Culturally Speaking

If you learned to drive on the right side of the road and you go to drive in a country that drives on the left, it probably feels a little weird. The car's controls are in the "wrong" place, you have to look at the mirrors and through the windows at different angles, and you have to "Keep Left" instead of to the right. Nevertheless, you are still operating a car and the basic principles of driving are the same. Soon you adapt and drive on the left as if it was second nature.

In the same way, you feel strange and less skilled when you visit a new culture. The language may be different, social customs might seem odd, and you might wonder why people dress the way they do. If you stay there long enough, you may start to behave like those around you, wear similar clothes, learn the language. You have learned to "drive on the other side of the road".

What is culture?

Culture as a concept comes from anthropology. This is probably why, when we use the word "culture" in a term like "cultural diversity", we often mean ethnic culture as defined by race or nationality. But culture is difficult to define, because it is a term that can encompass so many ideas and be applied in lots of different ways. The culture expert Geert Hofstede gives us a snappy summary: "the software of the mind".

Cultural groups are not necessarily ethnic. All groups of people have their own cultures: families (if you look closely, each family has its own unique way of doing things), generations (youth culture tries to find its own identity, separate from elders), friendship cliques (at school, remember the "cool kids", the "nerds", the "sports stars"?), even genders (books like *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* attempt to explain this cultural difference). Who is in power, how decisions are made, what clothes are worn, how people talk, and how members of the group interact with others, are all things determined by the group's culture.

Most scholars agree that culture comprises the values, beliefs, knowledge, and behaviour of a group with common rules which must be followed for group membership. Each new group develops its own culture, and imposes its culture on newcomers. Culture creates a feeling of oneness and identity. There is often strong pressure to conform with the dominant culture, so that deviance is punished: the parent grounds the misbehaving child; the teenager is ridiculed by peers for having the "wrong" hairstyle, or listening to the "wrong" music; the woman who tries to advance in her career hits the "glass ceiling". At a societal level, deviants often go to prison.

We can define culture with a somewhat flippant but nevertheless truthful statement: "How we do things around here".

Organisational culture

Since organisations are groups, we can say that they also develop their own internal culture. This is taught to new employees in two main ways: during orientation, where they are explicitly told about the organisation's structure, values, goals, and policies; and during work, when newcomers learn the more implicit beliefs and feelings of their colleagues - people who also form role models for appropriate behaviour that will help them to get along with others.

Something as simple as clothing can dramatically alter the organisation's culture. A company in which employees are expected to wear a suit to work has a very different culture to one where people can be much more casual. This not only affects their physical appearance. People who wear t-shirts and jeans to work are unlikely to address the boss as "sir"; they don't necessarily feel they are "at work" because there are no special clothes for work; their people skills may need to be very good to put customers, who may be used to standard corporate dress, at ease in a meeting.

Where does company culture come from?

Culture forms over years of interaction between the people in an organisation. The beliefs and values of the organisation's founder or current leader often have a strong effect. Some older companies produce history books with biographies of important people in their pasts. Many managers hire people just like themselves, which automatically reinforces the culture. Over time, employees develop their own acronyms, jargon, and nicknames that are like a foreign language to newcomers.

Power structures, which determine who makes decisions, how rewards are distributed, and who can talk with whom about what, also have a strong effect on culture. The organisational chart is a picture of this structure. The arrangement of the employees in the buildings which house them is a physical representation of this structure. It encourages people to interact in certain ways. I once saw a company where all the managers were in open plan offices, but they had their own floor of the building, apart from other employees - supposedly to make it easier to communicate with other managers, and allow the workers to "get on with it" without distractions. This made a clear social distinction between the managers and the workers, and created resentment in the workers, who felt they were isolated from managers who rarely visited the workers' floors and were unaware of the real working conditions.

Culture is also influenced by external forces. The society in which the organisation exists strongly affects the organisational culture: for example, a competitive society such as the United States which values independence and individual hard work has bred many competitive companies, their values demonstrated in awards like "employee of the month". When a company decides it needs to lay off employees, or change its market strategy, or is taken over by another company, then culture can change quite dramatically.

Once new employees have adopted the ways of those already in the organisation, then the organisation will accept them. Usually there is strong pressure from any culture to maintain the status quo. If newcomers will not adapt to the established culture, they

can try to change the organisation (as when a new CEO comes in and reorganises things). Less powerful individuals may suffer punishments such as not receiving a bonus or having to work late. Ultimately, a very resistant culture may reject them by firing or resignation.

You say you want a revolution…

If you have tried to make changes in your company but they didn't work, chances are the culture was resisting them. For example, a common attempt at change is to install a suggestion box in the staff common room. When the box remains empty, it seems pointless. Yet there is a strong cultural message here: nobody believes their suggestions will be taken seriously by the management. A cultural change will be necessary before the suggestion box works.

You cannot change something before you know what it is now. How can you become more aware of culture? Watch how people interact with each other. Do a survey of attitudes. Think about what you "know" about your company: what are the "unspoken rules"? How do people react to serious problems? How do people celebrate special events? There are many facets to organisational culture.

If management were to lecture staff about how all suggestions will be considered carefully, this is unlikely to have any effect. Perhaps there was a recent downsizing. Maybe there have been promises of raises and promotions that went unfulfilled. It took time for the employees to lose their faith; it will take time for them to regain it. In the natural course of events, culture changes slowly, but it can be influenced for more rapid effects. Examination of the culture will give clues about what to do to recreate an atmosphere of trust.

Our suggestion box example has been quite simplistic. Culture is a very complex phenomenon. However, one thing is clear: knowing about your company's culture and its impact on your organisation will make you a much more effective leader and manager.

Some related links (copy-paste into your browser):

The Business Open Learning Archive: Organisational Culture
http://www.bola.biz/culture/index.html

Organisation expert Edgar Schein's home page
http://web.mit.edu/scheine/www/home.html

dialogin The Delta Intercultural Academy
http://www.dialogin.com/

Next month, we will be discussing the effects of *national* culture on the workplace.

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