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1995

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Recommended Citation

Hanson, C. (1995). Occupational cultures: Whose frame are we using? *Journal for Quality and Participation, 18*(3), 60-64.

Whose frame are we using now, yours or mine?

Mental models or frames may be the trouble and not just ordinary resistance...

Occupational cultures: whose frame are we using ?

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Increasingly, organizations are relying less upon the vision or leadership abilities of any one person or group. Instead, they are trying to draw the energy needed to solve problems and innovate from all members of the enterprise.

Most of the organizations pursuing this new learning and decision making path however, must also overcome problems associated with having a mix of occupational groups whose different values, priorities and decision making strategies frequently produce cultural barriers to overall progress in reframing their culture. These cultural barriers can be thought of as occupational frames which can be both limiting and self–protective. Not recognizing and dealing with these barriers often means that opportunities for continuous learning and improvement are lost through misunderstandings and the irrational fear that organizational integration will weaken professional ethics, control, and quality.

A key strategy to both identifying and overcoming these barriers can be an educational effort in culture awareness and practical systems theory led by support staff professionals (be they from human resources, an organizational development group or quality and participation group). Such an effort can foster collaboration by first helping occupational groups identify current beliefs that block respect and understanding of the interrelatedness of one's work and the systemic nature of organizational life. Those charged with carrying out that type of strategy, would be well advised to be familiar with (or refamiliarize themselves with) the underlying theory to both organizational transformation and the impact of occupational frames. This article undertakes that task and will suggest some specific means to overcoming these barriers.

Are we looking at the same thing?
Teamwork and the synthesis of varied perspectives require a complex look at the interpretative nature of the learning process. People translate and label new information and experiences to fit their own internal codes. Our perceptions color how we relate to others and influence how we approach and resolve interpersonal conflicts. Examples include perceptual differences about:

• The ways to resolve problems effectively...

• The information needed for sound decision making...

• The structure of motivational reward systems, timeliness...

• The appropriate level of assertiveness.

Mental models... More specifically, the mental models or cognitive frames produced and reinforced by occupational groups can hinder the development of genuine synergy in total quality management cultures. These cognitive frames based on the work one does are culturally embedded and represent a myriad of organizational sub–cultures whose bonds may even extend beyond the boundaries of any one organization.

Occupational sub–cultures — Occupational frames form around the belief that members have the exclusive right to perform a given set of related tasks. The conditions necessary for sub–culture development, as noted by Trice and Beyer, are social interaction, shared experiences, and

similar personal characteristics.* Overall, research indicates that members develop a similar world view and act as reference groups through:

• Self–definitions…

• Common and unusual emotional demands…

• A failure to socially distinguish work from non–work…

• A belief that their self–image is enhanced by their work.

Member–controlled training and professional associations help to further systematize the work and foster bonding through technical and emotional support.

Some cultures cross organizational boundaries… Another characteristic of occupational cultures is that they are often imported since their ideas and ideals typically originate outside the organization. This emphasis on occupational values suggests that a sub–culture's values and beliefs have greater influence over work styles and perspectives than the procedures or policies of any one organization. This research finding represents an evolving understanding of organizational behavior that distinguishes work beliefs from work practices.

Sub–cultures and filtering information —
All cultures operate from cognitive models by creating belief systems to filter expectations for appropriate and inappropriate behavior. It then follows that differences in thinking and reasoning drive differences in cognitive frames.

"Those skilled tradespeople are all alike…" Attributional theory indicates that occupational frames filter how people think about other people, especially in performance situations. Since current thinking in attribution theory now emphasizes how affect and emotion influence cognition and behavior in social situations, attributional biases can thus be seen as a combination of both rational and non–rational processes. For example, experience can cause people to imagine the existence of relationship problems when none are actually present while ignoring other conflicts that really do exist.

Learning and occupational peer impact… While learning is primarily an individual process, it appears that it is collectively influenced by your organizational culture and sub–culture. Many anthropologists and educators maintain that culturally bound cognitive expectations affect learning insight and retention. That is, selectivity factors cause people to remember, interpret, and pay attention to messages in terms of their existing attitudes and beliefs. This suggests the possibility that internal expectations can cause you to reinterpret stimuli that are considered culturally foreign. Rogers concludes that information communicated in a manner greatly different from what is culturally common requires a longer learning period and often leads to a lack of comprehension or misunderstanding. It then follows that most individuals learn and generate knowledge more easily if organizational norms are compatible with their own experiential based internal codes.

Occupational frames can be culturally divisive — Sub–cultures, particularly occupational sub–cultures, approach work differently through dissimilar and often incompatible priorities, work strategies, recommendations, and rationales. Such differences can naturally lead to misunderstandings, distrust, and competition between sub–cultures and with the dominant corporate culture. They become problematic when collective and cooperative thinking and decision making are required.

Engineering and marketing are from different worlds! The dynamics of interaction between occupational sub–cultures are often analogous to the seemingly foreignness of communication discord between functions, departments, and levels. Furthermore, research suggests that cross–cultural differences reinforce and even enhance one's initial beliefs. Likewise, it is the differences between individuals that dominate relationships as people attempt to explain and defend their beliefs. While this process may reinforce professional identity, it may definitely serve as a block to organizational learning.

And they certainly don't speak the same language! Like national cultures, occupational sub–cultures, too, develop distinct languages or jargon that can reveal much about how members prioritize and interpret work responsibilities, processes, and relationships. The importance of occupational dialects or jargon is linked to the interrelationship between language and thought, better known as the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis. Whorf believed that language not only reported information, but that it shaped our perceptions of reality by developing classification systems to describe experiences and concepts.

* The research in occupational cultures is diverse and ranges from shipyard workers to medical personnel.

For example, general managers relate objectives to business plans while human resource developers define objectives as learning expectations that result in behavioral and performance changes. Thus, when people communicate through different vocabularies, they risk misunderstanding and devaluing each other's message.

You can "trust" accounting to squelch our proposal... Trust is critical to both transforming an organization and to overcoming defensive and dysfunctional communication patterns. However, cross–cultural communication within organizations frequently causes groups to misunderstand the other's mental model. Such challenges can provoke defensive, self–protective behavior that can actively inhibit many from taking risks and applying new definitions to problems or contributing innovative solutions.

Individuals tend to retreat to sub–culturally familiar ground when they are threatened or feel insecure. It is common for people to feel more comfortable and trusting of those who are most like themselves. In addition, ideological cloning often takes place which filters information and encourages the development of self–serving biases.

We don't stand a chance if engineering talks first... Cultural frames not only create division among sub–groups, they can cause power struggles between occupational groups and the mainstream culture. A kind of functional myopia can develop that is frequently at odds with the broader organizational perspective held by top management. For example, in a study I led, the executives' view of HR personnel was that, like other *techies,* they were not team players. In the same study, top managers who did not equally embrace employee welfare goals or failed to provide project support were considered villainous by human resource developers.

Who rules, top management or the sub–cultures? Occupational beliefs often compete against management–driven cultures and diminish the strategic role of an occupation whose values and perceptions appear to clash with the dominant culture. Sonnenstuhl's and Trice's typology for understanding the power issues between management and other occupations indicates that management is generally subordinate to occupational cultures in institutions where social workers and university faculty are dominant, but that the opposite is the case for accountants and engineers in corporations. The social workers and academicians represent established groups whose power and credibility are based on their having deep expertise and an extensive external client base. Possessing this power and credibility enables them to effectively counter complaints of functional myopia or concerns about administrative control. Likewise, they work in organizations where their specialty drives the institution's purpose.

So where does this leave us? Clearly, the bonds that unify occupational groups can prevent collective visioning and the generation of knowledge from all levels and factions. These barriers thwart the systemic efforts of human resource and other professionals charged with transforming existing behaviors and structures into those which will foster collaborative problem solving, a systems view of the organization and teamwork. Just as clearly, we should be able to see now that helping occupational groups identify and understand their belief patterns may enhance an organization's ability to transform itself.

Identifying mental models

Few people are consciously aware of their entire belief system. Two strategies (cognitive mapping and psychological profiling) may well help to increase an individual's awareness of their not so visible belief systems and occupational biases. Both techniques relate behavioral expectations to typical organizational interactions and situations.

Cognitive mapping — Cognitive mapping is based on the premise that people develop a set of guidelines or procedures for constructing and understanding reality. Sackman describes four structural aspects of a cognitive map that are relevant to an occupational culture. They are:

1. The *what is.* or descriptive categories.

This reflects the interpretative nature of language. Sackman uses the term "dictionary knowledge" to describe how terms and definitions can differ among cultural groups. Sackman calls this "directory knowledge" because it describes a kind of logic that drives actions and outcomes.

2. The *how* or causal–analytical attributions.

Causal attributions are expectations about cause and effect.

3. The *should.* or causal–normative attributions.

Causal–normative attributions are hypothetical and classified as "recipe knowledge" because they offer advice on survival and success as well as recommendations for improvements and repairs. This kind of knowledge is often found in the morals that frame stories of organizational life.

4. The *why* or causal–attribution.

This is labeled "axiomatic knowledge" because it explains the rationale behind why certain events happen. Examples reflect value judgments such as why one person was promoted over another and why a given strategy was chosen.

Psychological profiling — Sillars offers a model which is especially helpful in detecting the psychology of belief systems. Sillars links attributional and cognitive theory to develop of a kind of psychological profile for a given culture. He suggested that an exploration of the following dimensions can shed much light on the causes of relationship problems:

1. *Sense of ego:*
   What do people take credit for?
   Do they feel empowered or disenfranchised?
   What is the perceived cause of success and failure, that is, is it a person(s) or a situation?

2. *Conflict:*
   What constitutes negative (barriers) and positive (facilitative) forces?
   Is conflict resolved primarily through compromise, debate, compliance, or mutual information exchange?

3. *Impression of others:*
   Who are the heroes and villains?
   What constitutes positive and negative traits among members of an organization and in subgroups?

4. *Decision making:*
   Do subjects focus more on the process or outcomes?
   Is there a need to be decisive?
   What kind of information do they need to make a decision?

5. *Aberrant behavior:*
   What are the assumptions and surprises that reinforce and reveal cultural expectations?

A combined list of questions — Taken all together, human resource and other professionals might use the following set of questions or behaviors to uncover how people prioritize, strategize, idealize, and rationalize their work and its relationship to the organization as a whole.

• What do people talk about?

• What vocabulary appears unique to this group?

• What kind of information do they need to make decisions and generate solutions to problems?

• What are the similarities and differences for causality (cause and effect expectations)?

• What are the perceived roles that each group attributes for itself and the other?

• What resources are required to carry out these roles?

• What are the perceived positive and negative forces (people and/or situations) in relation to important goals?

• What are acceptable conflict resolution methods?

• What underlying organizational lessons or morals are implied in tales of past experiences?

Other factors impacting organizational sub–cultures and transformation — Organizational change is complex and as Wilkins and Gibb argued: no one process can enhance or insure positive cultural change. They contend that different organizational culture frames may be more persistent than others and thus experience greater difficulty in operationalizing the kind of critical reflection discussed here.

They refer to "frame fluidity" as the controlling factor. Frames tend to be more fluid when the belief system is too complex for everyone to understand and when there is a history of self–monitoring, exposure to alternative belief systems, and successful adaptation to change strategies. Thus, occupations with simple doctrine and little prior exposure to change efforts will more fiercely defend and fear dilution of their cultural identity.

The crucial role of past "agreements"...
Parker and Lorenzini found that many difficulties associated with cross–functional teamwork come from *career pacts* that functional leaders have made with subordinates. Such pacts are designed to protect their turf from outside interference. Thus, people are limited in their ability to cooperate with other functions.

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Top echelon frames... Finally, it is important to note that empowerment and teamwork employ the philosophy of consensual decision making. Yet, managers, too, are influenced by both functional and hierarchical frames. As managers move into the executive echelon, they develop a culture of their own. Managerial frames can, thus, limit shared perspectives and shared decision-making.

Closing thoughts

The paradox we must address is that occupational frames can be limiting, self-protective and at the same time a rich source of innovation.

* Opportunities for continuous learning and improvement can be lost through misunderstandings and the irrational fear that organizational integration will weaken professional ethics, control, and quality.

* The development of teamwork and total involvement which helps organizations to evolve into interdependent systems can be crippled if the negative aspects of occupational sub-cultures are not understood nor addressed.

* The richness to be derived from a diversity of perspectives (which can drive innovation) may never be tapped if the negative aspects of occupational sub-cultural differences are not understood.

The first step toward more integrated thinking and learning, may well be that individuals need to develop a rational understanding of their own occupational frames and monitor the effects of their own ethno-centrism. The next step may well be understanding how that understanding can be applied to transforming the potential negative into a positive. ◆

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