

## HOW TO DEFINE CULTURE IN GENERAL

### The Problem of Defining Culture Clearly

Culture has been studied for a long time by anthropologists and sociologists, resulting in many models and definitions of culture. Some of the ways that they have conceptualized the essence of culture illustrate the breadth as well as the depth of the concept. Most of the categories that follow refer primarily to *macro* cultures such as nations, occupations, or large organizations but some are also relevant to *micro* or subcultures. As you will see from the pattern of references, many researchers use several of these definitional categories, and they overlap to a considerable degree. Culture as we will see exists at many levels of “observability.” The categories are arranged roughly according to the degree to which you, as an observer, will be able to see and feel those cultural elements when you observe an organization or group.

- **Observed behavioral regularities when people interact:** The language they use along with the regularities in the interaction such as “Thank you” followed by “Don’t mention it,” or “How is your day going so far,” “Just fine.” Observed interaction patterns, customs, and traditions become evident in all groups in a variety of situations (e.g., Goffman, 1959, 1967; Jones, Moore, & Snyder, 1988; Trice & Beyer, 1993; Van Maanen, 1979).
- **Climate:** The feeling that is conveyed in a group by the physical layout and the way in which members of the organization interact with each other, with customers, or with other outsiders. Climate is sometimes included as an artifact of culture and is sometimes kept as a separate phenomenon

to be analyzed (e.g., Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2000; Schneider, 1990; Tagiuri & Litwin, 1968; Ehrhart, Schneider, & Macey, 2014).

- **Formal rituals and celebrations:** The ways in which a group celebrates key events that reflect important values or important “passages” by members such as promotion, completion of important projects, and milestones (Trice & Beyer, 1993; Deal & Kennedy, 1982, 1999).
- **Espoused values:** The articulated, publicly announced principles and values that the group claims to be trying to achieve, such as “product quality,” “price leadership,” or “safety” (e.g., Deal & Kennedy, 1982, 1999). Many companies in Silicon Valley such as Google and Netflix announce their culture in terms of such values in all of their recruiting materials and in books about themselves (Schmidt & Rosenberg, 2014).
- **Formal philosophy:** The broad policies and ideological principles that guide a group’s actions toward stockholders, employees, customers, and other stakeholders such as the highly publicized “HP way” of Hewlett-Packard or, more recently, the explicit statements about culture in Netflix and Google (e.g., Ouchi, 1981; Pascale & Athos, 1981; Packard, 1995; Schmidt & Rosenberg, 2014).
- **Group norms:** The implicit standards and values that evolve in working groups, such as the particular norm of “a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay” that evolved among workers in the Bank Wiring Room in the classic Hawthorne studies (e.g., Homans, 1950; Kilmann & Saxton, 1983).
- **Rules of the game:** These are the implicit, unwritten rules for getting along in the organization, “the ropes” that a newcomer must learn to become an accepted member, “the way we do things around here” (e.g., Schein, 1968, 1978; Van Maanen, 1976, 1979b; Ritti & Funkhouser, 1987; Deal & Kennedy, 1999).
- **Identity and images of self:** How the organization views itself in terms of “who we are,” “what is our purpose,” and “how we do things” (e.g., Schultz, 1995; Hatch, 1990; Hatch & Schultz, 2004).
- **Embedded skills:** The special competencies displayed by group members in accomplishing certain tasks, the ability to make certain things that get passed on from generation to generation without necessarily

being articulated in writing (e.g., Argyris & Schon, 1978; Cook & Yanow, 1993; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Ang & Van Dyne, 2008).

- **Habits of thinking, mental models, or linguistic paradigms:** The shared cognitive frames that guide the perceptions, thoughts, and language used by the members of a group and are taught to new members in the socialization or “onboarding” process as it is now often called (e.g., Douglas, 1986; Hofstede, 1991, 2001, Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; Van Maanen, 1979).
- **Shared meanings:** The emergent understandings that are created by group members as they interact with each other where the same words used in different cultures can have very different meanings (e.g., Geertz, 1973; Smircich, 1983; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984; Weick, 1995; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001; Hatch & Schultz, 2004).
- **“Root metaphors” or integrating symbols:** The ways that groups evolve to characterize themselves, which may or may not be appreciated consciously but become embodied in buildings, office lay-outs, and other material artifacts of the group. This level of the culture reflects the emotional and aesthetic response of members as contrasted with the cognitive or evaluative response (e.g., Gagliardi, 1990; Hatch, 1990; Pondy, Frost, Morgan, & Dandridge, 1983; Schultz, 1995).

I have provided these many ways of defining culture to give you a sense that culture covers pretty much everything that a group has learned as it has evolved. When we look at macro cultures (e.g., nations or occupations) and want to describe their cultures, we need all of these specific concepts to capture their culture. However, in moving toward a usable definition of culture that you can apply to the organizations and groups that you will encounter and that you will want to decipher, we need a more integrative dynamic definition that highlights how culture forms and evolves in organizations, subcultures, and micro systems. The foregoing categories will help to define the content of a given culture, but defining them has to be a more dynamic holistic process.

The reason for such a formal definition at this point is to forewarn you that you will find many groups of various sizes with different shared patterns that must be understood on their own terms. You will see articles about how to change or even create cultures that don't agree with each

### **A Dynamic Definition of Culture**

The culture of a group can be defined as the accumulated shared learning of that group as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration; which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, feel, and behave in relation to those problems.

This accumulated learning is a pattern or system of beliefs, values, and behavioral norms that come to be taken for granted as basic assumptions and eventually drop out of awareness.

other or that don't make sense. This definition is deliberately focused on the general process of how *any culture* is learned and will evolve, but in practice you will have to focus on different elements of that formal definition to make sense of the particular organizational situation you encounter. So let's expand on and explain the importance of each component of that definition in preparation for the more detailed analysis of these elements that occur later on in this book.

### **Accumulated Shared Learning**

The most important element of the definition is to note that culture is a *shared* product of *shared* learning (Edmondson, 2012). If you understand that culture is a shared product of shared learning, you will realize several important corollaries that make culture complex. To fully understand a given group's culture, we will need to know what kind of learning has taken place, over what span of time, and under what kinds of leadership. Deciphering such history is impossible with preliterate culture, nations, and some occupations; however, with contemporary organizations and work groups, it is possible and fruitful to begin culture analysis with historical analysis. I will keep referring to "the group," but I mean this to include organizations of all kinds as well.

If learning is shared, all the group forces of identity formation and cohesion come into play in stabilizing that learning because it comes to define for the group who we are and what is our purpose or "reason to be." The various components of what is learned then become a pattern of beliefs and values that give meaning to the daily activities and work of the group. If the

group is successful in achieving its purpose and is internally well organized, it will come to take these beliefs and values along with the accompanying behavioral norms for granted and will teach them to newcomers as the way to think, feel, and behave. In many ways this can be thought of as the group's sense of identity, which has both an external component of how the organization presents itself to the outside and an internal component of what its inner sense of itself is.

### **Basic Taken-for-Granted Assumptions—The Cultural DNA**

The earliest shared learning provides meaning and stability and becomes, in a sense, *the cultural DNA*: the beliefs, values, and desired behaviors that launched the group and made it successful. This early level of beliefs, values, and desired behavior becomes nonnegotiable and turns into taken-for-granted basic assumptions that subsequently drop out of awareness. Such assumptions come to be very stable, serving as the source of later ways of doing things and elaborating the culture. What needs to be mentioned here is that these elements, learned early and composing the cultural DNA, are the source of the group's stability and cannot be changed without changing the group altogether. This point has to be understood at the outset because culture-change programs can work only if they are consistent with the group's cultural DNA.

### **Solving Problems of External Adaptation and Internal Integration**

One of the most consistent findings of the study of groups and organizations is that leaders and members differentiate the "task" of the group from the question of "how we will organize and maintain ourselves as a group?" This arbitrary distinction has taken many forms, such as the "managerial grid," which separately measures the degree of concern for task and of concern for people, leading to an "ideal" of maximizing both (Blake & Mouton, 1964, 1969; Blake, Mouton, & McCauley, 1989). In extensive studies of problem-solving groups, it was discovered that two kinds of leadership evolved and were necessary for long-range group performance: a task leader and a social-emotional leader who were usually different people within the group (Bales, 1958).

Studies of effective organizations have always shown that successful performance and effective learning hinge on not separating these two dimensions, thinking instead in terms of “socio-technical systems,” in which the external and internal are at least aligned if not integrated. In business organizations, this issue has shown up in concern for a “scorecard” or a “double bottom line” that emphasizes the need for paying attention to both the economic health of the organization and the internal organizational health that allows it to function and maintain itself (Kaplan & Norton, 1992).

One of the great dangers inherent in culture-change programs is to assume that strategy and the external adaptation issues are somehow separate from culture and to focus the desired culture changes just on the *internal* mechanisms by which a group makes life pleasant for itself. All the emphasis recently on analyzing which company to work for creates the risk that you will go to the best company but will be out of a job in a few years because that same company did not understand that its strategy was also part of its culture and failed to evolve that strategy according to the changing needs of the situation (Friedman, 2014).

### **Solutions That Have Worked Well Enough to Be Considered Valid**

Groups are created for a purpose. We huddle together for safety or security or to get something done, and the group’s survival depends on the degree to which it accomplishes its purpose. Groups do not exist in isolation. To get something done requires some kind of action in the various environments in which the group is embedded. As the group acts, it gets feedback on whether or not it is accomplishing its purpose. If it succeeds and continues to succeed, the beliefs, values, and behavior patterns that launched the group will become taken for granted as the way to continue. With age and continued success, those beliefs and values will become part of the identity of the group and will automatically be taught to newcomers as “this is who we are, this is what we do, and these are our beliefs.” Whereas those values and beliefs might have been debated at the launching of the group, they become nonnegotiable and are treated as “assumptions” that new members are expected to adopt as the price of admission to the group.

## Perception, Thought, Feeling, and Behavior

As a group grows, has success, and develops an identity, the shared learning process broadens from just the minimum behavior we need to agree on to get the job done to a language, a way to think, and a way to feel. When a company is founded, there will be a common interest focused on the technology, the product or service, and the occupational competencies required to perform. This means that some common ways of thinking and perceiving are present at the outset by the common decision to be a group and do something together.

With success and further shared experience the group develops its own “jargon,” often expressed as shorthand and acronyms, forms of humor, and expressions that symbolize some of the essence of the shared experience. In Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC), a company that we will be referring to frequently, the phrase “Do the right thing” symbolized the value of technical honesty, openness, and really solving the customer’s problems. In Apple the phrase was “Do your own thing,” which meant feel free to contribute in the best way you can but express yourself personally, which, at the time, meant “decorate your office any way you want, bring your pet to work, but do the job well.”

We tend to think of culture as mostly behavioral (i.e., “This is how we do things around here”) and forget that with time and shared learning we come to share how we talk, what we perceive in our relevant environment, how we think about it, and what makes us feel good or bad. The longer the organization has existed, the more the thoughts and emotions of the members come to be alike. This process is most visible at the national level, where we find that subsidiaries of companies that move to new countries have great difficulty in functioning efficiently because of differences in language, thought, and emotional processes. In some companies the corporate culture is so strong and well embedded that the local offices in different countries look like and function exactly the same way as the headquarters organization.

I was once asked to describe the culture of the Swiss-German company Ciba-Geigy to the U.S. subsidiary in New Jersey. I had studied this culture in Basel and gave my Basel speech in New Jersey, which elicited the shocked response: “My God, you have just described us perfectly!”

## **What You Imply When You Use the Word *Culture***

The concept of culture implies structural stability, depth, breadth, and patterning or integration that results from the fact that culture is for the group a learned phenomenon just as personality and character are for individuals learned phenomena.

***Structural Stability.*** Culture implies some level of structural stability in the group. When we say that something is “cultural,” we imply that it is not only shared but is also stable because it defines the group. I have referred to this as “basic assumptions” and cultural DNA. After we achieve a sense of group identity, which is a key component of culture, it is our major stabilizing force and will not be given up easily. Culture is something that survives even when some members of the organization depart. Cultural DNA is hard to change because group members value stability because it provides meaning and predictability.

At the same time, the more surface elements of culture are defined by the interaction among the group members. The more ritualized of those interactions support the DNA and provide additional stability, but as new conditions arise and as new members with different beliefs, values, and norms enter the group, there will inevitably be both reinforcement and change as new solutions are invented for the problems of internal and external survival. Culture is both stable and dynamic, just as our body is stable if we think of the skeleton and skin and organs but constantly changing if we think of cells and the various bodily processes. The stable parts like our bones can change but not easily or rapidly unless extreme circumstances cause “breaks.” When companies go bankrupt or are taken over by a turnaround manager, the cultural DNA can be destroyed and a new organization can be launched.

***Depth.*** The basic assumptions of a culture are the deepest, often unconscious part of a group and are, therefore, less tangible and less visible. From this point of view, many of the definitions of culture that I reviewed focus too much on the visible manifestations of culture, but they are not the “essence” of what we mean by culture. This essence, best thought of as the cultural DNA, consists of the taken-for-granted, nonnegotiable beliefs, values, and behavioral assumptions. When something is more deeply embedded, that also lends stability.

**Breadth.** A third characteristic of culture is that after it has developed, it covers all of a group's functioning. Culture is pervasive and influences all aspects of how an organization deals with its primary purpose, its various environments, and its internal operations. As we have pointed out previously, the most common mistake is to limit the concept to the internal workings of the group while forgetting that culture also covers mission, strategy, structure, and basic operational processes. All of these have been the product of shared learning and will limit the kinds of changes the organization can make.

**Patterning or Integration.** The fourth characteristic that is implied by the concept of culture and that further lends stability is patterning or integration of the elements into a larger paradigm or "gestalt" that ties together the various elements at a deeper level. Culture implies that rituals, values, and behaviors are tied together into a coherent whole, and this pattern or integration is the essence of what we mean by "culture." Such patterning or integration ultimately derives from the human need to make our environment as sensible and orderly as we can (Weick, 1995). Because disorder or senselessness makes us anxious, we will work hard to reduce that anxiety by developing a more consistent and predictable view of how things are and how they should be. "Organizational cultures, like other cultures, develop as groups of people struggle to make sense of and cope with their worlds" (Trice & Beyer, 1993, p. 4).

However, we will also discover that within the cultural DNA one finds conflicting themes based on different things learned at different times and in different ways. Furthermore, as organizations evolve and develop subgroups, those subgroups develop their own subcultures, which may conflict with each other or with the larger "corporate culture." As we will see, cultural dynamics can become very complicated.

### **Taught to New Members: The Process of Socialization or Acculturation**

After a group has developed a culture, it will pass elements of this culture on to new generations of group members (Louis, 1980; Schein, 1968; Van Maanen, 1976; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Studying what new

members of groups are taught is, in fact, a good way to discover some of the elements of a culture, but we learn about surface aspects of the culture only by this means. This is especially so because much of what is at the heart of a culture will not be revealed in the rules of behavior taught to newcomers. It will be revealed to members only as they gain permanent status and are allowed into the inner circles of the group, where group secrets then are shared.

However, the way people learn and the socialization processes to which they are subjected may indeed reveal deeper assumptions. To reach those deeper levels, we must try to understand the perceptions and feelings that arise in critical situations, and we must observe and interview regular members or “old timers” to get an accurate sense of the deeper-level assumptions that are shared.

Can culture be learned through anticipatory socialization or self-socialization? Can new members discover for themselves what the basic assumptions are? Yes and no. We certainly know that one of the major activities of any new member when she or he enters a new group is to try to decipher the operating norms and assumptions. But this deciphering will be successful only through experiencing the rewards and punishments that are meted out by long-standing members to new members as they experiment with different kinds of behavior. In this sense, there is always a teaching process going on, even though it may be quite implicit and unsystematic.

If the group has not evolved to the point of having shared assumptions, as will sometimes be the case, the new members' interaction with old members will be a more creative process of building a culture. But once shared assumptions exist, the culture survives through teaching those assumptions to newcomers. In this regard, culture is a mechanism of social control and can be the basis of explicitly manipulating members into perceiving, thinking, and feeling in certain ways (Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989; Kunda, 1992, 2006). Whether or not we approve of this as a mechanism of social control is a separate question that will be addressed later.

### **Can Culture Be Inferred from Behavior Alone?**

Note that the definition of culture that I have given does not include overt behavior patterns, though some such behavior, especially formal rituals,

would reflect cultural assumptions. Instead, this definition emphasizes that the shared assumptions deal with how we perceive, think about, and feel about things. We cannot rely on overt behavior alone, because it is always determined both by the cultural predisposition (i.e., the shared perceptions, thoughts, and feelings that are patterned) and by the situational contingencies that arise from the immediate external environment.

Behavioral regularities can occur for reasons other than culture. For example, if we observe that all members of a group cower in the presence of a large and loud leader, this could be based on biological-reflex reactions to sound and size, individual learning, or shared learning. Such a behavioral regularity should not, therefore, be the basis for defining culture, though we might later discover that, in a given group's experience, cowering is indeed a result of shared learning and therefore a manifestation of deeper shared assumptions. Or, to put it another way, when we observe behavioral regularities, we do not know whether or not we are dealing with a cultural manifestation. Only after we have discovered the deeper layers that I am defining as the essence or DNA of culture can we specify what is and what is not an "artifact" that reflects the culture.

### **Do Occupations Have Cultures?**

The definition provided previously does not specify the size or location of the social unit to which it can legitimately be applied. We know that nations, ethnic groups, religions, and other kinds of social units have cultures. I call these *macro* cultures. Our experience with large organizations also tells us that even globally dispersed corporations such as IBM or Unilever have corporate cultures in spite of the obvious presence of many diverse subcultures within the larger organization.

But it is not clear whether it makes sense to say that medicine or law or accounting or engineering has cultures. If culture is a product of joint learning leading to shared assumptions about how to perform and relate internally, we can see clearly that many occupations do evolve cultures. If there is strong socialization during the education and training period and if the beliefs and values learned during this time remain stable as taken-for-granted assumptions even though the person may not be in a group of occupational peers, then clearly those occupations have cultures. For

most of the occupations that will concern us, these cultures are global to the extent that members are trained in the same way to the same skill set and values. However, we will find that the macro cultures, the nations and religions in which members of those occupations practice, also influence how the occupations are defined—that is, how engineering or medicine is practiced in a particular country. These variations make it that much more difficult to decipher in a hospital, for example, what is national, ethnic, occupational, or organizational.

### **Where Does Leadership Come In?**

Leadership is the key to learning. Learning occurs when something expected is not happening and the individual or the group feels hungry, hurt, disappointed, or in some other way “disconfirmed.” If we are talking about culture formation, learning occurs through the leadership of a founder or entrepreneur who uses his or her personal power to demand some new behavior directed toward achieving some purpose. If the group gets into difficulty, it will again be leadership that will propose something new to try to get out of the difficulty. If the group is successful, the culture will define what is expected of its formal leaders. If the group then gets into difficulty again, formal leaders or other members of the group will demonstrate or demand some new behavior to solve the problem, which may evolve the culture.

The learning mechanism will vary with the nature of the difficulty. If the group is not doing something that it should be doing, the leader provides it; and if the group succeeds, that behavior is reinforced and is eventually justified with the appropriate beliefs and values. If the group is doing something wrong that produces undesirable results, that behavior is punished by the other cultures in the environment and the group learns never to do that again. But again, the learning of something new or stopping something inappropriate will be mediated by leadership behavior. This will be explored further in the subsequent chapters.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

To summarize, the most useful way to arrive at a definition of something as abstract as culture is to think in dynamic evolutionary terms, to think of culture as what the group has learned in its efforts to survive, grow, deal

with its external environment, and organize itself. If we can understand where culture comes from and how it evolves, we can grasp something that is abstract, that exists in a group's unconscious, yet that has a powerful influence on a group's behavior.

Any social unit that has some kind of shared history will have gone through such a learning process and will have evolved a culture. The strength of that culture depends on the length of time, the stability of membership of the group, and the emotional intensity of the actual historical learning experiences they have shared. As we will see in the case examples, leadership is involved in the creation of the culture and at every stage of the organization's growth and maturity.

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### Suggestions for Readers

- If you are a scholar or researcher, before you plunge into your research consider that you are about to study a complex, patterned, multifaceted human socio-technical system and decide what it is you are really trying to find out, what research method you will use, and how that research method might affect the system.
- If you are a student or potential employee, ask the recruiter about the history of the company and ask to meet some “old timers” to get their sense of how the company came to be.
- If you are a change leader, ask yourself the following question: If the group or organization I am trying to change has a learning history, what can I learn about that history before I begin to plan changes?
- If you are a consultant or helper who has been asked to build or change culture, be sure to ask the potential client what he or she has in mind and get as concrete a picture as possible of what problems the client is trying to solve before you agree to anything.