Organizations as Cultures

Informatics 162 W
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Thanks to Paul Dourish for much of this content

Organization as a Cultural Phenomenon

Some argue we are all living in an organizational society

- As workers of a large multi-national corporation, we identify with co-workers in other countries

- As workers in the same *type* of job, we also identify with workers at other companies

But we are also all part of particular nations, religions, races, ethnicities, etc.

Japan as an example

- Growing rice is hard and often fruitless
- Requires intensive teamwork

Leads to
- Organizations willing to take risks
- Built on teamwork
- Cooperation between organizations (even in other industries)

The US as an example

- A lot more "carrot" than "stick"
- Potentially derived from a nation of "winners"
  – History of the country's formation
  – Parent-child relationships (Puritans…)

Discussion

Can we transfer these cultural influences on organizations between countries?

Corporate Culture

- System of attitudes and meanings
  - Shared Norms
  - Values
  - Assumptions

- Out of this, a focus on meaning-in-use
  - "hello" as a greeting
  - "hello" as a mark of friendliness and community

How to find corporate culture

- Patterns of interaction
- Language
- Images and themes in conversations
- Rituals and daily routines

Culture is often taken for granted

- Generally isn't expressed
- But… it is the accumulation of a lot of ways of doing things
- And… it frames how we think of new situations
    – Opportunities for technological innovation?
    – Opportunities to increase customer satisfaction?
    – Opportunities to crush our competitors?
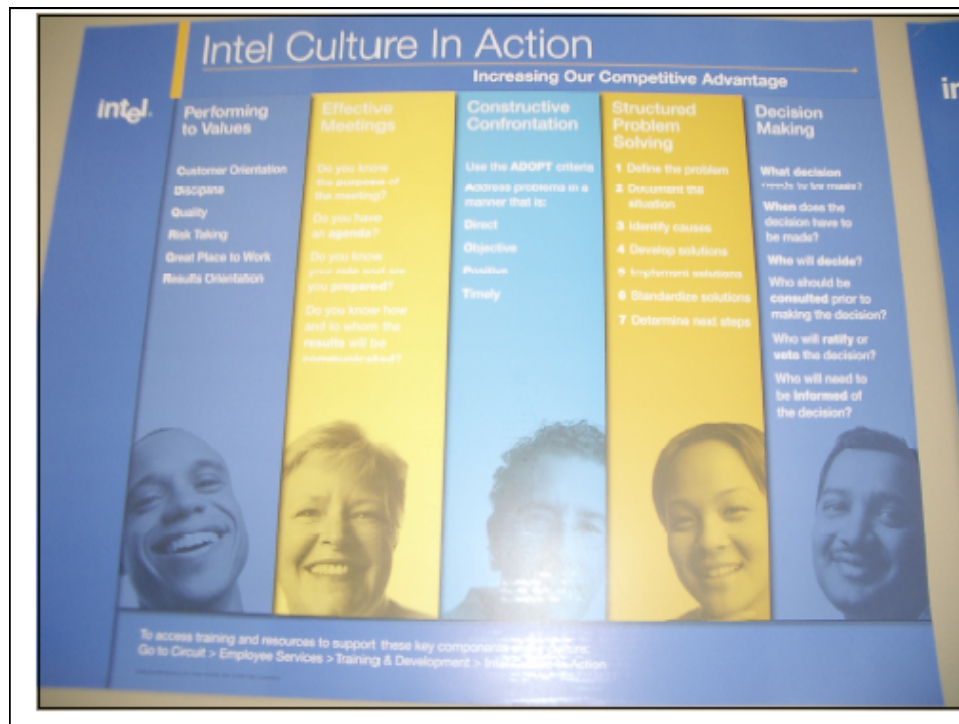
Culture and History

Organizations "follow paths" through time
- Broad need to seek consistency and coherence
- For both organizations and individuals

Fragmented Cultures

- Some organizations have people who say one thing and do another
- Often emerge from or involve separate subcultures

Culture and Innovation

Think about how organizations "make sense" of the world:

- New situations, opportunities, and challenges arise
- Where do ideas originate? managers?
- How are they nurtured?

The Role of the Leader in Corporate Culture

- Powerful leaders symbolize their organizations
- Gender as a powerful cultural force
  - Harold Geneen from ITT vs. Anita Roddik from the Body Shop
  - "Female" subcultures within "male" orgs
- But leaders don't have a monopoly on creating culture (or shared meaning)

Other forms of subcultures

- Professional groups

- Social or ethnic groupings

- Divided loyalties

Culture as Reality Construction

- Allows people to see and understand
  - Events
  - Actions
  - Objects
  - Utterances
  - Situations
- Help us to cope with situations being encountered
- Provide a basis for making our own behavior sensible and meaningful

Culture as Rule Following

- Everyday routines are *accomplishments*
- We invoke the rules and codes of behavior based on the situations in which we find ourselves → *enactment*

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Culture becomes an active, living phenomenon through which people jointly create and re-create the worlds in which they live

The Power of the Culture Metaphor

- Challenge of creating new forms of organizations is a challenge of cultural change
  - Transforming mindsets, visions, paradigms, shared meanings, and so on
  - Inventing a new way of life
- Understanding corporate culture involves grasping the mundane routines
- Objective elements (structure, rules, goals, job descriptions) are also enacted

Strengths of the Culture Metaphor

- Directs attention to the symbolic significance of almost every aspect of organizational life
- Shows importance of shared meaning
  - Forces leaders to think about what they are seen and experienced to be doing along with what they think they are doing
- Recognizes that are socially constructed
  - between an organization and its environment
  - The environment itself (made up of orgs)
- Notes that effective change depends on changing images and values

Challenges of the Culture Metaphor

- Some leaders use culture to manipulate
  - "newsspeak" from 1984
  - Cultures controls rather than expresses
- It is hard to see culture beyond the immediate pattern
  - Understandings are usually much more fragmented and superficial than reality
  - Can't be measured on a scale
- Big events and rituals tend to get more attention than the deeper and more mundane aspects
- Power is too often invisible (see political metaphor… coming soon)

Upcoming

- Friday: Discussion
  - Case Studies due
 - You will learn about progress reports

Upcoming

Monday: No class. Project work time.

- Based on the key issues you brought up in your case studies, determine what additional data you might need.

- Do you need to watch on a different day? at a different time? in a different part of the organization?

- Are there data points you just won't be able to collect this quarter? That's fine if there are… remember to include them in your writing.

Upcoming

- Next Wednesday: More on culture
  - Two research papers for reading, so start early

Okay and now on to your midterms
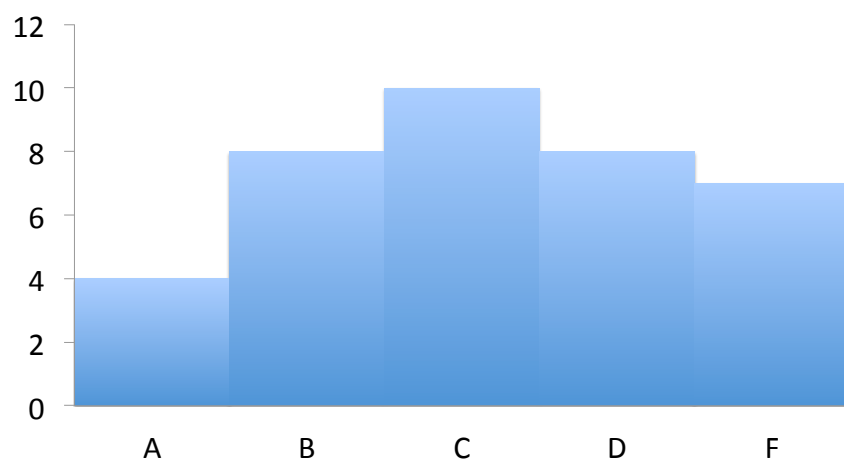
What you did(n't) do well

- You did best collectively on short answers
- You did better on questions about machine metaphor than on methods
- In some cases, I could have worded the question better
  - We gave partial credit when possible
- In some cases, I am worried about how little you know
  - Reread the assigned readings, the lecture slides!!!