

Change and Culture

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Tom looks at how professionals such as Organisational Psychologists, Change Consultants and Human Resource professionals can better work together to develop successful workplace cultures even when faced with a constantly changing environment.

Understanding workplace Culture

As a first point, it is important to understand what work culture is. At its very basic it is the 'feel' of a workplace, the way things are done, the way people communicate and work 'here'. It is essentially the psychology of an organisation, a set of goals, beliefs, structures and behaviours. In this sense an organisation can be compared to a person. One can be smart, innovative and quick to adopt technology another can be secure, steady, reliable and consistent.

A lot of effort is invested in many companies to create a culture that helps the organisation better achieve its goals and business plans. As a simple example, one organisation might feel that through support, teamwork and sharing of ideas they can foster innovation that would help them bring new and exciting products to market, while another may encourage achievement and competition by focusing on success of their consultants to attract motivated staff who can in turn help capture more market share.

Whatever the idea, the culture is the environment or habitat in which employees operate. This environ-

ment powerfully shapes employees' feelings, experiences, opinions, the connection with their organisation and their interaction with their colleagues. Some elements of culture are immediately apparent while others become more apparent over time.

How Change affects Culture

Culture and the way employees experience their work environment can be significantly affected by change. Change can happen for many reasons.

It might be born out of a need for an organisation to become more competitive, due to a merger or an acquisition. Intensive global competition, higher customer expectations and greater focus on quality have resulted in much greater requirements placed upon organisations

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today than a few decades ago (Quinn and Spreitzer, 1997).

Additionally, an explosion in infor-

mation technology impacting on the way and speed with which we do things has provided a source of competitive advantage to organisations that can effectively change.

There exists in the literature a number of change models (Kotter, 1995) and criteria (Probst, & Buchel, 1997) to guide and instruct the implementation of major change in organisations.

Businesses are discovering that new capabilities demand extensive changes in how work gets done, as employees are asked to think globally, cooperate with other units, challenge managers and show sensitivity for customer needs.

While change and its effect on culture in a single organisation can be incremental and spread over a time period, it can be far more confronting in a merger or acquisition of another organisation.

Many mergers occur for the purpose of consolidating resources and market share or developing economies of scale. Often differences in culture and the implications are not properly considered.

I have been involved in a number of projects where there has been an incompatibility which has resulted in large amounts of work to get right. One example was a large telecommunication giant purchasing and absorbing a small innovative company and another was two established consultancies merging with vastly different cultures.

One consultancy was traditional with well established products and offerings, while the other was research based, innovative and flexi-

ble, focused on assisting clients rather than in outright profits.

After the merger, rather than complementing each other, the consultancies continued to operate like separate companies with different values, behaviours and processes and couple of years later the work still continues to integrate both effectively. A simple example is one that half prefers to use electronic project management software, databases, schedulers, diaries and remote email clients, while the other prefers to use paper based systems, such as hand writing and handing in invoices and leaving phone messages on notes in pigeon holes.

As both prefer, and defend, their own way of doing things, administration staff are required to perform the same tasks differently based on who is involved. As you can imagine, the issues and inefficiency this creates are enormous.

What can Organisational Psychologists do?

While any of the models of change management are well established, psychologists can use their understanding and study of people to tweak and adjust the way these processes are delivered to maximise effectiveness.

Psychologists can begin to quantify aspects of culture and deal with these concepts in a more scientific fashion, by collecting information, measuring behaviour, monitoring satisfaction and supporting individuals.

The development of culture requires the creation of a vision which provides a holistic perspective, an implementation process that is sustained by organisational learning and the creation of resources to support the change (Miles, 1997).

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ture and consequently the capacity of the organisation to learn (Hodgkins & Brown, 2003).

The goal of the change process when improving operations is to achieve a quantum improvement in the firm's efficiency, often by reducing costs, improving quality and service and reducing development time.

Improvements are achieved by re-engineering business processes, restructuring roles and responsibilities, and redefining performance standards and measurements.

Typically, according to Blumenthal and Haspeslagh (1994), these changes require employees to work in teams, work across functions or other organisational boundaries and play a large role in identifying and resolving problems. Therefore, as Psychologists we can help managers to coach and facilitate and rely less on monitoring and controlling.

The first step to driving the development of culture is for Psychologists to help identify the views and wishes of employees and stakeholders of the organisation. The feedback provides the basis for developing guiding principles and the initial planning of the process of change.

Throughout the process of change communication needs to provide information, summaries, comments on progress, encouragement and confirmation that views of the Organisation were incorporated from the outset of the design process. All of these factors are important in the change process (Hargie & Tourish, 2000) and can be designed with the help and knowledge of Organisational Psychologists.

This democratic and consultative style of management is more likely to lead to a successful development of culture than a top-down approach. This style of management is related to the notion of a learning organisation (Jones, 1996).

Simply defined by Brown and Mano-

gue (2007), a learning organisation may be described as an organisation in which individuals are encouraged to learn, reflect and problem-solve together. These collective experiences sustain and develop the organisational culture and consequently the capacity of the organisation to learn from its own reflections (Hodgkins & Brown, 2003).

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