



## Chapter 12

### Organizational Culture and Symbols

1

### Objectives - students will be able to:

- Identify the core assumptions of the symbolic perspective.
- Identify the various forms that symbols can take in organizations, and describe the functions of each.
- Discuss organizations as cultures.

2

### Nordstrom – culture as key to success

- The Nordstrom culture sets employees free.
- Nordstrom is informally organized as an "inverted pyramid," with the top positions occupied by the customers and the salespeople.
- Nordstrom tears down barriers. Salespeople are free to sell merchandise to their customers in any department throughout the store.
- Managers are encouraged to have a feeling of ownership about their department.
- An employee profit-sharing retirement plan inspires motivation and encourages loyalty.
- Goal setting is essential to the culture. Employees at every level are perpetually striving to meet or surpass personal, departmental, store, and regional goals for the day, month, and year. Peer pressure and personal commitment push competitive employees toward constantly higher goals.
- Employees have access to sales figures from all departments and stores in the chain, so they can compare their performances.
- Compensation is based on Commission. Outstanding sales performances are rewarded with prizes and praise, as are good ideas and suggestions.

3

### Organizational Culture and Symbols – chapter outline

- Symbolic Frame Core Assumptions
- Organizations as Culture
- Organizational Symbols
- An example: Mary Kay
- [YouTube - Mary Kay on ABC News!](#)

4

### Core Assumptions of Symbolic Frame

- Most important – not what happens, but what it means
- Activity and meaning are loosely coupled
- People create symbols to resolve confusion, find direction, anchor hope and belief
- Events and processes more important for what is expressed than what is produced
- Culture provides basic organizational glue

5

### Organizations as Culture

- Organizations have cultures or are cultures?
- Definitions of culture:
  - Schein: "pattern of shared basic assumptions that a groups has learned as it solved its problems...and that has worked well enough to be considered valid and taught to new members"
  - "How we do things around here"
- Culture is both product and process
  - Embodies accumulated wisdom
  - Must be continually renewed and recreated as newcomers learn old ways and eventually become teachers
- Managers who understand culture better equipped to understand and influence organizations

6

## Organization as culture 2

- Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from another. (Hofstede, 1984)
- Culture is the interwoven pattern of beliefs, values, practices, & artifacts that defines for members who they are and how they are to do things. (Bolman & Deal)

7

## Observations about the Symbolic Frame

- It forms a conceptual umbrella for ideas from a variety of disciplines, including organizational theory, sociology, & political science.
- It seeks to interpret & illuminate basic issues of meaning & belief that make symbols so powerful.
- It sees life as more serendipitous than linear.
- It sees meaning as the basic human need.
- It encourages us to see organizations as theater & organizational activities as dramaturgical performances played to both internal & external audiences.
- It views structures & processes as secular theater—drama that expresses our fears, joys, & expectations.
- It sees play, ritual, ceremony, and myth as essential to high performing teamwork.

8

## Dimensions of National Culture

by Geert Hofstede, 1984

1. *Power Distance*: A measure of power inequality between bosses & subordinates
2. *Uncertainty Avoidance*: The level of comfort or discomfort with uncertainty & ambiguity
3. *Individualism*: The importance of the individual versus the collective
4. *Masculinity-femininity*: A measure of male dominance

9

## Leading by Leveraging Culture

J.A. Chatman & S.E. Cha, *California Management Review*, Vol.45, No. 4, Summer 2003, pp.20-33

- Culture must be *strategically relevant*
  - Employees have to be freed up from rules in order to deliver fully on strategic objectives
  - They have to understand the ultimate strategic goals & the norms through which they can be successfully achieved
  - They must care about reaching those goals & what their coworkers think if they don't
- The culture must be *strong*
  - There is a high level of agreement among employees about what is valued
  - There is a high level of intensity about the values

10

## Leading by Leveraging Culture (2)

- The content of organizational culture must contain innovation
  - Hiring creative people is usually stressed
  - Brainstorming designed to publicly raise creative ideas
  - Norms that support risk-taking and change may be key
  - Create an environment where team members are safe to take interpersonal risks
  - Leaders must move quickly to implement new ideas

11

## Leadership Tools to Manage & Change Culture

(Chatman & Cha, 2003)

- Recruiting & selecting people for culture fit
  - Will the firm's culture be rewarding for the potential recruit?
  - Send recruiters who demonstrate the norms desired
  - Ensure things like the web site convey cultural norms
- Managing culture through socialization & training
  - Ensure that employees acquire cultural knowledge
  - Ensure that they bond with one another
- Managing culture through the reward system
  - Culture is the informal reward system & needs to be connected to the formal one
  - Rewards need to be clear, consistent & comprehensive

12

One thing is guaranteed: A culture will form in an organization, a department, and a work group. The question is whether the culture that forms is one that helps or hinders the organization's ability to execute its strategic objectives. Organizational culture is too important to leave to chance; organizations must use their culture to fully execute their strategy and inspire innovation. It is a leader's primary role to develop and maintain an effective culture.

(Chatman & Cha, 2003, p.32)

13

## Symbols and Culture

- Symbols are the basic building blocks of the meaning systems, or cultures, that we inhabit.
- Symbols embody and express an organization's culture.
- Symbols most clearly communicate an organization's culture.
- Symbolic forms play distinctive cultural roles in organizations.

14

## Symbols



15

## Organizational Symbols

- Symbols reveal and communicate culture
  - McDonald's golden arches, Ray Kroc
  - Harvard's myth, mystique and rituals
- Volvo France (pro-environment autos)
- Continental Airlines (corporate culture 'turn around')
- Myths: deeply-rooted narratives that explain, express and build cohesion
  - Often rooted in origin legends ("how it all began")
- Values: what an organization stands for and cares about

16

## Organizational Symbols (II)

- Vision: image of future rooted in core ideology
- Heroes and Heroines
  - Icons and living logos who embody and model core values
- Stories and Fairy Tales
  - Good stories convey information, morals, values and myths vividly, memorably, convincingly
- Ritual
  - Repetitive, routinized activities that give structure and meaning to daily life
  - Men's hut and initiation rituals
- Ceremony
  - Grand, infrequent symbolic occasions

17

## Organizational Symbols III

- Metaphor, humor, play
  - "As if" role of symbols: indirect approach to issues that are too hard to approach head-on
  - Metaphor: image to compress ambiguity and complexity into understandable, persuasive message
  - Humor: way to illuminate and break frames
  - Play: permits relaxing rules to explore alternatives, encourages experimentation and flexibility

18

### Myths, Vision, and Values

- ❑ *Myths*, operating at the deepest reaches of consciousness, are the story behind the story.
- ❑ *Vision* turns an organization's core ideology, or sense of purpose, into an image of what the future might become.
- ❑ *Values* define what an organization stands for.

19

### Heroes and Heroines

*Heroes come in every shape and size;  
Adding something very special to others in their  
lives  
No one gives you medals and the world won't  
know your name  
But in Southwest's eyes you're heroes just the  
same*

20

### Stories and Fairy Tales

- ❑ Fairy tales and stories offer comfort, reassurance, direction, and hope to people of all ages.
- ❑ They externalize inner conflicts and tensions, convey information, morals, values, and myths vividly and convincingly.
- ❑ They keep the historical exploits of heroes and heroines alive.

21

### Ritual

- ❑ Ritual gives structure and meaning to daily life.
- ❑ Humans create both personal and communal rituals.
- ❑ The paradox of ritual patterns and sacred habits is that they simultaneously serve as a solid footing and springboard, providing a stable dynamic in our lives.
- ❑ Historically, cultures have relied on ritual and ceremony to create order, clarity, and predictability.
- ❑ Initiation is an important role of ritual.

22

### Ceremony

- ❑ Ceremonies are grander, more elaborate, less frequent occasions than rituals.
- ❑ Ceremonies punctuate our lives at special moments.
- ❑ Ceremonies socialize, stabilize, reassure, and convey messages to external constituencies.
- ❑ Ceremony is evident in matters of national importance

23

### Metaphor, Humor, and Play

- ❑ Metaphors compress complicated issues into understandable images, influencing our attitudes, evaluations, and actions.
- ❑ Humor is a device for distancing, but it can socialize, include, and convey membership.
- ❑ Play encourages experimentation, flexibility, and adaptiveness.

24

## Conclusion

- In contrast to traditional views emphasizing rationality and objectivity, the symbolic frame highlights the tribal aspect of contemporary organizations.
- Culture as basic organizational glue, the “way we do things around here”
- Symbols embody and express organizational values, ideology

25