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*by John Traphagan*

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KENNETH ANDERSSON FOR HBR

A great deal of ink has been spent over the past thirty years or so on the idea of corporate or organizational culture. Back in the 1980's, I picked up a now-famous book, Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman's *In Search of Excellence*, that praised the unique management structure and corporate culture of computer then-giant Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC). I was working at DEC at the time and, like many other employees of the company, I was proud of the DEC culture and the fact that it was considered a great place to work and a model for other companies, where CEO Ken Olsen was simply known as "Ken" by the employees. Peters and Waterman's book spawned an entire

industry in corporate culture consultants and an endless stream of books about corporate and organizational culture has followed right into the present.

Today, the idea that organizations have cultures is rarely questioned by the media, by corporate executives, or by the consultants who make a living helping organizations improve their “cultures.” Organizational culture is assumed to be important to making sure that employees are happy and productivity is good. At the same time, the concept, meaning, and function of culture rarely garners much thought. When I ask business people to define culture—or even when I ask students in my class on organizational culture to do so—it turns out to be difficult. I either get a simple definition, such as “the values of a group” or I get “interesting question” and something of a blank look as a response. The problem here is that while we use the term “culture” constantly, most of us give very little thought to what that term means and how its use influences behavior and thought within organizations.

In fact, anthropologists—the group of academics who first used the term in an analytical sense—have never really agreed on what exactly culture means. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, E. B. Tylor defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” Most of the definitions of culture used in books about organizational culture and values follow the Tylorian definition. Culture is the values, practices, beliefs, etc. of a group of people. In other words, culture is everything; which basically means it’s nothing from an analytical perspective. The only really useful aspect of this definition is that culture involves groups (society) and that those groups share something. Otherwise, it’s pretty vague.

This definition also has a tendency to present culture as a fairly deterministic thing—people act within a group that shapes the way they think, but the fact that the way everyone thinks constantly changes the nature of the group is not given much attention. Since the 1980’s, anthropologists have come to think of culture more as a process, rather than a thing that people share. As such, it is constantly changing as people contest and innovate upon the rules and ideas that constrain their actions and ideas. And, of course, many of the people who operate inside a group do not actually share the values espoused as belonging to the organizational culture. Any organization, particularly multinational ones, has multidimensional webs of values and beliefs that are constantly interacting and often competing with each other and with the espoused values of the organization as a whole.

The problem with the term “culture” is that it tends to essentialize groups: it simplistically represents a particular group of people as a unified whole that share simple common values, ideas, practices, and beliefs. But the fact is, such groups really don’t exist. Within any group characterized as having a culture, there are numerous contested opinions, beliefs, and behaviors. People may align themselves to behave in a way that *seems* as though they buy into expressed corporate values and “culture,” but this is just as likely to be a product of self-preservation as it is of actually believing in those values or identifying with some sloganized organizational culture. I worked for DEC, liked DEC, and did my best, but I don’t think I can honestly say I was ever committed to the values espoused by the

organization. I was interested in a paycheck and in order to get that paycheck, I had to align my identity with the patterns of behavior and thought expected by those who had power over me.

The boundaries of any organization are permeable and usually not particularly clearly defined. We can tell if someone works for organization X, but that organization influences and is influenced by a much broader collection of organizations with which it interacts, from corporate partners to government. Furthermore, it exists embedded in the broader context of a society's political and social ideals and practices – and often, those of many different societies.

So I think we need to stop using the term “culture” to talk about what’s going on in our organizations. By using the culture concept, we tend to artificially ossify the diverse, complex, and constantly changing social environment that is any organization. As a result, it becomes easy to misinterpret or misunderstand the nature and influence of power, conflict, cooperation, and change in relation to both individual and group behaviors. Corporations and other organizations do not have cultures; they have philosophies and ideologies that form a process in which there is a constant *discourse* about the nature and expression of values, beliefs, practices, ideas, and goals. This discourse happens in sales meetings, interactions with customers, board meetings, and in conversations around the water cooler. It’s a constantly moving target.

Those of us interested in how organizations work, as well as those engaged in building successful organizations, need to develop a way of talking that captures the discursive nature of group behavior and to think in terms of all groups as processes that shape and are shaped by individuals. Dropping the term “culture” from the lexicon of organizational and corporate consulting and research would be a good step in that direction.

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