Understanding organisational culture in a development ngo in Nepal by applying academic theory to witnessed organisational behaviour

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A B S T R A C T

OD practitioners and managers are focussing on the culture of organisations with the aim to improve it and to steer and control the organisation towards optimal performance. Examining the organisational culture of SRWSP in Nepal through the lenses of academic theories reveals valuable details for interpreting and understanding witnessed organisational behaviour in a complex international organisation situated in a complex national culture. The influences of national culture, international corporate culture and SRWSP's mission on the formation of its organisational culture are examined, before reflecting on the applicability of theoretical models to the case of SRWSP and their possible contribution to organisation development.

A R T I C L E I N F O

Keywords

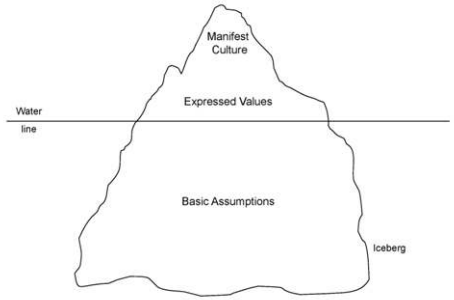
Organisational culture, organisation development, Nepal, symbolist, functionalist, chakri, afno-manchhe, ke-garne, karma, gender

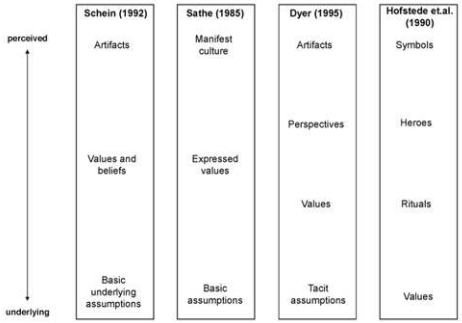
How to refer to this article

Schueber M.,
Understanding organisational culture in a development ngo in Nepal by applying academic theory to witnessed organisational behaviour,
2009, Omertaa, Journal for Applied Anthropology,
http://www.omertaa.org/archive/omertaa0050.pdf

Preface

Imagine the scenario of a new colleague or perhaps even a new leader from a very different cultural background to be entering an organisation. This could be a specialist expatriate or a new project manager joining a project in International Development Cooperation. Here two organisational cultures will meet, causing some kind of reaction. The newcomer's behaviour and interaction with the team will be influenced by his/her past organisation's culture, while his/her colleagues will all share to some extent their own organisational culture. Such a confrontation could be a source of inspiration, creative reflection and could generate a boost of energy for the organisation or it could result in conflict, suffering and actually in draining vital energy.





Having gone myself already several times through such a scenario and having experienced myself the conflict and suffering aspects of it as well as the inspiration and wisdom it can breed, I want to reflect on and analyse organisational culture for my own benefit in future assignments as organisation development practitioner in multicultural environments as well as for other development practitioners. The article could also be used as a tool to start a discussion and reflection on organisational culture and respective teambuilding within a team or organisation.

1. Introduction

While peoples' behaviour is affected by culture, be it as members of society or as members of the organisations they create, it also contributes to the continuous recreation of culture. Hofstede defines culture as: "the collective programming of the human mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from those of another. Culture in this sense is a system of collectively held values." (Hofstede 1981:24).

Culture evolves from religion, ideologies, philosophies, political, and economic conditions (Francesco and Gold 1998) and is learned by individuals during 'primary and secondary socialisation' (Berger and Luckmann 1967:129). Primary refers to early childhood, while secondary refers to skills and behaviour related to adult and occupational roles (ibid.). Culture is a construct, which cannot be directly observed (Francesco and Gold 1998) and people are mostly not aware of their own culture until they get confronted with a different culture (Schein 1992). Also behaviour that is appreciated in one culture could be regarded unacceptable in another one.

Whilst anthropologists seek to understand national and ethnic subcultures better, Organisation Development (OD) practitioners and managers are focussing on the culture of organisations with the aim to improve it and to steer and control the organisation (Bate 1994). Organisational culture can be seen as "the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organisation, that operate unconsciously and define in a basic 'taken for granted' fashion an organisation's view of itself and its environment." (Schein 1992:6)

Part two of this paper outlines main points of academic theory on organisational culture, while part three critically discusses the key issues of controversy. The organisational culture of SRWSP(1) in Nepal is analysed in part four by using theoretical concepts to interpret witnessed behaviour. The concluding discussion reflects on the applicability of theoretical models to the case of SRWSP and their possible contribution to organisational development. It is followed by a short reflection on the process of writing this essay.

2. *Overview of academic theory on organisational culture*

The concepts and models that have been developed by researchers are intended to help interpret cultural differences and how those affect people's behaviour in society and in the workplace. From the vast body of theory on organisational culture, I have chosen to address those aspects that are most relevant to my experience as development practitioner mainly in Asia. They are: levels of organisational culture; significance of organisational culture; influences on its development; and influence of national culture on organisational behaviour.

Levels of organisational culture

The concept of Schein (1992) distinguishes three levels of organisational culture: artefacts, like language, overt behaviour, dress, rites and rituals, and espoused values like the mission statement; values and beliefs that justify behaviour and actions; and basic underlying assumptions that are guiding peoples' perception and are the foundation of culture.

Figure 1: Sathe's Levels of culture (adopted from Francesco and Gold 1998:19)

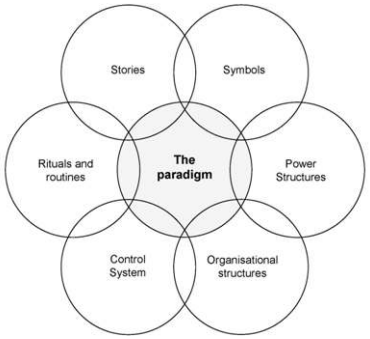
Whilst the artefacts or "manifest culture" (Sathe 1985:NA) and the expressed values can be experienced, the basic underlying assumptions are not visible (Figure 1). The metaphor of an iceberg also quite appropriately reflects that only a small portion of culture is visible and perceived while most of it is hidden.

Figure 2 compares the three-level models of Schein (1992) and Sathe (1985) with the four-level models of Dyer (1995) and Hofstede et. al. (1990), the later of whom considers the first three of his levels practices. All models represent culture consisting of features on a continuum somewhere between perceived and underlying.

Figure 2: Levels of culture compared

Brown (1995) and Robbins (1993) have developed even more detailed frameworks, intended to help better describing a particular organisational culture.

Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961)	Hofstede (1980) and Bond and Hofstede (1989)	Trompenaars (1993)
Focus of responsibility	***Individualism vs. collectivism***	***Individualism vs. collectivism***
Relationship to the environment	Power distance	Universalism vs. particularism
Activity orientation	Uncertainty avoidance	Neutral vs. affective relationships
Conception of space	Masculinity vs. femininity	Specific vs. diffuse relationships
Time orientation	***Long-term vs. short-term orientation***	***Relationship to time***
Nature and people		***Relationship to nature***
		Achievement vs. ascription



Significance of organisational culture

Nelson and Quick (1994) see three core functions of organisational culture and suggest that: the sense of identity is a source of commitment and motivation; culture as a sense-making device offers guidance for understanding the organisation; and culture as a control mechanism guides behaviour. The psychological contract (Arnold et. al. 1998) is one example of how organisational culture guides the relationship between the employee and the organisation through shared assumptions and values. Since culture does not only affect overt behaviour but also the source of behaviour, the values and norms, it represents the "largest organisational control system" (Egan in Mullins 2002:808) and the "social glue" (Furnham and Gunter 1993:NA) that counteracts differentiation.

Recognising this potential to shape organisational behaviour, researchers have explored the relationship between organisational culture and organisational performance. Peters and Waterman (in Mullins 2002:808), Heller (ibid.) and; Goldsmith and Clutterbuck (ibid.) draw from their separate researches the conclusions that a strong, dominant coherent organisational culture is likely to be favourable for excellent performance.

Organisational culture is also crucial for organisational change (Kotter and Schlesinger 1979; Beer 1993 in Senior 1997). There are however conflicting views about whether it is wiser to attempt shaping culture to fit corporate strategy or rather bringing strategy in line with existing culture (ibid.). This has been further explored by Leidner (1999), who developed a model to facilitate analysis and judgment of how a particular corporate culture might affect the success of corporate knowledge management strategies.

Researchers and scholars (Harrison 1972; Handy 1991; Deal and Kennedy 1982; Hall, W. 1995; Kotter and Heskett 1992) have proposed models to assess, describe and classify organisational culture. While these models and typologies help create awareness of organisational culture, their main objective is to assess the gap between existing organisational culture and the one desired by the leadership. This however raises the crucial question of manageability of organisational culture, which will be addressed in part three.

Influences on the development of organisational culture

Organisational culture is influenced by many factors. The major ones are: history and ownership of organisation; function and technology; mission and goals; size; location; management and personnel; and the environment (Mullins 2002). Employees, the management and certainly the environment are also influenced by the national culture. Especially when considering organisations as open systems (Ackoff 1998; Mullins 2002) that interact with and depend on the environment like organisms (Morgan 1986) the influence of national culture appears obvious.

Influence of national culture on organisational behaviour

Frameworks have been proposed to study and categorise national cultures, in order to understand how national cultures influence organisational behaviour. Several of those resulted from research in multinational corporations.

Hofstede's (1980) much-applied framework is based on a survey of 116,000 employees of IBM in 50 countries (ibid.). He initially proposed the first four dimensions in Figure 3, reflecting work-related values to describe a culture.

Figure 3: Dimensions of national culture compared

Finding that Hofstede's dimensions, grounded in a Western view of society could not sufficiently describe Chinese culture, Bond with Chinese colleagues identified the need for another, the 'Confucian work dimension' (Francesco and Gold 1998). This dimension was later integrated by Hofstede, as long-term/short-term orientation into his framework (Bond and Hofstede 1989).

Earlier already, the anthropologists Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) had created a scheme of 'six values orientations', which could each have three variations. Drawing on their (ibid.) and others' work, Trompenaars (1993), attempted to describe cultural differences with seven dimensions (Figure 3). Besides some overlapping, all three frameworks explore also different aspects of culture, and thus complement each other.

The important dimension of communication, which is not addressed directly by above frameworks is the focus of E. Hall's (1976) research on the relevance of 'context'. He places national cultures on a continuum between high or low context. In high-context cultures, the behaviour of people and the context are very important for interpreting explicit communication, while they are less important in low-context cultures where the content of communication dominates.

All mentioned theories and concepts on organisational culture are attempts by researchers to explain complex reality through simplified models and frameworks. They highlight certain aspects only, are based on assumptions and reflect a particular view of reality. Some of those concepts are consequently controversial.

3. Critical discussion of key issues of controversy

The following discussion features controversial issues that were most relevant to my work in international development cooperation. They are: The functionalist vs. the symbolist view; the convergence vs. divergence view; consideration of gender; and the question, whether cultural frameworks really explain cultural differences.

The functionalist vs. the symbolist view

There are two very distinct views about the manageability of organisational culture. The functionalist or objectivist view considers culture as an organisational variable, like structure, processes, strategy, technology or other sub-systems, which can be managed (Alvesson 1993) and is generally preferred by managers who seek to control systems. Possible means for attempting to control or change culture could be seen in recruitment and selection, training and development, the reward system, the communication channels and in making resistant members redundant (Rees 2001).

The symbolist or interpretive view advocated by Smircich (1983), Morgan (1986), Meek (1988), Alvesson (1993) and Drummond (2000) sees culture as a symbol of what an organisation is rather than something it has. Morgan (1986) uses culture as metaphor for the concept of organisation itself. He maintains that the organisation is a social entity, constructed by its people rather than by its management, which implies serious limitations to control or manage culture. Wilson (2001) regards the concept of 'corporate culture' propagated among others by Deal and Kennedy (1982) as an "extreme form of functionalism, often solely, concerned with economic performance" (Wilson 2001:175). Drummond (2000) argues that "corporate culturism charges management with creating a unitary set of values [while] in reality organisations are not one culture but many" (ibid:251).

Organisational culture could impede or facilitate organisational change (Senior 1997). Proponents of the functionalist view would lobby to change the culture in order to suit the strategy, while the symbolists would suggest adjusting the strategy to the cultural reality of the organisation (Senior 1997).

Whilst the functionalist as well as the symbolist views each reflect some characteristics of organisational reality they are not very compatible. The concept of the organisational climate (Mullins 2002) and the concept of the cultural web are useful to address the dilemma surrounding manageability of culture.

According to Denison (1996) organisational culture refers more to deep rooted values, beliefs and assumptions while organisational climate represents aspects of the organisational environment consciously perceived by its peoples. Moran and Volkwein (in Mullins 2002:809) argue that organisational climate is more malleable than culture and more appropriate to target interventions aimed at organisational change. Changes in climate will sooner or later also affect the organisational culture (Hailey 1999), trickling downwards from the top of the iceberg.
Johnson's and Scholes' (1997) model (Figure 4) describes the organisation through a number of features interwoven in a cultural web. It "appears to bring together the idea of culture as congruent with everything that happens in an organisation" (Senior 1997:106) while offering the possibility to plan strategic organisational changes, taking culture into considerations (Senior 1997).

Figure 4: The cultural web (Johnson and Scholes 1997 in Senior 1997:106)

The convergence vs. the divergence view

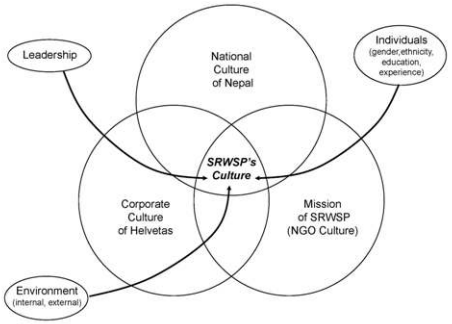
Proponents of the convergence view expect that due to globalisation, and use of similar technologies (Woodward 1965; Castells 1989) organisations, wherever they are will be shaped into a "particular configuration with respect to strategy, structure and management" (Senior 1997:118). The concept of corporate culture seems to be pushing in that direction.

The contrasting divergence view suggests that differences in national cultures and respective contexts will prevent nations from converging (Hofstede 1980; Tayeb 1989; Wilson 1992), which can be seen, in e.g. the 'digital divide' and widening gap between rich and poor countries. Research of Florida and Kenney (1991), Tayeb (1987), and Guillen (1994) supports the view that cultural differences contribute to variation in organisational structure and organisational behaviour.

However conflicting they are, both views underline the importance of studying organisational as well as national culture in order to facilitate interpretation of organisational behaviour and its effect on organisations. This is expressed by a third view suggesting that national cultural values and corporate values interact with structural variables and shape thus together the organisational behaviour (Francesco and Gold 1998).

Consideration of Gender

Gender relations influence the functioning of organisations (Alvesson and Billing 1997). Although some writers address gender in their cultural models, like Hofstede (1980) in the masculinity/femininity dimension and Schein (1992) in addressing gender subcultures in organisations, Wilson (2001) argues that most studies on organisational culture are gender blind. Wilson (2001) suggests that culture can be explored with a deliberate focus on gender but since all cultures are 'gendered cultures' it is imperative to consider gender in every study on culture. Here, the symbolist view offers a more sympathetic base for considering gender within culture than the functionalist view (ibid.).



Do cultural frameworks really explain cultural differences?

Cultural frameworks oversimplify, generalise and average national cultures. "There is often greater variation within single cultures than across cultures" (Francesco and Gold 1998:20). From the study of the visible layer of culture (Figure 1) researchers make judgements about the large hidden phenomenon of culture. National cultures are not homogenous they consist of subcultures and ethnic groups, and organisational culture may be more influenced by those than by the 'so-called' national culture.

All these frameworks contribute to some extent to an understanding why people behave differently, but to really understand cultural differences one has to experience them through interaction with people. Further, there are very nation or region-specific cultural features like the 'jagir-culture' (Pradhan 1993, 1996) in Nepal that cannot be fully captured and interpreted with Western-thinking-based frameworks. Also the fact that in Hindu and Buddhist societies often happiness is given a higher priority in life than material and economic gains (Sinha 1994) seems to be difficult to frame with Western models.

4. Organisational behaviour and culture of SRWSP in Nepal

SRWSP was supporting rural communities in Nepal in the construction of gravity flow drinking water systems. From 1976 till 1993 the programme was headed by Western engineers and the focus was on technical implementation. In 1993 Helvetas decided to give higher importance to the community development aspect and consequently appointed a female team leader (2) with a social background. I joined SRWSP in 1996 and together with ML and the Nepali deputy team leader (3) formed the management team (4) that headed SRWSP until 1999. During this period, SRWSP had around 30 Nepali staff from different ethnic background of which 10 were female. The organisation was structured into six sections: social development, engineering, training, monitoring and information coordination, administration, and finance. It coordinated the rural projects from its programme office in a district capital. The members of the social, training, and engineering section where mostly working in the field, concerned with activities aimed at facilitating community development and empowerment as a preparation for the technical implementation of the drinking water system.

The scope of this essay does not allow a very thorough analysis of the complex organisational culture of SRWSP. However, to explore the relevance of key theories for the interpretation of organisational behaviour, I first analyse how the formation of SRWSP's culture was influenced (4.1) and then present two events to demonstrate the applicability of both, the functionalist and symbolist views (4.2).

4.1. How the formation of SRWSP's organisational culture was influenced?

Many factors seem to have contributed to the formation of SRWSP's culture, the main ones being: the national culture of Nepal (5), the history and corporate culture of Helvetas, and the organisational mission.

The influence of national culture

Although the theoretical frameworks presented in part two are helpful for interpreting the influence of the national culture, they are too general and not sufficient here. Nepali culture shows some very specific features and behaviour patterns, which highly influence peoples' behaviour in all walks of life. They are chakari; afno-manche; adesh; karma; and subordination of women. The first four are part of the 'jagir-culture' and originate from the influence of the Moghul regimes of the 17th century (Pradhan 1993) and the influence of the predominant Hindu culture. They are based on the understanding that public servants are not serving the public but the public them.

Chakari is a ritual where employees (or citizens) show a respected position-holder again and again their loyalty and subservience in expectation for future favours (Pradhan 1993). It could be interpreted as a manifestation of Hofstede's (1980) dimension of high power-distance.

Afno-manche is a term used to describe one's own circle of associates on whom one can call (not always depend on) when the need arises. The larger the circle is and the more influential the members are the higher one's status becomes (Bista 1991). This indicates the importance of the dimension of collectivism (Hofstede 1980; Trompenaars 1993) in Nepal.

Adesh means order and is crucial for decision-making processes. Due to the high power distance, subordinates usually don't dare to make decisions and just wait until they are instructed from above (Manandhar 1999). The decision maker on the other hand never consults downwards but always upwards and this process happens on all levels of hierarchy in society. Also, persons in powerful positions are hardly ever held accountable for their decisions and actions, because they have usually been endorsed from above.

Chakari, afno-manche and adesh are influential factors for decision-making, performance appraisal and are crucial for careers in the public sector. Although they are hardly found within SRWSP's internal processes due to the influence of Helvetas' corporate culture, they are very important for the interfacing with stakeholders. Beneficiaries and politicians would approach SRWSP's staff through chakari or their circle of afno-manche, which had to be dealt with appropriately in order not to insult anyone or create a negative image for SRWSP. All three practices were used strategically by SRWSP personnel for aligning stakeholders and adesh could be used by staff to point to a higher authority within Helvetas, in order to resist pressures from politicians requesting favours.

Karma actually understood by Buddhists as cause and effect (Hart 1990), is used in daily life to express a feeling of helplessness, subordination and resignation. It is an expression of an ascriptive culture (Trompenaars 1993), where power and status are not gained by skills, knowledge and performance but through birth, heritage, age and gender. Karma as an expression of fatalism (Bista 1991) renders the Nepali culture low in uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede 1980) and high in subjugation to nature (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961)). The belief that one has no control over the future, contributes to short-term time orientation (Bond and Hofstede 1989) and to reluctance for planning (Manandhar 1999).

In SRWSP a different interpretation of karma, seen as an ultimate accountability for one's actions (Hart 1990) has been advocated by the management team.

Subordination of women is a feature of Hindu culture and seen in most of Nepali society (Leermakers 1991), except in those communities that are predominantly Buddhist. Owing to its gentleness, low assertiveness, lack of machismo and high value for the family, the Nepali culture should be feminine according to Hofstede's dimensions (1980), which is however in contrast with the suppression of women.

The influence of a female team leader enhanced gender awareness and helped strengthen the position of women not only in SRWSP but also in the target communities, by incorporating gender workshops in staff training and field activities.

In summary, the main artefacts and organisational behaviour representing values and underlying assumptions of the national culture in SRWSP are:

- Regarding SRWSP to be a family (addressing each other by 'brother' and 'sister'), having picnics together and celebrating festivals, a desire for harmony, aversion against receiving critique and reluctance to give critique.
- Desire for status, big desks, and using motorbikes instead of bicycles.
- Worshipping the vehicles during an annual festival.
- Indirect communication as expression of high-context culture (Hall 1976).

The influence of corporate culture

The corporate culture has been influencing staff mainly through 25 years of expatriate leadership. Those European leaders being accountable to and representing Helvetas influenced SRWSP according to their different personalities and styles. Most were strong personalities and sometimes, even role models. They could be described as medium individualistic, advocating low power-distance (Hofstede 1980) and a task culture (Handy 1991).

The underlying Swiss cultural values that exerted the most influence were probably: appreciation of democracy, fairness, equality, accuracy, hard working attitude, high quality performance, punctuality, cost-effectiveness and inventive behaviour, with a respect for cultural differences (as practised in Switzerland). The pioneering role in the provision of rural drinking water earned Helvetas a very good name in Nepal and most staffs identified themselves proudly with Helvetas.

However, before the appointment of ML the focus of SRWSP was on technical implementation, fostering two distinct subcultures: the large male engineering section on one side and the small social and training sections with very few females on the other side. Two subcultures may give different meanings to the same event because members' perception is influenced by their specific underlying values. During the leadership of ML, these subcultures merged very much into one overarching family-like culture. This might have been facilitated by the importance given to vision alignment, teambuilding and gender workshops, and performance appraisals focussing on personal development plans.

In summary, the main visible facts representing values of the corporate culture in SRWSP are:

- Democratic decision making processes reflected through leadership by a management team an the decentralisation of decision-making.
- Importance of accountability.
- Rather flat organisation structure.
- A for Nepal high female/male ratio of 1/3.
- Well-equipped, neat and tidy office with excellent storekeeping and information management system.
- Absence of peons or secretaries who are normally indispensable as assistants to senior personnel in most organisations in Nepal.
- Some employees who did not perform and behave within the expected limits were made redundant.

The influence of the mission

SRWSP's culture was definitely influenced by its mission and objectives, which were 'the improvement of living conditions of underprivileged people (especially women) and their ultimate empowerment'. I agree with Fowler (1997) that a Development-NGO with such a mission must question certain values of the national culture, which quite likely have contributed to poverty and injustice. This suggests that the organisational culture of SRWSP is affected by a force, critical to some aspects of the national culture, thus actually demanding a respective counter-culture. SRWSP aimed at practicing (through its members' behaviour) what it preached (in its mission) which was very crucial for its credibility and success of advocacy in favour for underprivileged people.

In summary, the main artefacts and behaviour representing values influenced by SRWSP's mission are besides those already noted under corporate culture:

- The shared aim to help empower the underprivileged.
- The deliberate use of polite language and respect towards members of the lower-casts, and practice of solidarity with them.
- Purposeful employment of staff from diverse ethnic groups and also low-casts.
- Taboo for corruption.
- Simple and low profile office layout, where the leaders did not occupy the biggest rooms, and were ordinary villagers were always welcome.
- Regular field visits by all section leaders to keep a finger on the pulse of reality.
- Several field activities were aimed at empowering women in the project communities.
- Code of conduct to serve the poor and consequently pay for any food in the village. (Often the community has first to please and feed the government-engineers in order to receive their service.)

I have analysed how SRWSP's culture was formed, by interpreting visible features like artefacts, behaviour and espoused values. Although it is impossible to precisely capture SRWSP's complex culture with any of the popular typologies, Kotter's and Heskett's (1992) term 'adaptive' organisational culture fits best, because of SRWSP's customer-orientation and particular innovativeness that is revealed next.

4.2. Application of symbolist and functionalist views

SRWSP's culture evolved with the influence of external and internal factors. Two events show the importance of both the symbolist as well as the functionalist views, for exploring organisational dynamics.

Like in every organisation, so also in SRWSP there were conflicts. Especially the difficult tasks of the community facilitators caused frustration and stress. Having experienced the benefits of practising the ancient meditation technique 'Vipassana' (6), I suggested to the management team to offer a ten-day Vipassana course to all staff as an opportunity for personal development and capacity building. The management team agreed on the condition that those who wanted to go (voluntarily) had to spend 6 days of their annual leave for the course. 75% of all staff went, knowing that it would be hard work.

It was exceptional that so many participated and I attribute it to the unique mix of SRWSP's culture, a 'family' that cared for and valued every individual's contribution and emphasised that personal development meant organisational development; a culture that respected the national values of spirituality and search for happiness plus the Western values of exploration and learning.

Having experienced their own impurities and embarked on a process of mental purification helped employees to develop more goodwill, respect and compassion for others, knowing that everyone is struggling with their own problems. Experiencing and acknowledging the 'real-self,' becomes more important than wanting to establish a positive image about oneself in the minds of others, and results in enhanced openness and trust. The meditation practice also reveals that the responsibility for one's suffering lies in one's own actions, which worked to balance the fatalistic trends of national culture. The practice also helped some members to develop their self-confidence.

In the second case inspired by the book of Semler (1994), the management team proposed to experiment with participatory salary adjustment. All employees agreed. The process involved that the teams of all sections discussed every staff member's performance before confidentially voting first on own section-member's salary level and then on the salary of all other sections' staff. The management team also voted and had reserved the right to scale a person up or down two steps. When the results were computed they came very close to the average votes of the management team (didn't result in an all-round increase) and most people were satisfied. Performance appraisal with 360 degree and even six (sections) dimensional feedback is normally not appreciated in high power-distance, ascriptive cultures (Kanungo and Mendonca 1994).

It was probably welcomed due to the climate of trust and responsibility. This group-performance-appraisal further strengthened collectivism and contributed to transparency and the balancing of personal with organisational interests.

Applying a symbolist view one would focus on trying to understand the organisational culture, which enabled both events to happen. Applying a functionalist view one would investigate which impact the events had on the culture that could perhaps be used to further shape and influence it.

5. Concluding discussion

Organisational culture is permanently created and recreated by all the members of an organisation. SRWSP's case shows that an organisation's culture cannot easily be classified in one type or another but is mostly unique and affected by many factors.

Figure 5 displays the National culture of Nepal, the corporate culture of Helvetas, and the mission of SRWSP (NGO culture) as the main sources from which SRWSP's organisational culture emerged. Besides that, leadership and individual employees' behaviour influenced it.

Figure 5: Main sources of influence on SRWSP's organisational culture

While individuals' contribution to shape organisational culture is affected by their gender, ethnicity, faith, education and experience, there were various unpredictable factors, emerging from the internal and external environment that all influenced SRWSP's culture in particular ways.

To which extent it was influenced by deliberate efforts is difficult to judge. However, especially in a national culture with high power-difference, leadership is most influential. The multicultural, multi-gendered management team had a positive impact on SRWSP's culture. The gender-balanced leadership reinforced the nurturing family- and harmony-experience while the multinational composition stimulated curiosity, inquiry, exploration, learning and fostered tolerance and respect.

Getting exposed to different cultural values can initially be painful and create conflict. It challenges existing patterns of thinking, asks for new perspectives but also generates new experiences that promote change and development. By taking them into consideration and by managing those multiple perspectives of individuals and subcultures, "management can [still] not control culture but [surely] influence its evolution" (Walsham 1993:47).

Although my both management team-mates (AL and ML) might give slightly different accounts on SRWSP's culture than I did, they probably agree with me that this particular organisational culture was the most valuable asset of and resource for SRWSP, which is very much in line with the writing of Mintzberg et. al. (1998).

This short analysis of SRWSP's organisational culture reveals how useful some academic theories can be to understand witnessed organisational behaviour. For a development practitioner like me, working in a multicultural environment, the theories that explore different national cultural values and how they are reflected in peoples' behaviour are most relevant. Mostly, however, a single theory or view cannot sufficiently explain complex reality and the application of several perhaps confliction ones renders a more realistic and holistic picture and thus deeper understanding.

Reflection on my learning in the process of working on this essay

When I started working on this essay, I saw my tacit knowledge on and my experience with organisational culture on the one side and the body of theories and concepts on the other side and found them little corresponding with each other. Through trying to apply those theories one by one to my chosen case and judging how well they reflected my experience, I slowly progressed in expressing my tacit knowledge on SRWSP's organisational culture more precisely. Thus, the theories facilitated framing and externalising my experiences and making them explicit to myself as well as sharing them with others.

I also clearly experienced the need to apply conflicting theories, since my experiences and tacit knowledge of reality were not linear but complex, controversial and conflicting. They are loaded with emotions, preferences and assumptions. These influence my cognitive filters hence also yielding contradicting insights and conclusions, which all have some validity.

As a situated observer (Denzin and Lincoln 2000), my interpretation and analysis are guided by my longstanding experience as a development practitioner in Nepal. Although this puts me in the position to develop a critical view on the evolution of SRWSP's culture, I acknowledge that the meaning given to my observations is subjective.

I painted a rather positive picture of SRWSP's culture, possibly because I have personally benefited so much from such cross-fertilization of mixed cultures. Probably also, because I have seen enough development projects fail that were not able to integrate 'Local' and 'Donor-culture' into a sustainable organisational culture. My experience suggests that in organisations that are like SRWSP affected by several rather incompatible cultures (Figure 5) emphasis needs to be on organisational maintenance rather than only on outputs. Such efforts will help develop a strong base of cultural values by embracing and merging the initially competing values into a synergy, from which the organisation as well as the individuals will benefit, and which will contribute not only to outputs but also to outcomes and sustainability. In those development projects where such a synergetic value base could not be achieved, the chances for sustainability are rather low, which can be witnessed when the donors withdraw their funding.

While in the past my concern about organisational culture was guided more by tacit, intuitive knowledge, I can now express experiences and ideas more accurately by using multiple selected academic theories and concepts. This has helped me already in understanding and analysing organisational behaviour and organisational culture and communicating better about them in project management and organisation development tasks.

Endnotes

1. *The Self Reliant Drinking Water Support Programme (SRWSP) was a development programme of the Swiss NGO Helvetas in Nepal, which subsequently developed from 2000 onwards into the Water Resources Management Programme (WARM-P).*

2. *This was my wife, here called 'ML'.*

3. *Here called 'AL'.*

4. *ML and me worked each part time while AL worked full time.*

5. *Nepal is a Hindu Kingdom, with many different ethic groups. The majority of them are Hindus, the second most Buddhists and some are Moslems. Several ethnic groups, (Newar, Gurung, Magar), are influenced by both Hinduism and Buddhism.*

6. *Vipassana is a non-sectarian meditation technique open to people from all walks of life. It means "insight" (Hart 1990:6) and teaches to look inside and observe one's mind and experience the reality inside (including emotions, hopes and fears) understanding that reality is something personal and different for everyone. One experiences that the external reality cannot be separated from the observer, or it is not anymore reality but just a simplified model. Vipassana also helps seeing and appreciating the reality as it is and not as we would like it to be. Since the main purpose of Vipassana is purification of the mind, the practitioners get confronted with their deep mental impurities and learn how to eradicate them slowly, through the patient practice of Sila (morality), Samadhi (concentration) and Pania (Wisdom) which requires hard work and diligent efforts.*

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