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A common thread in the study of organizational culture is the idea of culture as a unifying force that brings people together to work productively toward the attainment of organizational goals. In this approach, organizational culture is understood as a variable to be used in projects of social engineering aimed at creating unity and cohesion.

But that's not really what culture is about, nor is it a useful way to think about organizations. Why? Because culture isn't just about unity; it's also about division. Rather than a deterministic "thing" that shapes behavior and unifies people, culture is something people use, often strategically, to achieve goals. It can also provide a basis upon which people contest and counter certain ideas and values while accepting other values associated with a particular cultural context.

Even values presented as commonly held by the organization and its members and, thus, constitutive of a culture usually aren't really all that common. For example, think of a politician who extols values such as "freedom" and "liberty." Voters might agree that those are important values yet disagree deeply on what the values really mean. Is freedom supported through social programs that redistribute wealth — as in Franklin D. Roosevelt's [famous articulation](#) of "freedom from want" — or is freedom served through being left to our own devices without government intervention? "Freedom" can be used in both ways and exists as a common value only to the extent that people define it in the same way.

In organizations, people interpret and contest values all the time. In my university, one of the core values espoused is responsibility, which is defined as meaning "to serve as a catalyst for positive change in Texas and beyond." This definition is quite different from my own. I associated the word "responsibility" with accountability and duty, rather than with being a catalyst for change. Also, how does one define positive change? I suspect it is quite different from one member of the university community to another. Even if most members of the university agree that responsibility is an important value, many may not agree with what that means or feel that the stated definition represents their own ideas about responsibility.

To further complicate things, people may contest "common" values while maintaining their commitment to the success of the organization. This may be as obvious as open disagreement, or as subtle as a manager quietly reshaping a project to reflect their personal ideas about how things should be done. It could show up as a tacit rise in absenteeism or overt complaints about decisions made by leaders. Indeed, one might complain about the decisions of leaders precisely *because* one is committed to the organization and feels that the direction that leadership is moving is wrong.

Even values espoused specifically to bring people together may not necessarily function that way. For example, Build-A-Bear Workshop states that it views "Di-bear-sity" as a core [value](#). However, it's fairly easy to imagine that while some might view this as a cute and positive representation of the value of diversity, others might respond that the term trivializes real issues related to diversity in the workplace and more generally in society. Employees might be divided on this point while retaining an overall commitment to the company and even feeling appreciative of the effort despite its weaknesses. Some research has found that rather than making everyone feel included, praising diversity can make some people feel [singled out](#) or [threatened](#). It's not simple.

And this brings us to an important point: The attempt to unify an organization by creating a "culture" is ultimately an exercise of power. People will react to that expression of power in different ways

depending on the extent to which the values associated with the organizational culture resonate with their personal beliefs.

Fundamentally, a culture is not a set of (marginally) shared values; it's a web of power relationships in which people are embedded and that they use to meet both personal and collective goals but that can also restrict their ability to achieve goals. Those power relationships can function to pull people together, but they also can pull them apart because they are the product of differential access to resources. And differences in power influence how we respond to and think about values espoused as being shared by members of a group.

Reliance on culture as a way to create unity can mislead those in positions of power into thinking that the core values expressed by the organization are actually uncritically accepted by employees. This can lead to false beliefs that publicly expressed conformity with corporate values reflects personal acceptance of those values. It also obscures the fact that people may align themselves with core values not because they agree, but because they see other values, such as job security, as more important to achieving their personal goals.

The idea that unity can be generated among employees by fixing or creating an organizational culture relies on a naïve assumption that culture unambiguously brings people together. But the reality of culture is that it represents a tremendously complex variable that can both bring people together and pull them apart – or do both at the same time.

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