

# Leadership and Work Culture

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Culture is at the core of human existence and brings meaning to it. Organisations thus are affected by the culture in which they operate and cannot remain impervious to its influence. There are however cultural traits which are conducive to effective organisational behaviour and others which are detrimental to it. Leadership however plays a key role in creating and building culture within the organization. Thus it is possible for leadership to create and sustain an environment that is transformational and leading to effective organisational outcomes.*

**KEYWORDS** *Culture, values, environment, leadership, organisational behaviour, effectiveness*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Organisational effectiveness is the outcome of many factors undoubtedly. However today it is widely recognized and accepted that it is the human factor that plays a key role in bringing about the success of an organisation. In the study of human behaviour, the importance of culture and its effect on the persons who comprise the organisation has received much attention. This paper deals with the influence of culture in an organisation and the role played by the leader in building a positive work culture leading to organisational effectiveness.

## **THE CONCEPT OF WORK CULTURE:**

Culture is an integral part of human life. Wherever human beings exist and interact with each other, culture exists and develops. It is a fundamental social process which shapes specific and distinct ways of life.

Culture is a difficult concept to define being intangible and having diverse facets. Webster spoke of culture as the integral pattern of human behaviour that includes thought, speech and action and which depends on a person's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations.

Culture is a total way of life of a people. It is the social legacy an individual acquires from one's group. It represents a people's design for living: social symbols, religion and rituals, language, art and literature, ideologies and meaning systems, technology, social organisation and kinship structures. A world view and value system are the core of any culture (Kluckhohn, 1951).

The anthropological, sociological and management literature define culture in hundreds of different ways. A definition used by Geert Hofstede could suit our purpose well: "Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another. Culture, in this sense includes systems of values; and values are among the building blocks of culture."

Within the organisational boundaries people on a continuous basis come to interface with goals, objectives, technology, structures, policies, etc. This constant interface produces beliefs, values, norms and roles related to work. It is this totality of the various levels of interacting factors around the focal concern for work, which is labeled as work culture. (Mankidy J.)

The elements of work culture include the entire gamut of beliefs, values, traditions and norms which heavily influence the way the people in an organisation behave, how they work together and pursue organisational goals. The beliefs, norms and values relating to work centred activities will produce what we call 'work culture'. It is the glue that enables an organisation to work as a cohesive unit.

Sinha (1990) agreed that the central concerns or the ethos of an organisation or group expresses itself in its culture. He listed four sets of characteristics which, taken together, constitute the culture of an organisation:

1. Organisational goals and objectives and the way they are perceived and responded to by the employees,
2. Technology of an organisation, its structure, work systems, financial position, etc.,
3. Social groups, norms, values, power structure, role relations, etc.,
4. Work behaviour and related cognitions and effects.

The organisation, while having a culture of its own, is itself embedded in the broader cultural context and external social realities, which affect the internal dynamics of the organisation constantly and significantly. In other words the beliefs, values and attitudes of a society affect the beliefs, values and attitudes of the people working in the organisations which exist within that society. People's assumptions, beliefs and values are thus shaped by the culture to which they belong. Basic assumptions and premises are fairly deeply rooted in an individual and one must therefore assume at least in the short run, that culture cannot be changed to meet the demands of management.

In the case of national or ethnic cultures, they are also usually supported by a complex and long established social system which has a vibrant existence outside of the context of a business organisation. Thus an individual's behaviour in an organisation will mainly be guided by the outside culture from which they come.

Members of an organisation in a given cultural environment therefore would share a common set of assumptions, beliefs and values, which originate from the local environment. These cultural values from the environment are brought into the work place and have a very strong impact on the behaviour of persons within the organisation. And since leadership is a key factor in any organisation there is an intimate relationship between leadership and work culture as is discussed below.

### **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEADERSHIP AND WORK CULTURE:**

There is a reciprocal relationship between leadership and work culture. While a leader is influenced by work culture in his approach to the subordinates and the organisation, the leader also creates and manages culture by helping his subordinates and the organization maintain a set of behaviour patterns, norms and values. (Schein, 1987). Thus leadership is both affected by and affects the work culture. This two-way relationship is explained as follows.

The cultural milieu and the situation have considerable bearing on both the leader and the follower as they interact. The personality traits of the subordinates (as manifested in a given situation) must be the key variable with which the leader must deal. Their needs, values, attitudes and feelings provide the fabric based on which the leader will determine his

approach. Similarly the personality of the leader (also manifesting itself in a situation) influences his range of perception of follower and situation, his judgment of what is relevant among these perceptions, his sensitivity to the personality of the follower and to the situation and the consequent approach he selects towards his subordinates, to stimulate them towards and effective behaviour in a given situation. The very fact that the leader seeks to exert influence on a follower entails that he is alert to the behaviour of the follower, and quickly and automatically judges such behaviour to be appropriate or otherwise to the task at hand. Thus the follower is an important variable in the leader's approach, and his behaviour forms the basis for deciding the leader's communication behaviour. It is of crucial importance that the leader be sensitive to relevant attributes of the follower. The relevant attributes will seldom be of a superficial kind, such as the follower's appearance or his publicly held attitudes or opinions. Rather, the leader needs to assess correctly attributes such as the follower's feelings, values, his motives and perceptions of others. The leader should be able to understand his followers, the situation in which he exercises his leadership, so as to adopt the right approach and make a success of his role.

Douglas McGregor (1966) in his book 'The Human Side of the Enterprise' specifies the following four main variables of leadership relationship:

1. The characteristics of the leader.
2. The attitude, needs and personal characteristics of the followers
3. The characteristics of the organisation, such as its basic purpose, habits customs, traditions, structure, nature of tasks performed, etc, and,
4. The social, economic and political milieu.

The last two elements identified by McGregor refer to what we term as culture. However while mentioning culture, he not only considers the internal work culture but also the external environment as also influencing the leadership approach. Thus, management behaviour will reflect the values of the local culture. It will not include behaviour which runs counter to the culture. Secondly, culture influences the perceptions which individuals in organisations have of the world around them. This would include their perceptions of both the internal and external organisational environments (Negandhi, 1975), i.e. what is happening in the organisation as well as what is happening outside of it. Culture would influence what is perceived and what is not perceived, or noted. It would also affect the evaluation and interpretation of what is perceived. With respect to the external environment, culture would have the greatest influence on where and to what the greatest attention is paid. With respect to the internal environment, culture will affect the perception and evaluation of behaviours of individuals in the system. It is this process that would result in resistance to counter cultural management behaviours.

With regard to the same, Baldev R. Sharma (1974) too opines that cultural values have a pervasive impact on the workers' attitudes and behaviour. He cites the example of Japanese employees who are more willing to identify themselves positively with the company than are employees in, say, the United States. The uniqueness of the Japanese factory worker in terms of his life-long commitment to his employer is well known. Although it is true that the environment in most countries is changing over the years and is becoming more democratic and even homogenous in a sense, however it is also a fact that the environment as well as the culture vary from country to country. For example, the environment in a developed country is different from that in a developing country. The economic, political and cultural differences between the developed and developing countries are very different and would have a considerable impact on the internal work culture, the management practices and employee behaviour in organisations.

Cultural factors affect the interaction of individuals. On the one hand, certain cultural factors facilitate certain behaviours. Members of a cultural group share complementary behavioural programs which regulate their interaction. Associated with these programs are values and ideology which provide a guide and a meaning to what they are doing. However other cultural factors also inhibit other behaviour. Specifically, these are behaviours which run counter to the values or practices of the culture. A culture also provides a guide for perception and attribution of others' behaviour. Thus within a cultural group, certain behaviours will generate a feeling and response that is positive while others will generate a negative feeling and response. Therefore what is required is the leadership which can be adapted to a particular culture and bring out a positive behaviour responses and weed out negative behaviour patterns or cultural resistances from among the work force. This is where the second dimension of the relationship between leadership and work culture comes in. The leader is the most critical factor in shaping organisational culture.

### **LEADER AS CULTURE BUILDER**

Leaders are culture builders. Schein (1987) believes that organisational cultures are created by the founders of organisations and subsequently are maintained by the founder's chosen leaders. Founders form organisations based on personal beliefs about how to interact with the environment and about the nature of reality, people, activities and relationships. They make presumptions about what should or should not be, what works and does not work, and what constitutes appropriate or inappropriate organisational activity. Founder's goals, assumptions and visions of reality come to be shared by others in their organisations, particularly the leaders. Over a time, shared realities evolve into consensually validated organisational cultures that become the "correct" ways of solving organisational problems related to survival and adaptation to the external environment and to integration of the internal processes required to ensure survival and adaptation. Thus, organisational culture becomes a normative glue (Morgan, 1986) that structures the milieu and makes it possible for people to derive meaning from their work, to work comfortably with others, and to focus on key organisational tasks.

Leaders need to have the skills to scan the organisational boundaries and the environment and to proactively intervene not only to regulate the inflow of influences, but to create a conducive environment or culture. The change in the culture of the organisation would necessarily have to consider:

- a. changes in the external environment having a direct bearing on the culture, and
- b. the strength of the existing culture within an organisation and its flexibility to parry the blows from outside and integrate them.

It is the responsibility of the leaders to manage the interface between the two sets of forces and help the organisation cultivate a culture conducive to work. If the fit between culture and environment is inappropriate, the leader must change the work culture to one that is appropriate to it.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Two implications can be summarised from the above discussion. Firstly, that the successful leader is keenly aware of all relevant factors that have a bearing on his leadership situation. In other words, that he closely understands himself, the individuals and group with whom he is dealing, and the company and broader socio-cultural environment in which he operates. But this sensitivity or understanding is not enough, which brings us to the second implication: the successful leader is one who is able to behave appropriately in the light of these perceptions. If direction is in order, he is able to direct, if considerable participative freedom is called for, he is able to provide such freedom. (Tannenbaum, 1968).

Work culture in addition provides a set of values and guiding principles that makes for psychological control where physical command and controls are not desirable or effective. In today's competitive environment there is a need for empowerment, innovativeness, teamwork and flexibility in structures and systems. In smaller organizations, the values of the entrepreneur or top manager reflect to a large extent the corporate identity of the unit. His behaviour, style, likes and dislikes are known to everyone and everyone's behaviour is influenced accordingly. Thus work culture is a powerful vehicle for organisational transformation and top management has an important role in shaping it.

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