

Reaction Memo 1 - Organizational Culture

The article *We're Thinking About Organizational Culture all wrong* by John Traphagan (2017) argues against the classical definition of organizational culture. He argues that creating an organizational culture is a tool of power which can be used by the superordinates. In this Reaction Memo, I will discuss this rather radical approach by Traphagan (2017) and compare his definition with the one stated in the course literature *Organizational Theory and Design* (Daft and Armstrong, 2015). In addition to that, I will reflect upon my experiences on organizational culture working as a barista in Sweden's largest coffee chain.

The key points made in the article by Traphagan (2017) are, according to me, that creating an organizational culture is an organic process rather than directives and activities to create shared values ordered by the people in power positions. For example the author describes the uses of slogans and workshops and how they get interpreted differently by organizational members. With different interpretations they do not unite people, they pull people apart. However, employees usually do not openly show their opinion on this due to the fact that they want to keep their job and reach their goals. Therefore, the article concludes that the attempt to unify members of an organization by creating a culture is an exercise of power.

The definition of an Organizational Culture is, according to the text book, "the beliefs, understandings, set of key values and shared norms of the people in an organization" (Daft and Armstrong, 2015, p.26.). Furthermore the text book states six ways to interpret an organization's culture, these are: Symbols, Rites and Ceremonies, Stories and Myths, Organization Structure, Control Systems and Power relationships (Daft and Armstrong, 2015, p.378). This is where I find that Traphagan's (2017) article and the text book have different views of organizational culture.

The textbook's standing point is that an organization has shared beliefs, understandings, and key values and by looking at, for example, rites and ceremonies or symbols one can determine which kind of culture the organization belongs to. This does not include how the members interpret the activities ordered by the top management. To sum it up, the actual organizational culture might be better determined by the interpretation by the organization members and the consequences of the attempts of creating a culture, rather than looking at the activities ordered by the top management.

To further strengthen my argumentation, I would like to bring up examples from my working experience as a barista in the large organization, Espresso House. Every week we had a personnel meeting with the coffee shop manager, not uncommonly we were presented to announcements regarding how we should act in the workplace. In other words, attempts to create a unified culture. However, here is when I can relate to Traphagan's (2017) article, if the message from the top management was not approved by the employees, the attempt of creating or strengthening the culture was a failure and the result of the attempt was counterproductive.

Lastly, I would like to stress the importance of context. For example, the size of an organization plays a substantial part in the organizational culture. I, being a member of a large organization, never met the top management, and of course it is very hard to have a unified culture on all the vertical and horizontal angles and levels of the organization. However, if the the organization is small with a few employees, a unified culture is far easier to accomplish.

References

Daft, R. L., & Armstrong, A. (2015). *Organizational Theory and Design* (3rd Ed.). Toronto, ON: Nelson Education.

Traphagan, J. (2017). *We're thinking about organizational culture all wrong*. Harvard Business Review Digital Articles, p.2-4