

## THE NEED FOR CULTURAL CHANGE: A CASE STUDY DISCUSSION

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the significance of the organisational culture and the research carried out within the University of Malta to test whether a cultural change is required in the organisation. The research examined the views and comments of the stakeholders of the organisation on the present organisational culture namely, students, administrative staff and academic staff from various departments. A twofold research methodology was chosen. Initially, a quantitative stage involving questionnaires was sent to all participants. This was followed by a qualitative stage involving twelve participants taking part in the in-depth structured interviews. Secondary data was also used for the study, which guided the researcher in understanding better the present organisational culture.

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**Keywords:** Organisational Culture, Organisational Behaviour, Cultural Change

### Introduction

The notion of organisational culture has its ancestry in anthropology, where anthropologists define culture as the *'patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols'* (Key 1999:217). Culture in general is also referred to as the system of shared beliefs, values, behaviours, and artefacts that individuals apply to get along with one another, and that are spread from generation to another through learning.

Many researchers and theorists offered other numerous definitions of culture. Hofstede (1982) defines culture as the *'collective programming of the mind'* (1982:21), which distinguishes a group of individuals from another and it determines the identity of a group of people (Hampden-Turner 1990:12). According to Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (2003), culture is *'a shared system of meanings'* and it states what individuals pay attention to, what are people's actions and what they value (2003:13).

Culture concerning organisations is defined as the manner and learned ways that rule and form the organisations' employee relationships (Williams *et al* 1993:17). Every organisation has its own distinctive culture which is formed unconsciously (Williams *et al* 1993:18), based on the values of the top management who lead and direct that organisation. Similarly, Edgar Schein (1985) defines organisational culture as *'a learned product of group experience'*. On the other hand, Deal & Kennedy (1984) offer the *'the way things get done around here'* definition of organisational culture (1984:4).

Organisational culture operates at all levels from subconscious to visible and it directs the manner in which an organisation deals with information, its employee relationships, and its values (Hampden-Turner 1990:1). Handy (1993) argues that a culture cannot be specifically defined since it is something that is perceived and sensed (1993:191), and it is established and erected over the years by leading groups in an organisation (Handy

1993:183). Organisations grow from the initial ideas, strategies and structures made by their founders, and thus culture is historically based (Williamson *et al* 1993:20).

Williams *et al* (1993) postulate that once an organisation has made a strategic decision, reflecting its setting at that time, the amounts of autonomy for succeeding generations are restricted (1993:21). This is because the original structures and procedures may be present in many generations after the organisation's creation and thus, the original culture influences successive generations. This is also due to the fact that, decisions that affect the future of an organisation, are made within the framework of the existing culture (Williamson *et al* 1993:21).

Finally, beliefs, attitudes and values of individuals, are all acquired from an individual's environment, and hence the organisational culture is acquired from the environment common to its affiliates (Williams *et al* 1993:17). The internal and external environment both influence the culture of an organisation. The internal environment includes the organisation's technological and societal structures, such as rules, regulations and information technology systems. Therefore, part of the culture is an artefact of these '*socio-technical systems*' (Williams *et al* 1993:17). The socio-technical systems may also include the decision-making, planning and control procedures of the organisation, the procedures for recruitment and human resources development, and the behaviour of other associates, particularly the behaviour of executives and work groups (Williams *et al* 1993:17).

On the other hand, the external environment consists of the social, political, legislative, economic and technological systems that set a range of demands on the organisation and form differing learning environments (Williams *et al* 1993:17). This is because the external environment consists of organisations that operate in diverse sectors with different markets, and which have different skills and resource requirements (Williams *et al* 1993:17).

### **The Significance of Culture**

The culture of an organisation is a complex phenomenon, since it comprises the attitudes, beliefs and values of people in an organisation (Armstrong 1994:61). These factors are deep rooted and derived from primarily held beliefs in the organisation and its history. When an organisation is formed, its culture becomes the basis on which the organisation will continue to exist. Work groups in an organisation have their own behavioural habits and relations, which to some degree, may affect the entire system.

However, employees' actions may be mostly subject to the shared practices of the specific culture of the organisation to which they belong. Of course, an organisation may have more than a single existing culture. Moreover, complex organisations may contain sub-cultures that overlap (Williamson *et al* 1993:23). These sub-cultures conflict with each other since they are made up of what is imported by the employees into the organisation. The imports may include the national culture, the class and social group background of individuals (Hofstede 1981:15).

It would be beneficial for people who are responsible for the strategic development, productivity and learning of an organisation, to understand the organisational or corporate culture they work in, to be successful in the business (Deal & Kennedy 1984:18, Hampden-Turner 1990:1). Top management individuals in organisations often attempt to establish or change a corporate culture. This includes enforcing corporate values and behavioural patterns that replicate the objectives of the organisation. Corporate culture is a key factor in the accomplishment of an organisation's goals and organisational effectiveness (Hampden-Turner 1990:1). Moreover, corporate culture enhances the management of change (Armstrong 1994:63).

Armstrong (1994) argues that cultural management is also an important factor, which facilitates change (1994:61). This may be useful where a culture is dysfunctional. The aims of cultural management often include developing principles to guide top management to plan and implement organisational strategies and policies, generating and retaining a positive climate and, encouraging dedication to the values of the organisation (Armstrong 1994:62).

However, even though culture may be managed, Deal and Kennedy (2000) argue that if the culture was required to be changed, it would be a very difficult task, since culture changes solely when it is ready to change (2000:35). This is because changing individual and group behaviour is an extremely difficult and time consuming process (Sims 2000:66). Moreover, Sims (2000) postulates that it is an individual's trend to want to preserve the existing culture, and this is often referred to as '*cultural persistence*' (2000:66).

Uttal (1983), (cited in Sims 2000), argues that culture has an '*addictive quality*' due to the individuals' awareness that culture mechanisms cannot be changed without affecting traditions and values (Sims 2000:66). For example, an organisation culture that adopts unethical behaviour tends to nourish itself unethically, since unethical managers are likely to employ individuals like themselves, in order to maintain the culture that exists (Trevino & Nelson 1995 cited in Sims 2000:66). Ethical climate is another element that influences the shaping of the organisational culture (Bourne & Snead 1999:288, Grubisic & Goic 1998:163).

Culture is also the key factor in influencing whether or not a company is successful, and thus, it needs to be on the top of the management priorities list (Deal & Kennedy 2000:40). To this respect, people who are responsible for the strategic development, productivity and learning of an organisation, may encounter problems if they ignore the cultural ways and practices of their organisation (Deal & Kennedy 2000:40).

### **The University of Malta**

The researcher considered two main approaches to study the organisational culture of the University of Malta, namely the 'typological approach' and the 'trait approach' (Liu *et al*:2006). The trait approach was finally chosen for the study, and hence the researcher assumed that the culture is an attribute of an organisation that can be changed. There is *prima facie* evidence of an effective culture that consists of generally pleasant and collegial relations, and camaraderie between colleagues and various staff members. However, there is high bureaucracy and complexity and, because of this, the University's system of communications does not permit easy routinisation, especially where it concerns employees and students. Moreover, as an organisation that fulfils multiple objectives, namely lecturing and producing knowledge through research, there may sometimes be conflicts (Schein 1970:117).

It seems that due to the high bureaucracy, hierarchy-based communication barriers exist between the University's employees. This may result in an attitude of neglect from the higher authorities, which would then inflict a negative attitude in the organisation's employees. It is also common practice for the University of Malta to encounter conflicts between management and the academic body, mostly where power and decision-making are concerned. Lockwood and Fielden (1973), (cited in Shattock 1999), argue that decision-making and budgetary matters should be the responsibility of the faculties or departments, to reduce the work load from the central administration of the universities (1999:274).

Moreover, Shattock (1999) postulates that since 1966, the debates whether power should be concentrated in the centre of the university or spread around the university and away from the centre, has taken enormous steps (1999:274). To this respect, there are several universities that have developed a strong organisational culture, in which managerial and academic structures work hand in hand in order to provide efficient decision-making

mechanisms (Shattock 1999:281), and this is the way the University of Malta should be. The above-mentioned issues advocate the appropriateness to analyse the present organisational culture of the University of Malta.

### **The Study and Its Findings**

The research examined the views and comments of the stakeholders of the organisation on the present organisational culture, and it pursued both the inductive and deductive approaches. The research also tried to bind the results of both for evidence, contradictions and verification of the findings.

A deductive approach has been used to collect relevant quantitative data concerning views on the current organisational culture. Hypotheses based on the researcher's past and current experiences, and literature on organisational culture questionnaires, were used as sources for the setting up of a questionnaire. This method involved two hundred and thirty three individuals, including students, administrative staff and academic staff from various departments and sections.

An inductive approach was then used to find out what is actually going on in the field. Top management, subordinates and students' views and perspectives was first obtained through interviews, and then analysed for coded content. It is only in this way that new developments in the views and perspectives can be illuminated and brought into the academic domain. The data acquired from the interviews was then weighed against the quantitative data gathered from the questionnaire surveys. The research at both stages focused on six very important aspects of the organisational culture; the mission and values, power and conflict, information and communication, ethics and, creativity and innovation.

Secondary data was collected to increase the validity of the research in question. These included the issued strategic plan for years 2002-2006, which was published in 2003, and the collective agreements of the employees. The strategic plan, which was collected from a dean's office, included a mission statement and, a list of goals and objectives. The goals and objectives included information on quality of education, excellence in research, quality of life, the world of work, increase in student numbers, streamlined administration, the physical environment, fund generating and quality assurance. The collective agreements of the employees, which were collected from the human resources department, included the benefits, salary scales and other information on the working conditions.

The findings illustrate both positive and negative issues in which problems need to be dealt with. The positive ones indicate that in the organisation, there are reasonably good working conditions and freedom of expression, and work and service are both conducted in an ethical way. Moreover, the degree courses offered are thorough and of high educational standards. In addition, the University of Malta adopts acceptance and open-mindedness towards diversity and multi-culturalism.

The negative findings indicate that there is a general lack of communication concerning the objectives and values of the organisation, conflicts and abuse of power, lack of training and development for employees, problems with the present management and communication style, and the present organisation structure is highly bureaucratic with imbalanced distribution of staff, and lack of professional HR people.

### **Implementing a Cultural Change**

Undoubtedly, the findings illustrate that there is sufficient scope for the University of Malta to implement a number of changes to improve or change the present organisational culture. A number of recommendations need to be considered. These include the implementation of an official mission statement, training and developing staff, redistribution the present members of staff, recruiting new management staff and professional human

resources people, applying efficient systems for communication and distribution of information, and implementing rewards and incentives.

Presently, at the University of Malta, there seem to be no clear indications of what the objectives and values of the organisation are and the majority of employees and students do not feel they belong to the organisation. Many individuals are not aware of the strategic plan of the organisation, and the general organisational policies and procedures are not revised as required from time to time. This result suggests that there is a great resistance to change, especially from people at the top of the hierarchy.

Of course, the above recommendations can alter attitudes and values, and along with changes in systems and structures, bring about the required changes in behaviour, and thus the culture may be modified. Undoubtedly, cultural change is an extremely difficult and long-term process. In order for change to be possible, top management is initially required to have a clear strategic vision and then be able to communicate it to all stakeholders of the organisation.

Moreover, in order for the University to develop a strong organisational culture, both managerial and academic structures need to work hand-in-hand in order to provide efficient decision-making mechanisms.

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