structure

Most often this experience is an unintended consequence of managerial decisions and actions. Each part of the puzzle contained an admixture of his personal and particular context and its overlap with the organisational context.

This complex of each person's experience and residual feelings forms the ground of the organisation culture. Organisations seldom provide psychologically secure institutions where these feelings can be shared, become a resource to the organisation, and become the basis of organisational reviews. Small pockets of "grumbling clubs" or "crib clubs" are the only places where these feelings are vented. These "clubs" by their very nature become holders of negative feelings. These negative feelings and impressions have a way of filtering downward in an organisation.

They are finally articulated by the staff through the unions. The unions take up those issues that are legally defensible and on which they can take a stand. The rest of the

underlying feelings become their fuel. A potentially powerful emotional energy of the organisation thus rarely finds positive expression within the organisational framework.

This ground of feelings and personal interpretation then becomes a major component of the working of an organisation. It holds the preoccupation and human energies of the employee. Every organisational process is mediated by this, though only the tangibles and measurable features are taken into account in the decision making. Problems that surface are a manifestation of this unexamined complex. Normal attempts at problem solving only alter the form of the problem and never its content. A steady state is then reached where a class of problems all over the organisation. Only a resolution of the underlying issues will change this "state" of the organisation. This means finding a new ground and perspective from which to approach the problems.

The processes by which tissue cultures are created in a laboratory is a close analogy to these processes. A nutrient medium is prepared which will selectively nourish certain types of tissues or cells. A smear that contains these tissues or cells when introduced into the nutrient medium will flourish and grow. Other types of cells will die. The boundaries created in an organisation by the tacit understanding of its people of "that which is admissible and that which is not" is very much like this culture medium.

The psychological map of the organisation carried in the minds of the people carries a strong boundary defined by "That which can be seen, That which can be talked about, That which can be owned up and That which can be acted upon". The feelings that keep experienced as threatening and leads to uncertainty and anxiety. This boundary also defines the energy available to the organisation : The energy each member of the organisation will bring in to his work. Without changing this contour and its envelop, an organisation can only make superficial changes. The class of problems it faces will be the same even if its form changes now and again. This envelop constrains both the leader and the follower. The leader who threatens these boundaries will be resisted and the one who does not follow is an isolate.

Changes are brought about at this level only through working at the identity processes of individuals, their role taking processes and at the group processes of the organisation. Spaces where people in the organisation can experience catharsis, rejoicing, mourning, togetherness, absolving shame, regeneration and renewal are the institutions within the organisation. They are necessary both to defuse the residual negatives that individual (and therefore the organisation) carries and turn them into positives. These are spaces where these feelings can then become the compost that nourishes greater investment of energy and greater mobilisation of belonging in the person. Synergy can be generated and a positive loop of participation from people and convergence of their efforts become possible.

Approaching the issue of organisation development through designing and creating appropriate institutions is the new paradigm. These institutions through creating a space for emotional and intellectual recalibration become the anchors of a self designing organisation. An organisation where the redesign originates from the point of action, from the holders of the actual reality.

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