

Understanding Functional Subcultures in Organizations: An Exercise

Joseph P. Daly, Appalachian State University

Abstract

Early models of organizational culture, and even many popular treatments of the subject today, have tended to assume that cultures are homogeneous throughout the organization. More recent research has determined that organizations are more properly characterized as being composed of subcultures, sometimes varying substantially from one another. Subcultures in organizations have implications for a great many aspects of the organization's functioning, including conflict, deviance, organizational learning, innovation, and ethics. Subcultural differences are often fostered by an organization's design, as with functional organizations where coordination across subunit boundaries is inhibited and employees tend to view the organization through the limited perspective of their functional specialty. The author describes an exercise for encouraging business students to explore the implications of subcultures and functional designs by interviewing professors from different departments in their school.

Introduction

In organizational behavior and organization theory, a great deal of attention is paid to organizational culture. A simplistic view of organizational culture is that it is a shared system of meaning that is homogeneous throughout an organization (for a review of this perspective and conflicting approaches, see Frost, Moore, Louis, Lundberg, & Martin, 1991; Meyerson & Martin, 1987). A more comprehensive view of organizational culture is that there is a dominant culture within an organization and, while elements of the dominant culture are shared across units, subunits of the organization are likely to have subcultures unique to their units (Jermier, Slocum, Fry, & Gaines, 1991; Sackmann, 1992; Hofstede, 1998).

An analogous focus of study occurs in organization theory with the examination of functional organizations. A strength of the functional design is that it enables specialization and in-depth skill development. However, among its weaknesses is that that it leads to poor coordination among departments and leaves employees with a restricted view of overall organizational goals (see Duncan, 1979).

Implications of cultural fragmentation

There are important implications to the notion that organizational cultures tend to be more fragmented than many have assumed them to be. The existence of subcultures in an organization have been shown to be a factor with regard to a number of outcomes, including workplace deviance (see Coleman & Ramos, 1998, for a review), differences

across units in responses to change (Baba, 1995; Bloor & Dawson, 1994), knowledge-sharing within units (Sackmann, 1992), and perceptions of the value of advancement (Paules, 1990). In addition, Whetten and Cameron (2002: 189) suggest that subcultures should often be fostered as a means of enhancing organizational innovativeness. Many organizations (e.g., Apple Computer, Lockheed Martin) will keep new product teams separated from the rest of the organization, presumably to maintain a distinctive emphasis on innovation within the team and keep them in some cases from being “infected” by any biases against innovation in the larger organization.

The following is an exercise that is designed to give students an understanding of how subcultures develop within functional specialties of an organization and how that development may be related to an organization’s structure. It requires students to gather information about the functional departments in their own college or school. The exercise is designed for use with either undergraduate or graduate students in schools of business. As will be evident from the nature of the exercise, it will be useful only with students in a business school or faculty of business that has a conventional business school structure, i.e., one that has functional departments or schools in the areas of accounting, finance, management, marketing, production/operations management, etc.

The Exercise

The exercise is conducted in a series of steps, as follows:

Step 1. Students form, or are put in, groups. There should be as many students in a group as there are academic departments in the college/faculty of business or management, so that one student in each group can be assigned to interview a professor in one of the school’s departments. (In the case of very large classes, two students in each group can be given that assignment.)

Step 2. One or more students in each group is/are assigned to interview a faculty member in the college or school. Each student (or small subgroup of the group) interviews a faculty member from a different department, such that each overall group ends up conducting interviews with a representative from every department in the school or college. Questions may vary, but the following questions should be included:

- (a) How would you describe the principal teaching methods that professors use in your department?
- (b) How are the teaching methods of professors in your department unique when compared to those of professors in other departments? Why are they unique?
- (c) How are teaching methods of professors in your department similar to those of professors in other departments? What accounts for that similarity?
- (d) Which department other than your own is your department most similar to in your approach to teaching?
- (e) How often do you communicate with professors outside your department? To what extent are those linkages formal or informal? Which departments do you communicate with the most?
- (f) To what extent do you receive training in business disciplines outside your primary specialty?

Students are not limited to asking questions about similarities or differences in teaching alone. To the extent that students are prepared to ask questions about research as well as teaching, similar questions can be assigned that focus on research—for example, what kinds of research questions are asked in each department and what methods are used to address those questions? Similarly, additional questions may be asked which address the relative emphasis on teaching versus research across departments. If questions are to focus on research, students should be instructed to interview only tenure-track faculty (they may need to be informed as to who in the faculty is tenure-track and who is not).

Step 3. (Can be done in or outside of class). Students meet within each group to compare notes. Are there more similarities than differences in teaching methods across departments? Does communication flow more freely within than between departments? Is there a tendency for an “us versus them” mentality to develop? Did any of the interviewees speak disparagingly of teaching methods or course content in other departments?

Step 4: In-class discussion. Students can either prepare informal presentations or simply discuss the questions in Step 1 as they apply to the different faculty members interviewed. (The instructor may also require a group paper as part of the assignment.) During the discussion, the instructor can record the students’ impressions on the board under headings such as “Areas of Similarity” and “Areas of Difference.” The instructor can then proceed to facilitate a discussion as to the consequences of those similarities and differences, including such questions as:

- What do the students think are the consequences of subcultures for coordination of different organizational units? For sharing of knowledge across subunit boundaries?
- What is the apparent relationship between organizational structure and organizational culture?
- Would the existence of subcultures enhance or detract from innovativeness within the organization?
- What about managing resistance to change, when the degree of resistance varies across departments?
- As for ethical beliefs, practices, and values, can we expect these to differ across subunits in a culture characterized by subcultures? (See, for example, Hofstede’s, 1998, finding that subcultures in a large organization differed on the dimension of Normative versus Pragmatic orientation to customers).

Finally, the instructor may give a short minilecture on organizational cultures, subcultures, social identities (see Hogg & Terry, 2000) and functional designs. What are the implications of cultural fragmentation for intraorganizational conflict? When strong subcultures exist, does an “us versus them” mentality tend to develop in relationships between subunits?

In the higher education context, a number of influential voices have called for crossfunctional integration of the business curriculum (Porter & McKibbin, 1988; Smith, 1995, April 11; Stover, Morris, Phar, Reyes, & Byers; 1997). What are the likely consequences of functional specialization for efforts to integrate course content across

disciplines in the curriculum? If the culture of the college, faculty, or school turns out to be well integrated across disciplines, the discussion can focus on why this is so.

There are a number of rich possibilities in the exercise, which make it adaptable to a variety of subjects in organizational behavior or organization theory. As such, the exercise can be done in the beginning of the term to stimulate students' thinking about the many topics in OB or OT and their interconnectedness. Similarly, the exercise can be introduced at the end of the term and thus act as a vehicle for summarizing the many content areas.

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