

Automakers Culture

Culture is a shared set of beliefs, values and assumptions that contributes to the identity of an organisation and its members. Culture influences the way individuals think and, consequently, the way individuals act by identifying what is important within the organisation and what is not.

There was a glaring set of shared values that permeated through Automakers. Culture certainly existed from an integrationist perspective, which assumes there is the presence of a singular, uniform culture. The integrationist theory of culture suggests that by adopting a common set of values, organisations are able to better survive and adapt to its external environment while maintaining internal integration within the firm; that is, the existence of cohesion and shared understanding among staff.

From an integrationist point of view, the leaders manage culture in a top-down manner that allows the organisation to be predictable and stable, as a dominant set of values decreases the likelihood of conflict. These prevailing values can be 'engineered' and reinforced by managers through formal policies, informal norms, stories, rituals and jargons. T-Plant had created a strong, singular culture that emphasised aggression, competition and lying, stealing and cheating. The culture very much resembled T-Plant's 2x4 management style, one that was known for its 'internal verbal abuse' and 'dramatic confrontations'. These norms and practises were further acknowledged through stories and myths where 'perpetrators were spoken of as folk heroes'. As a result, employees became aggressive in order to compete with other teams. This culture was deliberately 'engineered' by managers as they believed it was 'familiar', 'contained elements of excitement' and 'necessary to get the job done'. Thus, the culture at T-Plant was organisation-wide and supported by consistent management practices. As a result of the aggressive and ubiquitous management style, new employees would be forced to quickly learn and adopt the explicit norms and thus be socialised into the culture without much choice. A unified culture is desirable according to integrationist theory as it assumes this will result in higher commitment, greater productivity and ultimately better profits in the organisation.

However, integrationist theory is limited in that there is no empirical evidence that suggests an organisation will perform better through a strong culture. It is also possible that a strong culture may be dysfunctional in that it promotes qualities such as lying and cheating. The pressure of working under a 2x4 management style translated into employees 'failing to take responsibility for product defects' as they were more concerned with the 'fear of being exposed and humiliated' than delivering quality service. As a result, there were significant drawbacks on organisational performance.

When the new management style was adopted, the culture at Automakers started valuing participation, team work, autonomy and quality. Lower level managers became more involved in the decision-making process which led to them having a stronger commitment to the organisation. Organisation performance increased through cost reduction, quality improvements, waste reduction and stronger motivation and job satisfaction.

The Differentiationist theory of culture assumes that different subcultures exist within the organisation. These subcultures may exist across departments or divisions or even on a smaller scale within particular working teams. It is therefore the responsibility of middle management rather than organisation leaders to implement values and norms that represent the subculture. The existence of subcultures can lead to a more meaningful experience for individuals as there is a stronger emphasis on commitment to the smaller work group. Managers also have greater scope and can be more flexible in their management of culture as they do not have to cater for a larger audience. However, conflict may potentially arise between subcultures as they are unable to complement each other. There is also the risk of employees working towards the interests of the subculture rather than the organisation, a phenomenon referred to as 'Balkanisation'.

On the surface, Automakers had a very integrated culture that valued aggression and competition, however, subcultures existed within the organisation that possessed subtle yet distinct differences. The degree to which managers and workers accepted the 2x4 management varied with some referring to the extreme managers as 'monsters' while others found it 'appealing'. The 'excitement and subterfuge' suited some while others preferred the 'straightforward approach' to going about work. There was also a clear distinction between the 'old supervisors' who 'knew the system better' and the new managers whose 'budgets were way over' because they didn't 'lie, cheat and steal a little'.

In addition to the cultural differences between the old and new, there also existed subcultures vertically with higher level managers understanding that the organisation's behaviour 'was out of sync with the larger society' and middle managers who were primarily concerned with 'covering ass'. Although the higher managers were 'suspicious of a participative management program', they encouraged more professionalism while middle managers simply fought for survival with little ethical boundaries.

Furthermore, competition and a lack of cooperation existed between shifts known as 'shiftitus' and 'empire building'. As competition intensified between shifts, 'Balkanisation' occurred where employees started working towards subculture goals rather than organisational goals. This led to barriers in communication as the rivalry resulted in workers hiding resources and passing blame onto others. Organisational performance declined through poor and faulty production.

Under the new management program, emphasis on participation greatly reduced the competitive nature at T-Plant, hence, subcultures were also less segregated. The organisation became more unified and reflected a more integrationist perspective. Although, this new culture was accepted by the majority of managers and worker, some were still 'ambivalent' and missed the 'old culture'.

Unlike Integrationist and Differentiationist theory which are both functional, Critical theory focuses on how employees are affected and how power is embedded in culture. It argues that under a strong culture, managers benefit from being able to control the employees. Therefore, it also suggests that employees should resist culture. While critical theory is useful in highlighting the negative effects of culture on individuals, it fails to show how employees can benefit from being socialised into an organisation's culture.

The aggressive culture at Automakers was clearly used by managers to challenge and force employees into working harder. From a critical perspective, no one particularly benefitted from this type of culture. Workers were subject to 'intensive verbal abuse' and constant pressure from the 'fear of being exposed and humiliated'. In comparison, managers also had little to celebrate as dysfunctional issues led to lower productivity levels. 'Shiftitus' in particular contributed to this as workers stole and hid materials from each other in order to gain a competitive advantage for their subculture while ignoring organisational priorities. The only real benefit was that some managers enjoyed the 'excitement' and had 'fun' but this was offset by a culture of 'covering ass'.

Resistance to the organisation's culture was minimal from the employees at T-Plant as the notion of 'wheel and deal' and shifting blame was necessary in order for self-survival. Employees were forced to adopt the culture of ignoring problems because 'if you fixed it too many times, then it would become your responsibility'. Similarly, if managers resisted the 'game', they would often find themselves over the budget and having to deal with many more tasks.

Although the working atmosphere was demanding at times, the employees at Automakers went along with this culture. It is important to note that the organisation members were 'self-selected' and that they enjoyed the competitive yet exciting atmosphere. It is clear that the employees' values were aligned with Automakers and its environment as they recognise the workers of the auto industry 'love cars and what they symbolise'. For the employees, the culture was 'tough and competitive', however, it was simultaneously 'resented and enjoyed'.

As the change to a participative managing style was implemented, workers became lost and confused, thus, managers found it difficult to establish and impose a clear culture among the employees. It was only after a few 'respected managers' reinforced the change, did employees feel more comfortable and motivated in the environment. The construction of this more participative, collaborative and forgiving culture enabled employees to leave behind their previously deceitful and dishonest behaviour. Higher level managers benefited as this led to cost reduction and quality improvements. Lower level managers became more involved in the decision-making process which led to them having a stronger commitment to the organisation. Workers benefited in that they were rewarded intrinsically through motivation and job satisfaction.