Viewing RTOs through the lens of culture

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Abstract

Alvesson (2002) uses the concept of culture as a lens through which to view an organisation. He believes that a cultural focus offers a creative way of understanding modern organisations. Whilst the author generally regards shared meanings as critical for coordinated action and interaction, he contends that a study of culture can be a powerful tool in counteracting commonly held beliefs and values that limit personal autonomy and slow the progress of change within organisations. In the study on structures and cultures in Australian registered training organisations undertaken as part of Supporting VET providers in building capability, work teams were asked to describe their own cultures and that of their organisation. This paper highlights the cultural complexity that can be found in the VET workforce, complexity which can and does make cultural change a complicated and somewhat problematic process, particularly in large providers of vocational education and training.

Introduction

Organisational culture is a highly complex concept and one which has been variously influenced by opposing views about its form and impact. Despite the many divergences in perceptions, there is agreement within the literature that examining different manifestations of culture provides leaders with a greater understanding of how to manage contradiction and effectively introduce change. In the study on structures and cultures in Australian registered training organisations undertaken as part of *Supporting VET providers in building capability for the future*, work teams were asked to provide evidence of their own culture and that of their organisation. The descriptions of artifacts, values, shared meanings and beliefs, group behaviours, language and traditions provided insights into some of the multiplicity of sub-cultures that exist within the seven Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes involved in the research. Five major clusters of cultural difference were highlighted

across the teams. These included sub-cultures based on discipline or occupation, on geography, on history, on ethos and on the concept of 'Us and Them'. While it was evident that this cultural complexity brings some benefits to the TAFE institutes, it has also made cultural change a complicated and somewhat problematic process for those who lead these particularly large, structurally complex and functionally diverse organisations.

Research method

The overall aim of this research was to assess the impacts of both structure and culture on the capability of registered training organisations. This paper, however, focuses only upon a review of literature and the findings relating to the culture aspects of the research. The specific research question framed to guide this aspect of the study was:

> *To what extent and in what ways do cultures within registered training organisations influence team and organisational capability?*

Information was gathered through participant questionnaires and semi-structured focus group interviews with thirteen natural work teams drawn from seven TAFE institutes across Australia. Teams, which were nominated by the senior executive of the organisation as being markedly different from each other because of the way they worked, were drawn from teaching and non-teaching areas. They ranged in size from three to four people up to fifteen members and were drawn from some cross-organisation policy/process groups such as human resources, administrative support, finance, client and student services, a literacy and numeracy project, and information and communication technology, plus teaching program areas such as Business Studies, Plumbing, and Furnishing

Protocols were developed for focus groups in which each of the teams was asked to describe 'the way we do things around here' using specific examples of whole-of-organisation culture as it was manifested in artifacts, espoused values, patterns of behaviour, common practices, language, rituals and traditions. In addition, participants were asked to provide illustrations of their own work team culture and to consider how it compared with that of the whole organisation.

Responses from focus group interviews were recorded electronically and transcribed. From the transcripts major themes were identified. These themes were then populated by supporting detail from the transcriptions, questionnaires and researcher observations. Illustrative quotations and vignettes were identified from the data. Cross analysis of this information was carried out to identify consistencies, variations and interrelationships between work teams and between organisations.

Literature review

Within the wide-ranging body of literature on organisations, culture is clearly disputed territory. The plethora of definitions that attached to the term 'culture' are largely an outcome of what Martin (2002, p.15) describes as the 'intractable intellectual disputes in the humanities and social sciences'. Within this contested ground, definitions range from the simple conception presented by Deal and Kennedy (1982, p.49) that culture is 'the way we do things around here' to many more complex attempts at describing both the tangible and intangible aspects of culture. Elsmore (2001, p.6) suggests that it is an accumulation of both shared and learned experiences, values and understandings that inform action and 'which are expressed, reproduced and communicated in symbolic form'. In his seminal work *Organizational culture and leadership* (2004, p.17), Schein defines culture as:

> *… a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems.*

Other definitions variously shaped by the social sciences, corporate commerce, change management and management and leadership studies also exist (Durkheim 1982, Halley 1998, Lewis 2001, Hatch 2004).

Despite many differences in descriptors, there is substantial consensus amongst authors that culture is worthy of closer investigation – particularly by those who are in leadership positions within organisations. Martin (2002), for example, suggests that a

study of culture offers the opportunity to clarify ambiguity and capture and articulate the complexities that inevitably exist within organisations. Similarly, Alvesson (2002) uses the concept of culture as a lens through which to view an organisation, suggesting that a cultural focus offers a creative way of understanding modern organisations. He proposes that while shared meanings and beliefs are critical for coordinated action and interaction in organisations, an understanding of culture can be a powerful tool in counteracting commonly held viewpoints and values that limit personal autonomy and slow the progress of organisational change (Clayton, Fisher, Bateman, Brown & Harris, 2005).

Furthermore, cultural elements play a significant part in determining organisational strategies, goals and ways of working and by developing a greater understanding of culture leaders can better explain *why* things happen within organisations. Such knowledge gives support to the development of strategies to generate increased employee motivation and commitment to the achievement of improved efficiency and productivity (Schein 1999; Schein 2004; Martin 2002). The assumption underpinning this thinking is that if leaders can manage or adapt culture they will be able to enhance organisational capability.

There are, however, divergent views on the links between culture and organisational performance. While some authors (Peters & Waterman,1982; Jarratt & O'Neill, 2002; Parry & Proctor-Thomson, 2003) cite evidence of the clear connections others such as Bodi, Maggs and Edgar (1997) are unable to determine any correlation at all. Lewis (2001, p.125), acknowledges a degree of uncertainty about the relationship between the two but remains optimistic about the possibilities by suggesting:

> *…there really is <u>no</u> direct link between culture and performance. Only behaviour can affect performance, and culture is not the only determinant of behaviour. Nevertheless, all the empirical evidence seems to point to some relationship between culture and performance.*

Assuming that there is a linkage, Schein (1999) suggests that the identification of sub-cultures within organisations offers leaders the opportunity to develop synergies between them and to prevent them from being at odds with each other. Similarly,

Martin (2002, p.3) emphasises the importance of leaders understanding and managing
:

> *…the patterns of meanings that link these manifestations together, sometimes in harmony, sometimes in bitter conflicts between groups, and sometimes in webs of ambiguity, paradox and contradiction.*

Organisations can simultaneously have a strong over-arching culture and a myriad of sub-cultures (Boisnier & Chatman, 2003). Sub-cultures –the division of an organisation into various informal groups with distinctive characteristics and often invisible boundaries are highlighted by such authors as Blacker (1995) and Schein (1996). Sub-cultures, often defining insiders and outsiders, are a product of differences between the expertise, focus, demands, approaches and activities of various groups of individuals and are exhibited as a distinctive array of shared values, meanings, mindsets and customs (Blacker 1995).

Boisnier and Chatman (2003, p.14) argue that some organisations are more prone to cultural differentiation that others with size, locus of power, demographic make-up and the extent of task differentiation being influential factors.

> *Subcultures are more likely to develop in larger, more complex, or bureaucratic organisations since these organisations are most likely to encompass a variety of functions and technologies.*

In every respect, these particular features are evident in the TAFE institutes in this study and others across Australia.

In a review of the literature Clayton and her colleagues (2005) provide an overview of some of the approaches used to describe organisational and group cultures. One approach is the use of typologies. For example, Handy (1976) describes types based on power distribution - the power or club culture, the role culture, the task culture and the people or existential culture. Deal and Kennedy (1982) identify types based on management. These include the tough guy, macho culture; the work hard, play hard culture; the bet-your-company culture and the process culture. Cultural types based on competing values are described by a group of writers (Zammuto, Gifford & Goodman

1999 in Parker & Bradley, 2000; Hendriks 2004; Palthe & Kossek 2003). These include hierarchical culture (also bureaucracy or professional-oriented culture); developmental culture (also entrepreneurial or innovation-centred culture); group culture (also the clan culture or the employee-centred culture) and rational culture (also market or task-oriented culture).

Classification of the observable within organisations is another strategy for understanding cultures. The way people interact, particularly in relation to the language, customs, traditions, rituals and group norms in common usage reflect the prevailing cultures. Organisational mission, vision and values statements, management processes, leadership styles and the image of the organisation to the outside world are also influenced by culture (Martins & Terblanche 2003).

Discussion and findings

When asked to describe their organisations' culture work teams used words like 'huge', 'diverse', 'complex', 'fragmented', 'unsettled' and 'transitional', reflecting the ever-changing nature of TAFE institutes. Other commonly used but more negative terms were 'compliance-driven', 'risk-averse', 'change-averse', 'bureaucratic' and 'rigid'. Where one work team spoke of a culture of divide and conquer, another suggested that the culture was about maintaining the existing hierarchy.

More positive descriptors were also provided, reflecting that individuals and teams perceived the organisational culture as being 'entrepreneurial', 'innovative', 'supportive', 'team-oriented', 'friendly', 'inclusive', 'business-like' and taking pride in what had been achieved for students and the community. Outward manifestations of the culture were generally identified as the way institutes celebrated success with ceremonies and rituals associated with graduations, awards and prize-giving being commonly cited. Vision and value statements, with which many of the teams were familiar, were also identified as evidence of the over-arching culture. A constant thread across most groups, however, was the recognition that there was not just one culture, but rather a number of different cultures within their organisation.

In moving from the culture of the organisation to that of their team, teaching teams typically saw their cultures as being student and community focused while the administrative teams considered themselves customer- and quality –focused. Without exception, all demonstrated pride in their professionalism and achievements. However, they often described cultural disjunctions in the views between what was espoused as the organisational culture and how it was lived in reality. Teaching teams stated that they frequently felt at odds with senior management who were seen to be more concerned with budgets, markets, key performance indicators, targets, audits, compliance and strategic alliances. The common perceptions were that competition, market share and business were the prevailing management cultures rather than education. This view was well expressed by one interviewee who suggested:

> *Management have taken their eye off the ball and the ball is our students. They have been driven by the dollar (and at that level they need to be) but there must be a happy medium sometimes.*

Taken as a whole, focus group interviews revealed a considerable level of cultural complexity with various groupings identifying and celebrating their own discrete cultural personas. Five distinct clusters of cultural difference were clearly identifiable across the thirteen work teams. First and foremost, there was very strong evidence of multiple sub-cultures based around disciplines, occupations and professional affiliations. Then other sub-cultures were described and depicted as emerging from organisational history or simply the geography of RTO campuses. Ethos-based cultures and 'us and them' cultures were also evident, each an outcome of different ideologies and oppositional views of 'how things are done around here' (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). Each of these cultural clusters is explained further below.

Discipline or occupation as cultural difference

Work team members were consistent in the view that their organisation fostered a multiplicity of sub-cultures many of which were based on discipline, occupation or professional affiliations. The terms 'blokey' and 'tribal' were commonly used in relation to traditional trades, and comments were generally supported by the suggestion that each industry has its own very distinctive culture. A group of

plumbers in one RTO, for example, used the terms 'clan' and 'club' to describe themselves whilst suggesting that in teaching areas such as community services and access and equity teaching areas the predominant culture was 'soft', 'feminine' or 'non-blokey' contrasting markedly with their strong 'macho' trade-based culture with its focus on what they called 'the group's behaviour'.

Subtleties often linked to those vocational/discipline cultures were also recognised. These depended on the work that teams undertook and the work ethic they applied to 'getting the job done'. Discussions generally centred on the standards of work and behaviour expected - often very much influenced by what was required in particular industry environments, or teams' perceptions of what was required. As an example, members of a Furnishing team commented:

> *We have to have a strong work ethic. We operate differently from others –*
> *we're out on a limb doing new stuff out there. We have a real team*
> *focus...we even eat together. We have a pizza at night once a week so that*
> *we can meet and talk through the issues. We have to make it work for us.*

Cultural 'silos' based on faculties, departments and units were also identified as widespread in every TAFE institute. Various traditions and rituals existed within these silos which were shaped and sustained by the background and work experiences of individuals within them. In a number of instances, these were seen to be used to maintain the status quo and slow the passage of much needed change. A different perspective was that it was a means of maintaining standards and quality. One informant reflected the views of many interviewees when she stated:

> *I've never worked anywhere* [that] *you get so many sub-cultures and so many*
> *different views and such difficulty communicating with people. It's the nature of*
> *where people come from before they come into TAFE. People are formed before*
> *they come here'.*

While many individuals and subcultures were 'formed' before they came to the organisation, other sub-cultures have been developed within the institutional environment.

Geography as cultural difference

In TAFE institutes with regionally dispersed campuses, geographically-based sub-cultures were delineated by regional work teams Participants of these sub-cultures consistently stated that they identified particularly strongly with the needs of their local communities more than others elsewhere in the organisation. Using terms like 'On this campus we…' or 'out here in the West' and 'those in the southern region' to emphasise this point, these teams explained that TAFE was a critical social, economic and cultural part of local communities. As a consequence, many participants exhibited shared meanings and particular language often related to campus-specific programs linked directly to local industries or community needs.

The tyranny of distance was also put forward as critical factor in the development of 'us and them' work team cultures. A number of groups suggested that geographic isolation forced people to bond closely and work as a close knit group – 'it is easy to work happily at a local campus and not see anyone from another campus for weeks'. The tyranny of distance had the additional benefit of providing freedom for 'us' from interference by 'them' in the city.

History as cultural difference

Illustrations of historically influenced sub-cultures were also provided by almost all work teams included in the study. These were an outcome of the host of large scale restructures, significant amalgamations and structural realignments individuals and teams had lived through. Each participating TAFE institute had a lengthy history of structural change and 'shadows' of work team and organisational cultures past remained intact within every team. People reflected back on the good things that used to happen prior to a particular set of changes, some more than ten years ago. Others described the very negative impacts of being forced to move from one structural form to another, impacts which left some disaffected and bitter. In one instance, a work team was able to identify the manifestations of three distinctly different cultures each based on the three colleges from which they had originally come. The challenge for some of these teams was to work with a number of quite disparate views on how and why things should now be done in their new roles and revamped organisation.

Ethos as cultural difference

Ethos-based cultures were also evident across a number of the work teams. These cultures were generally based on fundamental views about the role of vocational education and training generally, and TAFE as an institution in particular. For example, a predominant view across all teams was that TAFE was a public provider working for the public good. In line with this thinking, a number of teams argued that access, equity, social justice and second chance education were key roles for the organisation with students and community needing to be the primary focus rather than industry. Numerous individuals presented the view that the long-established public service culture of 'old' TAFE was being displaced by the more commercial, fee-for service culture of the 'new' TAFE.

Associated with these differences were the often identified cultural disjunctures between concepts of education and training, between educators ands trainers and teachers and facilitators. Discussions around these points revealed further cultural complexity with some such as the Language, Literacy and Numeracy team putting a strong case for the education of the individual and the trade-based teams emphasizing the importance of training for industry.

"Us and them' as cultural difference

All work teams proffered the view that 'us and them' sub-cultures were very common in their organisation. Generally these were seen to have developed around a variety of opposing views, power relationships and issues of status (or perceived status). Teams spoke of the cultural distinctions evident between permanent and sessional staff, unionist and non-unionists, educators and trainers, trades and non-trades, Higher Education and VET and 'new blood' and 'old blood'. In addition, there were consistent descriptions of the divide between administrative, corporate, support and campus operational staff and staff involved in teaching. Using phrases such as 'they don't understand what we need' and 'they cannot see the connection between what they do and students', participants described the lack of shared vision, values and meanings that existed in particular groups of institute staff. Individuals acknowledged

that such thinking was the basis for dysfunctional activity around the organisation, with improved communication being identified as the solution to the problem.

Some of the most potent evidence of the 'us and them' culture was provided by a Finance team member who encapsulated the views of her colleagues with the following explanation:

> *We are bearers of negative news and we must live with that. We're the backstop for those guys* [the teaching staff] *and we're working to support them. But they don't see it like that. They just see it as our compliance-driven culture and their work is more important than ours.*

Challenges of multiple cultures

These findings confirm what numerous authors within the body of literature on the topic have suggested, that many sub-cultures co-exist within organisations, particularly highly complex organisations such as TAFE institutes. Moreover, as suggested by number of participants it is possible for different cultures to cut across each other, with individuals belonging to a number of different sub-cultures. Work teams considered that this multiplicity was advantageous because it enabled diverse educational approaches appropriate for different vocational areas, industries and locations. At the same time, it was acknowledged that some group norms, values and beliefs were out-dated and only remained in place to slow the pace of change being demanded by organisational leaders.

Teams acknowledged the importance and influence of leaders in the management of divergent sub-cultures. Some participants noted that diversity was not an issue where strong leadership and transparent communication prevailed within the organisation. Others, however, cited the differences between what was said and what was done as discouraging the development of a truly over-arching organizational culture. The challenge for organisational leaders is to help people live with this inevitable inconsistency (Clayton, Fisher, Harris, Bateman & Brown, 2008).

Conclusion

Culture plays a critical role in shaping an organisation's vision, mission and strategic direction. Both strategy and coordinated action are informed by the shared meanings and beliefs that come together to form an over-arching organisational culture. The acceptance of an encompassing culture and unified strategic direction in structurally complex and functionally diverse TAFE institutes can be affected by the divergent beliefs and assumptions held by different sub-cultures that populate the organisations. In this study on RTO structures and cultures, the thirteen work teams described their sub-cultures as being variously fashioned by discipline or occupation, geography, history , ethos or the sense of 'us and them'. While it was evident that this cultural complexity has allowed tailored and innovative responses to specific institute demands and particular clients, marked differences in group behaviours, assumptions, language and beliefs within TAFE institutes have also complicated communication, frustrated innovation and slowed the progress of organisational change at a time when change has been presented as an economic and political imperative. These findings support the views of a key authors on organisational culture and confirm the importance of leaders examining and understanding more deeply the various manifestations of culture within their organisations. A greater understanding of sub-cultural differences may help managers account for behavioural incongruity across work teams and assist in closer management of those values and beliefs that get in the way of new ways of working and thinking in TAFE institutes.

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