The elusiveness of organisational culture
A descriptive model for understanding a much-abused concept

This essay is a shortened and simplified version of an academic paper.

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Introduction

After nearly three decades of broad academic interest in the topic, and a constant surge in popularity in management literature, authors remain compelled to define what they mean by “organisation culture”. Many of these definitions use culture in a way “which comprises everything and, thus, nothing” (Alvesson 1989, p. 323).

The purpose of this essay is to provide a model that would be useful to management; a tool that could separate out the various related constructs and clarify, in context, exactly what is meant by specific usage of the term “organisational culture”. It incorporates all well-published and credible views of organisational culture into one descriptive model.

There is a genuine need for such a model and for deeper understanding of organisational culture. Whereas some management texts acknowledge that culture is neither simple to understand and analyse, nor easy to influence, others are relatively naïve in their description of organisational culture, its importance and - most importantly - management’s capacity to influence it.
Theoretical Background

Mats Alveson of the University of Sweden published several influential articles on organisational culture in the 1980s. In his article “Concepts of Organisational Culture and Presumed Links to Efficiency” (1989) he describes four common conceptualisations of organisational culture.

The first is Culture as a building block in organisational design, which sees culture as a “behaviour regulation force”. “Cultural engineering” is possible because culture is in principle similar to other organisational elements. The second is Culture as symbolic management. Leaders “have influence on how employees perceive and understand reality and their tasks [which] might lead to a ‘favourable’ ... definition of organisational reality and work, shared by the entire organisation collective” (1989, p. 324). The third is Culture as diagnostic instrument, which recognises that culture is “hard to be fully aware of, difficult to have far-reaching influence on and, even more so to change.” (1989, p. 324). Awareness of cultural aspects could be used diagnostically to gain better insights concerning most aspects of organisations. The final conceptualisation is of Culture as paradigmatic concept, where culture is not a “substantial object” but a “theoretical approach about how to get deep and rich understanding about organisations” (1989, p. 325).

Alvesson sees these four approaches on a continuum from an “instrumental view” of culture to a “basic view of culture”. This is presented graphically in figure 1.

Figure 1. Graphic presentation of Alvesson’s continuum of conceptualisations of culture

In the basic view on culture, what is culture and what is not is often blurred. If culture has an effect on something, then this something must be outside of culture. In effect, culture is sometimes described as influencing culture.

Basic conceptualisation of culture

Whereas it might not be easy to neatly fit all theorists into this model, one of the most influential, if controversial - Geert Hofstede - is a good example of an author towards the “basic view” end of the spectrum. His initial classifications of national culture (large vs. small power distance, strong vs. weak uncertainty avoidance, individualism vs. collectivism and masculinity vs. femininity) (Hofstede 1980) have been applied to organisational study. In terms of Alvesson’s framework, this is a largely diagnostic-paradigmatic view of organisational culture. Hofstede’s later work on organisational culture follows this trend, but with the introduction of an instrumentalist concept: “practices”. He identifies six dimensions of practices: process oriented vs. results oriented, employee oriented vs. job oriented, parochial vs. professional, open system vs. closed system, loose vs. tight control, normative vs. pragmatic (1998, p. 483).
Hofstede makes a clear distinction between practices and values, stating that practices are designed according to the values of the founders and “significant top managers”, but that not all members of an organisation share these values. “Members have to follow the practices if they want to remain members, but they do not have to confess to the values. Leaders’ values become followers’ practices.” (1998, p.483).

This distinction by Hofstede echoes Alvesson’s distinction between instrumental and basic conceptualisation. For Hofstede there are two levels of construct related to organisational culture: one that can be influenced, and one that can’t. “Practices are less basic than values, and are amenable to planned change; values do change, but according to their own logic, not according to anyone’s plans (1998, p. 482).

Like Alvesson and Hofstede, many authors develop a dualistic conceptualisation of organisational culture. In explaining their six principles for changing organisational culture, Levin and Gottlieb refer to the use of instrumental and symbolic levers: instrumental levers “focus directly on modifying the work context and how work is performed”, while symbolic levers influence “people’s perceptions, attitudes and the meanings they attribute to organisational decisions, actions and practices” (Levin & Gottlieb 2009).

Whether or not culture can be influenced or changed is a key debate in organisational culture studies. Linstead, Fulop & Lilley (2009, p. 157) state that organisations are “both a product and a producer of culture”. The organisation, as product, is shaped by forces over which management has limited control (Neethling 2010). Alvesson and Berg maintain that if the concept of culture is taken seriously, it cannot be changed in a planned way:

> Considering that a corporate culture has perhaps been developing for over a century, that it is harboured by perhaps thousands of socialized employees, that it is reproduced every day by a fine net of rites and rituals and finally, that it might be related to cultural elements outside the direct control of organisations (e.g. national identity, conditions in the industry, social classes, etc.), the idea that a change program would be able to achieve a basic change to a prior established goal, appears unrealistic. (1998, p. 126).

In his defence of “old” IBM data used to develop his original theory of culture, Hofstede argues that “the dimensions found are assumed to have centuries-old roots” (1998, p. 481). This again reinforces the non-instrumentalist nature of at least some concepts of culture. This conceptualisation has some limitations, particularly its “restricted practical relevance”. Culture, in the “basic” sense, “can hardly be managed: at best it might be marginally affected through purposive activity” (Alvesson 1989, p. 332).

Darren McCabe is perhaps the most eloquent in arguing this point. He claims that culture is not an end-state, as implied by change theorists, but is characterised by ambiguity. Different and seemingly opposite conditions “coexist and change in tangled ways”. Changing culture “may prove more problematic than many assume. This is because such arguments tend to assume that cultures can be manipulated so as to achieve intended managerial outcomes and yet the exercise of power rarely operates in a deterministic way ... The assumption is that managers are able to effect change in a unilinear way to break with the past and culture is thought to respond to managerial hands like so much clay” (McCabe 2010, p. 231-2).

Despite the restricted practical relevance, a “basic” view of culture, with culture as paradigmatic concept and examined through an anthropological lens, is essential for a more complete understanding of organisations. Alvesson’s description of “Western managerial culture” illustrates the point well. It could be described with words such as “efficiency, rationalization, productivity, glorification of advanced technology, exploitation of nature, control, hierarchy, unequal distribution of rewards, dominance of typical male values, glorification of leadership, etc.” (1989, p.128.) Elsewhere in the same article he describes the evident racism of many Western organisations, where “pretty young white women” work as private secretaries and “black clericals” are reserved for the “routine, pressurised low-paid jobs”. Both these descriptions ring true as illustrative of the culture of many Western organisations of our time, yet these phenomena are hardly ever mentioned in organisational culture literature. It is essential for a deep understanding of organisational culture to include anthropological perspectives.
Interestingly, and perhaps not unpredictably, theorists concerned with organisational culture in the context of international business tend to incorporate anthropological, descriptive approaches. Smircich refers to this view as one where culture is a “background factor”, almost synonymous with nationality, and an “explanatory variable” (1983, p. 343). Olie states that national culture has a profound effect on organisational culture.

For example, French and Italian firms tend to have strong centralized hierarchical structures in which patriarchal influence of the patronage is strongly felt. In contrast, Northern European firms, such as Dutch and German firms, are more decentralized. National cultures may further influence the formalization of an organisation, its decision-making style and its strategy. (1990, p. 210).

Other authors refer to “culture distance”, claiming that the more culturally distant firms are, “the greater the differences in their organisational and administrative practices, employee expectations, and interpretation of and response to strategic issues” (Park & Ungson 1997, p. 283). Olie refers to culture-related problems and claims that of the 73 mergers he had investigated, 50% reported problems in relation to “personnel and cultural issues” during the implementation phase. (1990, p. 207). He uses the anthropological concepts of acculturation, distinguishing between assimilation (unilateral exchange of cultural elements) and integration (mutual exchange of cultural elements). The power balance between parties is an important factor determining the extent, speed and success of assimilation. He also describes the development of post-merger subcultures: “when forced to give up their identity, organisation members resist openly or show resignation, but at a deeper level continue to resist. The result is a split culture: an organisation with different subcultures. (1990, p. 209). With Olie there is a hint of instrumentalism, but his dominant approach is “basic”, in Alvesson’s terms.

Some organisational culture studies highlight the influence of industry on culture. Gordon (1991) argues that industry environment forces companies within it to adopt certain cultural values in order to survive, and Chow finds that corporate culture differs systematically across industries (2003, p66).

Instrumental conceptualisation of culture

Another influential theorist, Edgar Schein, tends towards the instrumentalist side of Alvesson’s spectrum, with some acknowledgement of the “basic” dimension. He also admits different levels of culture. Behaviours and artefacts are at the most manifest level of constructed physical and social environment. Values are less visible, and provide “the underlying meanings and interrelations by which the patterns of behaviours and artefacts may be deciphered” (Lim 1995, p. 16). Basic assumptions represent an unconscious level of culture - the underlying values. They are the most difficult to relearn and change. For Schein the acquisition of culture happens through the way “organisations have responded to important incidents in the past”, and through the “identification of organisational members with their leaders” (Lim 1995, p. 17).

Schein contends that culture changes through natural evolution because an organisation is an open system; environmental changes produce “stresses and strains inside the group, forcing new learning and adaptation” (Schein 1990, p.116). Schein also describes a second kind of culture change, that of “guided evolution and managed change” (p.117). It comprises enhancing cultural elements “that are viewed as critical to maintaining identity and to promote the ‘unlearning’ of cultural elements that are viewed as increasingly dysfunctional” (p.117). Schein describes several actions by leaders to produce culture change, including punishment and reward, key personnel changes, and articulating new assumptions.

Some literature suggests that certain types of leaders might be predisposed to influencing culture. Bass and Avolio refer to transactional leaders who “work within their organisational cultures following existing rules, procedures, and norms”, and transformational leaders who change culture by “first understanding it and then realigning the organisation’s culture with a new vision and a revision of its shared assumptions, values, and norms” (1993, p.112).
Management consulting and popular management literature, and some academic journals, have produced many more radical examples of the instrumentalist view of culture. In a Journal of Business Strategy article by Dr. Jerry Want titled “When worlds collide: culture clash: corporate culture – illuminating the black hole” (2003), we find what is essentially a spectacular rant against a long list of underperforming American corporations, “all brought down by their failed corporate cultures” (2003, p. 14). In this article culture is indeed everything: a belief system, the actions derived from that belief system, attitudes, values, processes, innovation etc. What makes the article interesting is its unquestioning belief that culture can be manipulated (“[he] went about finding out what was happening to the company’s culture and corrected it”), and that culture determines success or failure (“In the current age of radical change, failing corporate cultures directly contribute to more business failures than at any time in the past”) (2003, p. 22). In a section titled “Building a better culture”, Want includes measures such as closing the gap between business planning and “culture planning”, creating a culture that embraces change, keeping innovative people, breaking down bureaucracy and identifying “natural change leaders” and empowering them to lead the change process. (2003 p. 22).

Most amusingly, Want turns corporate culture into exactly the fad he despises:

In one way, it is refreshing to have all of these failures laid at the alter (sic.) of neglected business culture. For too long, sound corporate culture building and management have been pushed aside in favor of the failed and overused fads and fix-its of right-sizing/downsizing, Business Process Re-engineering (BPR), Just-in-Time, TQM, various go-for growth strategies, traditional business planning and assorted financial manipulations that have left the business landscape littered with bankrupt and under-performing companies, wasted technologies, lost assets, and derailed careers and talent. Given the business world’s appetite for the latest fads and fix its, there is a concern that “corporate culture” will become just the latest buzz-word that will fade into memory (Want 2003, p.16).

Through his simplistic, instrumentalist view of culture Dr. Want goes a long way to ensuring that it will become just that.

Not all instrumentalists are as naïve and strident as Dr Want. Ira Levin and Jonathan Gottlieb propose a complex set of principles and practices for “realigning organisation culture for optimal performance”. They conclude that it is a long-term endeavour “that demands endurance and unyielding focus”:

Unfortunately, there are no quick fixes regardless of how appealing and seductive that notion seems to be. Culture develops and evolves slowly over time. It is simply not realistic to think it can be changed quickly (Levin & Gottlieb 2009, p.45).

Whereas the “basic” view of culture suffers from restricted practical relevance, the instrumentalist view suffers from lack of evidence. The idea that a strong culture has a causal link with organisational performance - intuitive and positive as it might seem - has not stood up to empirical research. Lim (1995) reviews several idiothetic and nomothetic studies on the impact of organisational culture on performance and highlights a range of limitations. There is a lack of empirical correlation between culture and performance. There is no evidence of a causal relationship between the two. It is difficult to infer cultural values from the manifest behaviours of employees. Other variables such as organisational structure and leadership are not isolated in studies. At most it can be said that culture “facilitates economic performance”, that culture may serve to “foster the commitment necessary for a group of people to overcome adversity successfully” (Quick 1992, p.47.). The most important contribution of culture “towards the understanding of organisations appears to be as a descriptive and explanatory tool, rather than a predictive one” (Lim 1995, p. 20).

Even well-constructed studies, that appear to offer empirical evidence of the culture-performance link, tend to be disappointing despite impressive titles such as “Corporate Culture and Its Relation to Performance: A Comparative Study of Taiwanese and U.S. Manufacturing Firms” (Chow 2003). Yilmaz & Ergun note that, “given the broad conceptualisation of the construct of organisational culture, researchers have generally focused on a selected (and inevitably limited) set of cultural traits and examined their effects on (another, restricted set of) selected performance indicators.” (2008, p. 291).
One example of such restricted sets is found in Denison and Mishra’s research into organisational culture and effectiveness (1995). They provide empirical evidence of the positive relationship between the cultural traits involvement, consistency, adaptability and mission, and performance. This study will be further explored in the following sections of this paper.

One further question should be asked concerning an instrumentalist view of culture. We have questioned whether culture could be used to influence performance. It is also interesting to consider whether organisational culture should be “the target for planned change” (Alvesson 1989 p. 324). A healthy scepticism exists about management’s motives for formal or managed organisational culture development. According to Grey (2009, p. 69) culture-focused management aspires to regulate, “so that there is no distance between individuals’ purposes and those of the organisation for which they work”. He quotes Kunda, who refers to culture as educating people “without them knowing it” (2009, p.71).

Grey also refers to the very limited “set of pieties” used to describe formal organisational culture: “customer service, quality, flexibility and innovation” (2009, p.72). This supports the idea of culture, as defined by management, being little more than descriptors of the behaviours to promote the economic wellbeing of the enterprise.

Further questions

Another consideration in attempting to understand organisational culture is whether common conceptions of culture relate to culture at all. What is referred to as culture is perhaps better described as “organisational climate”, a concept that predates organisational culture in popularity (Hofstede 1998, p. 485). Litwin and Stringer (1968, p. 1) define organisational climate as “... a set of measurable properties of the work environment, perceived directly or indirectly by the people who live and work in this environment and assumed to influence their motivation and behavior ... [It] provides a useful bridge between theories of individual motivation and behavior, on one hand, and organisational theories, on the other”. Organisational climate is perhaps a better descriptor for what Alvesson refers to as “a common culture as a source of feelings of togetherness and mutual understanding” (1989 p. 326), or of evaluative concepts such as “job satisfaction”, which is often heard in discussions of organisational culture.

Even if we accept the notion of culture, what of subcultures? Schein acknowledges that “any definable group with a shared history can have a culture and ... within an organisation there can therefore be many subcultures ... it is perfectly possible for coexisting units of a larger system to have cultures that are independent and even in conflict with each other” (Schein 1990, p. 111).

Perhaps more intriguing is the related concept of informal culture. Informal communication networks, which embody differing cultures within an organisation, “play a greater role in influencing the progress of change than is usually understood” (Johnson-Cramer, Parise & Cross 2007, p.85). Managers have to pay as much attention to the “cultural networks of their organisation as to its formal structure when implementing change”. The real, spontaneous culture of the organisation, though influenced by leadership, is embedded in the ‘informal side of the organisation’. It sometimes operates in competition with the official organisation structure, and is based on “subcultures, age, years in the organisation, the relative status of different jobs, status in extra-company organisations, affiliations and alliances, and raw office politics. In dysfunctional organisations, with weak formal authority, the informal organisation could disproportionately control agendas. Even in well-functioning, well-structured organisations, the influence of informal networks and relationships should not be underestimated” (Neethling 2010). Early and Mosakowski (2004) refer to “sparring subcultures” in organisations.

Most managers would, at various points in their careers, have to promote change, but all institutions “resist change, and the informal networks within an organisation are a primary source of that resistance” (Johnson-Cramer, Parise & Cross 2007, p.85). How this happens successfully, is “much more mixed and ambiguous than the proponents of culture management recognise” (Grey 2009, p. 75). A key problem is that change programmes often fail to “break down the cleavage between thinkers and doers” (Bourgeois & Brodwin 1984, p.251).
Cooper (1994) analyses an interesting example of such resistance to change, where a change in Information Technology (IT) “conflicts with an organisation’s culture”. He describes two forms of resistance:

> The first may result in implementation failure by undermining the analysis and design process, underutilizing the system once implemented, and/or sabotaging the implemented system. The second adapts the IT during implementation or use so that conflicts with the existing culture are reduced. Both of these reduce the potential of IT implementation to engender organisational change (p.17).

Perhaps a fitting way to conclude discussion of the range of theories and debates is a reference to Linda Smircich’s 1983 article, Concepts of Culture and Organisational Analysis. Written early in the era of interest in organisational culture, the author compares theoretical approaches and links them to their philosophical roots. Classical management theory, contingency theory, cognitive organisational theory, symbolic organisational theory and transformational organisational theory all approach the issue of culture differently and have different research themes. She also links these approaches to parallel concepts of culture in anthropology, such as functionalism, ethnoscience and structuralism. Interestingly, a polarisation similar to that of Alvesson’s emerges; some theories see culture as a variable, and some as a “root metaphor” (Smircich 1983, p. 339). The variables are distinguished as either part of the environment (a “determining or imprinting force”), or seen as “the result of human enactment” (p. 347).
Theoretical Development

The questions raised by the juxtaposition of basic and instrumental conceptualisations of culture are illustrated in figure 2.

Figure 2. Questions raised by the juxtaposition of organisational culture theories.

There might be many other questions to consider in relation to organisational culture, but we would do well to develop a model or framework that clarified our understanding of these issues. It is not within the scope of this study to attempt to answer these questions definitively; we will, however, attempt to develop a framework that incorporates the key features of all the major theories quoted in this study. Addressing each of the questions in figure 2 will bring us closer to the clarity required to draw up the integrated semantic model.

What exactly is organisational culture?

A descriptive model of culture has to incorporate the fact that many leading theories distinguish different levels of culture.

In the broadest sense, a foundational, anthropological definition applies, where culture is the “foundational term through which the orderliness and patterning of much of our life experience is explained” (Smircich 1983, p. 341). The organisation as a cultural phenomenon is of interest here. It is possible to compare organisational culture from the industrial revolution and modern, America-centric global corporations. It is also of interest, particularly to the discipline of International Business, to have a broad enough focus to include comparisons between national cultures and organisations.
Underlying philosophies and ideologies make up this deepest level of culture. In this sense, culture is of largely descriptive and comparative utility. It also has strategic importance; in a systems approach it is important to consider the macro-environmental influences on the organisation. Whereas some Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental and Legal (PESTEL) influences on organisations could have direct, operational impact, many of these influences have a longer term, foundational influence on organisations - an influence on deep organisational culture as such. Consider the “green” cultures of organisations like Lend Lease that used to be as environmentally insensitive as any property developer twenty years ago, and today has one of Australia’s leading “green” buildings as its head office1. Consider Macquarie Bank’s open-plan, hot-desking office environment in contrast with the banking environments of a few decades ago. And consider how the anticipation of political change in South Africa in the 1980s dramatically changed the way that SABMiller conducted its brewing business. Environmental awareness, egalitarian office arrangements and socially responsible entrepreneurship could certainly be considered expressions of organisational culture, and in all three examples macro-environmental changes had an evolutionary effect. If these philosophies were merely opportunistic window-dressing, they would not be considered part of the foundational culture. The “essence of culture lies in the unstated premises or ethos that are taken for granted and so are largely implicit” (Trite & Beyer 1984, p. 664).

After this foundational level a broader definition of organisational culture should include a cultural values level. Values are not merely statements of intent such as might be contained in a corporate brochure, but the genuine beliefs that stem from the philosophies and ideologies underpinning culture in the organisation. Whereas philosophies and ideologies more-or-less evolve and are somewhat involuntary and even subconscious, values reflect a conscious judgement - a “standard for selection among the alternatives of orientation which are intrinsically open in a situation” (O’Reilly III et al, p. 492). Values are aspirational and, because they are so closely related to foundational philosophy, they are resilient.

Whereas values reflect foundational culture, they could also influence it. In the same way that a behavioural psychologist might use symptom alleviation to influence causal elements of behaviour, the introduction of and adherence to new values could affect underlying philosophies. An example is the influence of language on behaviour: when sexist language becomes unacceptable, awareness of sexual stereotypes increases and actual, underlying sexist philosophy could be modified over time.

A third level could be called symbolic culture, incorporating all the representations of culture that are readily established, produced, cultivated and promoted by the organisation. This includes tangible symbols such as premises, publications, mission statements and press releases, logos, slogans, uniforms and brands. It also includes intangible symbols such as rituals, myths, legends and stories.

The final level we will call cultural behaviour patterns. This is perhaps an awkward nomenclature, but all three words in the phrase are important. Not all behaviour patterns are cultural; individual behaviour patterns relate to personality, for example. Behaviour is important, in that we are not referring to symbols of culture, but the actions of people in an organisation that are indicative of the presence of an organisational culture. Finally, patterns are important; isolated or occasional behaviour does not constitute manifestation of culture.

It is possible that the cultural behaviour patterns most often could be interpreted as rituals, but there are many behaviours in organisations that are not quite ritual and that are often described as cultural, e.g. timeliness for meetings, whether or not lunch breaks are taken, working late, etc.

It is not our objective here to define culture, but to create a framework that accommodates various interpretations of culture. The above four categories, foundational culture, cultural values, symbolic culture and cultural behaviour patterns encompass the various elements usually contained in definitions of organisational culture, as represented in the sample of definitions in Appendix A.

1 This and the other two examples of macro-environmental influences are not referenced as they are drawn from the author’s personal consulting experience.
Could the organisation influence its culture?

Culture itself is not immutable. A war, the credit crisis in Greece, The Global Financial Crisis, Apartheid in South Africa, a near bankruptcy - all these macro- and market-environmental events can most certainly influence organisational culture.

It is more difficult to argue whether management is capable of changing culture. Culture does not necessarily conform to what managers want, and is “relatively impervious to intervention” (Grey 2009, p. 73). Employees do not represent a ‘clean slate’, upon which management can scribe a new culture. McCabe highlights the role of memory as “resisting and facilitating organisational change”, as a source of both “dissent and consent that defies and facilitates programmes of change in unpredictable ways” (McCabe 2010, p.245).

We propose that the answer lies in the level of culture that is being considered. Foundational culture and culture values are not easily influenced by individuals, except perhaps by founders or in the specific context of significant external influences like an economic crisis. Bass and Avolio’s claim that through “idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration” transformational leaders “integrate creative insight, persistence and energy, intuition and sensitivity to the needs of others to forge the strategy-culture alloy for their organisations” (Bass & Avolio 1993, p. 113) remains a bold claim. We do, however, know that such leaders could readily influence symbols, and certainly could - through the normal processes of management such as planning and control, effect changes in behavior patterns. Persistence in cementing such symbolic influence and change in behavior patterns could eventually create new expectations, attitudes and norms that would become the new culture of the organisation.

Two intelligent approaches to the problem of culture change deserve special consideration. Alvesson describes how managers, often with the help of external consultants, embark on culture change programmes, as a “grand technocratic project” (Alvesson, 2002). The motives are usually sound. Often the competitiveness of the organisation depends on a particular strategic direction that requires improvement in service, quality, speed, innovation or other strategic consideration. Senior and middle managers buy into the change, become even more self-motivated, energised by the symbolism and message of the culture change. In contrast to the “grand technocratic project”, Alvesson proposes two other types of change. “Organic social movement” refers to decentralised and spontaneous revision of thinking, often in response to societal change. As mentioned before, the new-found focus on “green” architecture within property development companies could be seen as an example of such a change. The third form of change is “everyday reframing”. This implies an incremental change founded on “pedagogical leadership” and the reshaping of ideas, values and meaning. This works best when related to material work situations (Alvesson, 2002).

The other approach that appreciates the complexity of change is proposed by Boan. “The concept that individuals create an organisation while in turn being impacted by it is similar to the concept in cognitive behaviour modification theory of the individual’s actions being reciprocally determined by the environment”. He mirrors the six steps of individual cognitive behaviour therapy interventions with ideal steps that a consultant should take in advising an organisation. Some of the steps resemble typical consultant interventions, but he emphasises the element of “reducing complexity”, proposing that a consultant should focus on the most efficient unit of control, “such as a team or microsystem” (Boan 2006).

What is the role of subcultures and informal culture in organisations?

We know that cultural values do not always flow through to all levels of the organisation. The “degree of penetration” Smit & Cronje (1992, p. 386) of management’s culture promotion depends on factors such as the size of the organisation and the persuasive ability of leaders. In small companies, leaders can make their influence felt more directly (Linstead, Fulop & Lilley, 2009, p. 167); in large companies the culture as envisaged by top management may have little influence on lower level employees, despite extensive and often expensive communication (Neethling 2010).
Whether size is to blame, or whether other informal cultural factors are at play, what Bourgeois and Brodwin (1984) call the “commander model” - where the CEO wields considerable power and can command implementation of strategy insulated from the biases and political influences in the organisation - rarely works in practice. The persistence of this approach might be attributable to the American MBA model, with its “predisposition toward ... quantitative and objective elements ... rather than with more subjective and behavioural considerations (Bourgeois & Brodwin 1984, p. 245).

Our model would have to acknowledge the presence of subculture and informal culture in organisations.

**Is there a correlation between culture and performance?**

Despite some academic scepticism, received wisdom is that “firms that have internal cultures supportive of their strategies are more likely to be successful” (Smircich 1983 p.346). There is also an assumption that “the symbolic or cultural dimension in some way contributes to the overall systemic balance and effectiveness of an organisation” (1983 p. 344).

There are enough examples of high-performing companies with “poor” cultures to raise doubt about the generality of these assumptions. One could argue, for example, that Lehman Brothers was successful because of its aggressive, go-getting culture. That same culture also caused its failure.

The obvious answer to the question has to be “yes”, but that “yes” means very little without a broad range of qualifications and explanations. There is a correlation between all organisational cultures and all types of performance.

What is of more interest is how organisational culture can be utilised to align effective strategy or, perhaps more realistically, how strategy can be developed to best operate within the existing organisational culture. Also of interest is the apparent fact that successful organisations seem to develop good cultures, i.e. success inspires and reinforces positive behaviour patterns, provides obvious symbols of success and, if sustained, could shape a positive foundational culture.

**Is there a causal relationship between culture and performance?**

As indicated above, the answer might very well be “yes” if the question is inversed: there often is a causal relationship between performance and organisational culture.

Generally speaking successful strategy combined with opportunities in the market environment generate success. If the organisational culture is supportive and facilitates good strategy formulation and implementation, it clearly will be a contributor to performance. It is difficult to conceive of a direct, causal relationship. Even fairly instrumentalist views of organisational culture sometimes imply this once-removed influence of culture:

“Good cultures are characterized by norms and values supportive of excellence, teamwork, profitability, honesty, a customer service orientation, pride in one’s work, and commitment to the organisation. Most of all, they are supportive of adaptability - the capacity to thrive over the long run despite new competition, new regulations, new technological developments, and the strains of growth” (Baker 1980, p. 10).

**Should culture be used to influence performance?**

Grey’s characteristically cynical view is that a healthy organisation culture reconstitutes beliefs to achieve “the removal of supervision” (Grey 2009, p. 71). A more positive view is that it is the duty of management to improve the organisations and the people in their care. Generating or maintaining success has benefits not only for business owners and senior managers; successful organisations are able to provide employees with greater security of tenure, greater access to benefits and greater opportunity for personal advancement (Neethling 2010).
Interestingly, there is a view that strong culture might in fact be counterproductive. Bourgeois and Brodwin’s “Cultural Model” for implementing strategy involves the CEO communicating an overall vision for the firm, and then “allowing each individual to participate in designing his or her work procedures in concert with that mission” (Bourgeois & Brodwin 1984, p.250). They highlight how a strong existing culture could be counterproductive by resisting deviance. Some companies have to locate research and development far away from existing bureaucracy, for example, to minimise the conforming nature of the organisational culture (Neethling 2010).

On a more prosaic note there is a broadly accepted utility for organisational culture that shows that it might be a good idea to use culture: the use of person-organisation fit as a consideration in recruitment and selection is standard practice in most organisations.

**To what other factors could performance be attributed?**

We have already indicated the seminal importance of strategy in achieving success.

A different and simple psychological motive might explain much of the apparent correlation between culture and success. Thomas and Kilmann’s cooperativeness - assertiveness matrix, usually applied to relationships between individuals, is easily applied to the relationship between an individual and the organisation. If an employee has concern for the outcomes of the organisation, for whatever reason, he/she is more likely to act in the interest of the organisation by accommodating, collaborating and compromising in the interest of achieving organisational objectives. If the employee has little concern for the outcomes of the organisation, he/she is more likely to avoid (be disengaged) or compete (be in conflict with the organisation).

If the majority of individuals in an organisation experience one or the other level of concern, it is likely that positive or negative effects could be compounded. Whereas organisational culture could produce such levels of concern, the short-term actions of managers or owners could just as easily and perhaps more dramatically create one or the other situation.

This is perhaps an important “reality check” for the idea that culture is central to achievement. Short-term and medium-term management actions - inspired by, in contradiction to or unrelated to organisational culture - have profound effects on organisational achievement.
A descriptive model of organisational culture

We have illustrated that the range and complexity of debate about organisational culture is indeed bewildering. There are, however, common themes in the literature, albeit that these are frequently approached from opposite ends with little agreed outcomes.

The proposed model (Figure 4) is a distillation of the extensive review of academic articles on the topic of organisational culture.

Figure 4. Descriptive model of organisational Culture

Organisational culture is shown to consist of four levels of culture: foundational culture, cultural values, symbolic culture and cultural behaviour patterns. The first two are not readily observable, whereas symbolic culture and cultural behaviour patterns can be observed in general interaction with an organisation. The four levels overlap because they are not always easily distinguishable from each other, and also because they do influence each other. This influence is not unidirectional.

The macro environment (political, economic, social, technological, environmental and legal) influences primarily foundational culture, but also has some effect on cultural values and a marginal effect on symbolic culture. Market environmental influences (suppliers, customers and competitors, and also the industry in which the organisation functions) effect cultural behaviour patterns and to some extent symbolic culture, but has very little effect on cultural values.

The ability of management to directly influence culture is virtually non-existent at foundational culture level. At the other extreme, managers are fairly readily able to influence cultural behaviour patterns.

The model indicates a causal link between organisational strategy and performance, but only inasmuch as organisational culture influences strategy. Performance has a more direct potential causal link back to organisational culture, in that success of failure have an enhancing or tempering effect on organisational behaviour patterns and possibly, ultimately, on foundational culture.
Suggestions for further studies

The model would benefit from refinement of the exact nature of the three influences on organisational culture: macro environment, market environment and management. It is likely that the directional increase in influence is not as linear as suggested by the model. The “starting points” of influence might also need to be adjusted.

This study has been deductive in nature, concluding with the proposed model following a literature review. It would be an illuminating exercise to reverse the process, i.e. inductively apply the model to the various theories on organisational culture.

Conclusion

Organisational culture will remain in the spotlight for as long as simple, evidence-based solutions to organisational success remain elusive. A concept as complex as culture is needed to illuminate the complexity of human endeavour.

This study might then seem futile, if it attempts to simplify a necessary complexity. It is hoped, however, that the proposed descriptive model will in fact highlight the complexity of culture, and discourage banal assertions of management’s role in changing culture.
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Appendix A: A sample of definitions of organisational culture

Culture can be defined as the shared philosophies, ideologies, values, assumptions, beliefs, expectations, attitudes, and norms that knit a community together. (Kilmann et al., 1985, p.5)

Talking about organisational culture seems to mean talking about the importance for people of symbolism - of rituals, myths, stories, and legends - and about the interpretation of events, ideas, and experiences that are influenced and shaped by the groups within which they live. (Frost et al., 1985, p. 17)

The collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one organisation from another’ (Hofstede 1998, p. 478).

A pattern of basic assumptions that a group has invented, discovered or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and that have worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems (Schein, 1990, p. 111).

Quite simply, corporate culture is the collective belief system that people within a company have about their ability to compete in the marketplace—and how they act on those belief systems to bring value-added services and products to customers and profits to the company. Corporate culture is reflected through the attitudes, behaviours, belief systems, commitments, values, decision-making processes, innovation and productivity that impact the long-term, as well as day-to-day, performance of the business. (Want 2003, p.17).

So far, we have used the term culture both for organisational and national levels alternately, yet its implication is somewhat different. Both uses of the term culture refer to a social process of understanding and interpreting the world surrounding us. Culture is often compared to a lens through which we perceive the world. When we depict culture as an onion, the outer layers are the organisational culture. The organisational culture is embodied in symbols, rituals and heroes. Symbols are words, gestures and objects. Corporate identity programmes are, for example, part of this symbolic level of culture. The symbolic level further includes manners of speaking and dress habits. Rituals refer to social rules and norms which need to be followed in a certain environment, while heroes are persons that are used as role models. They possess characteristics that are highly valued in an organisation. National culture, in contrast, relates to the more central layers. Values represent this side of the spectrum: they are feelings of right and wrong, good and evil, beautiful and ugly, rational and irrational. (Olie, 1990 p. 210)