Cultural Approaches

After Reading This Chapter, You Should …

- Know about how the cultural metaphor for understanding organizations was first developed as a prescriptive model for improving organizational performance and be able to describe the weaknesses of this prescriptive approach.
- Appreciate ways of describing organizational cultures as complicated, emergent, unitary, & ambiguous.
- Understand Edgar Schein's definition and model of organizational culture and be able to use that model to analyze cultural factors in organizational communication.
- Be aware of high reliability organizations as one important form of organizational culture in the twenty-first century.
- See ways in which the cultural metaphor requires alternative research methods, such as ethnography and the writing of cultural tales.

Several of the approaches in the previous chapters have looked at organizations and communication through the lens of a metaphor. Classical approaches conceptualize organizations as machines, and systems approaches look at the organismic aspects of organizational structure and functioning. In this chapter, we look at an additional metaphor by regarding organizations as cultures. The cultural metaphor derives from the field of anthropology, where scholars study the cultures of nations, tribes, and ethnic groups.

What is a culture? When we think about the culture of a nation, many things come to mind. Consider U.S. culture, for example. We might think about some of the values that many Americans hold: freedom, independence, hard work, or achievement. We might think about some of the symbols of U.S. culture: the stars and stripes, the bald eagle, baseball, and apple pie. We might think about the rites and rituals of Americans: Fourth of July picnics, blowout wedding receptions, or Super Bowl parties. We might think about the daily life of Americans: early mornings on the family farm, ninety-minute commutes on the Los Angeles freeways, or long days balancing the demands of work and family. But, of course, the notion of American culture is not always straightforward and uncontested. Especially in our post-9/11 world, there are debates about what it means to be American both within our own borders and as a part of the interdependent global world, and there are many political and social clashes that pit various

"subcultures" of America against each other. In short, when thinking about U.S. culture, we think about a complicated patchwork of values, symbols, and behaviors that define "America" in various ways for various people.

In using a cultural metaphor for the investigation of an organization, we are again looking for the qualities that make an organization "what it is". What makes Google different from Apple? What makes McDonald's different from Burger King? What makes the University of Texas different from Texas A&M University? What makes the Delta Gamma house on your campus different from Alpha Chi Omega's? As Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1983) note, "Each organization has its own way of doing what it does and its own way of talking about what it is doing" (p. 128). To discover these ways of doing and ways of talking is to investigate organizational culture.

In this chapter, we consider two different ways of thinking about culture. The first—originating in the popular business press three decades ago—looks at culture as something an organization has. According to this approach, having the "right" kind of culture can make or break an organization. The second approach considers culture as something an organization is. Following the discussion of these two ways of thinking about culture, I will explicate one model of culture in more detail. This model, developed by Edgar Schein (1992), conceptualizes culture as the assumptions, values, behaviors, and artifacts that an organization exhibits as it attempts to adapt to internal and external organizational contingencies. This model will then be briefly used to consider an important organizational cultural form of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century: high reliability organizations. Finally, we will take a look at the research methods typically used to investigate organizational culture.

Prescriptive Views of Culture

During the last part of the twentieth century, organizational scholars and practitioners became fascinated with the concept of "organizational culture". As Eisenberg and Riley (2001: 291) note, "the speed at which 'organizational culture' emerged as a significant lens for communication scholars and other academics to examine or otherwise engage with organizations and institutions was astounding". The concept of "culture" took the

business and academic community by storm for several reasons. First, the metaphor of culture clearly resonated with both academics and practitioners. It simply made sense to see organizations as complex arenas of stories and values rather than as entirely rational institutions. Second, the cultural metaphor opened up new and fruitful areas of research, as you will discover in this chapter. And, finally, culture quickly became a part of everyday talk in carpools and around watercoolers. As Eisenberg and Riley (2001: 292) point out, "organizational discourse was soon peppered with such statements as 'The culture here won't allow us to …' or 'Our culture is very intense—we work hard and play harder'".

The early popularity and widespread use of cultural terminology can be traced back to two popular books published in the early 1980s. These books are Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life by Terrence Deal and Allen Kennedy (1982) and In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's BestRun Companies by Tom Peters and Robert Waterman (1982). Both books propose that successful companies can be identified in terms of their cultures.

Deal and Kennedy's "Strong Cultures"

Deal and Kennedy (1982) argue that business success can be enhanced through the development of a "strong" culture. If an organization has the components of a strong culture, it will be a better place for individuals to work and will improve individual and organizational performance. Deal and Kennedy identify four key components of a strong culture:

1. **Values** are the beliefs and visions that members hold for an organization. For example, 3M Corporation espouses a value for innovation, whereas Prudential Insurance represents a value of stability.
2. **Heroes** are the individuals who come to exemplify an organization's values. These heroes become known through the stories and myths of an organization. For example, Steve Jobs is a hero who exemplifies innovation and market savvy at Apple.
3. **Rites and rituals** are the ceremonies through which an organization celebrates its values. An organization that values innovation may develop a ritualistic way of

rewarding the new ideas of employees. In other organizations, rites and rituals might include a company picnic or an awards banquet for outstanding employees.

4. **The cultural network** is the communication system through which cultural values are instituted and reinforced. The cultural network could consist of both formal organizational channels, such as newsletters, and the informal interactions of employees.

Peters & Waterman's "Excellent Cultures"

A second book that made a big impact on the business community in the 1980s is In Search of Excellence by Peters and Waterman (1982). Like Deal and Kennedy, Peters and Waterman were attempting to identify aspects of organizational culture that were prevalent in high-performing companies. They studied sixty-two organizations deemed "excellent" by employees and organizational experts. They then identified "themes" that characterized the cultures of these organizations. These themes are presented in Table 5.1. As this table indicates, the themes emphasize the importance of people (e.g., "close relations to the customer" and "productivity through people") and downplay bureaucratic structure and values (e.g., "autonomy and entrepreneurship" and "simple form, lean staff").

Both Corporate Cultures and In Search of Excellence had an enormous impact on organizational practice. These books emphasize the importance of organizational intangibles, such as values and heroes, and signal a move away from strictly rational models of organizing. However, the books were not as widely embraced by the academic community, primarily because they provide prescriptions for managerial practice rather than descriptions or explanations of organizational life. For example, Deal and Kennedy's book argues that a strong culture held by all employees is the only route to success in the business world. Similarly, individuals reading Peters and Waterman's book would conclude that excellence could be best achieved through the themes laid out in Table 5.1. Indeed, some scholars later called this approach "value engineering" because it espouses the belief that "effective cultural leaders could create 'strong' cultures, built around their own values" (Martin & Frost, 1996: 602).

It is important to stress that the values prescribed in this view of culture are, in large part, ones that can—and do—make positive contributions to organizational performance and to the work lives of organizational members. For example, there is little doubt that customer service organizations will be more successful if they gear decisions and actions to customer needs (Theme 2 from Table Peters and Waterman's Themes for Excellent Organizations) or that it is dangerous to try to do too many different things within one organization (Theme 6 from Table Peters and Waterman's Themes for Excellent Organizations). Indeed, more recent popular press management books have continued to echo many of the themes first set forth in these early books (see, e.g., Collins, 2004).

Peters and Waterman's Themes for Excellent Organizations

Theme	Description
A bias for action	Excellent organizations react quickly and do not spend excess time planning and analyzing.
Close relations to the customer	Excellent organizations gear decisions and actions to the needs of customers.
Productivity through people	Excellent organizations encourage positive and respectful relationships among management and employees.
Hands-on, value-driven	Excellent organizations have employees and managers who share the same core value of productivity and performance.
Stick to the knitting	Excellent organizations stay focused on what they do best and avoid radical diversification.
Simple form, lean staff	Excellent organizations avoid complex structures and divisions of labor.
Simultaneous loose-tight properties	Excellent organizations exhibit both unity of purpose and the diversity necessary for innovation.

Source: Miller, 2012: 85

However, these prescriptive approaches to culture also fall short in two important respects. First, it is naive to assume that there is a single cultural "formula" for achieving organizational success. For example, although a "bias for action" may have proven effective for the organizations studied by Peters and Waterman, there are certainly times when a more contemplative approach to organizing would be appropriate. Thus, prescriptions for the "correct" culture oversimplify the complexities of organizational life. Second, these prescriptive approaches treat culture as a "thing" that an organization "has". This objectification of culture is risky because when we objectify culture, we de-emphasize the complex processes through which organizational culture is created and

sustained. When we objectify culture, we also tend to simplify it. For example, we might assume that all organizational participants share the same culture and that the organization's culture is relatively stable over time.

Because of these problems, most scholars who adopt a cultural approach to the study of organizations avoid the prescriptive tack taken by these writers. Instead, cultural researchers seek to describe and understand the complex ways in which organizational culture is developed and maintained. The next section considers these alternative approaches to culture.

Case in Point: Red Sox Nation

I am a citizen of Red Sox Nation.

How did this happen to a lifelong Detroit Tigers fan? A woman who, as a girl, listened to the venerable Ernie Harwell broadcasting Tigers games through a transistor radio under the pillow? A woman who named her dog after Mickey Stanley, a 1960s Tiger center fielder? A woman who, in 1985, reprised the 1968 Detroit Tigers' fight song on a Lansing, Michigan, radio station in order to win a free gallon of ice cream?

Well, part of my change in nationality came from marrying a lifelong Red Sox fan. And having a daughter with a closet full of Red Sox (and antiYankee) shirts makes a difference too. But the power of the culture of "Red Sox Nation" was clearly an influential factor in my changing allegiances, for the Red Sox organization embodies a strong culture that reaches from the front office, to the field, to the streets of Boston, and to citizens of Red Sox Nation around the world.

At the beginning of the 2004 season, Mark Starr (2004) highlighted some of the characteristics of the Red Sox culture that include an intense rivalry (with the hated Yankees, of course), a singular setting (Fenway Park and the Green Monster), and a shared history of maddeningly dashed hopes. The power of this culture is heightened by talented and sometimes quirky team members and by widespread television coverage.

It all came to fruition in late October 2004. The Red Sox came back from a three-game deficit to win the American League pennant over the Yankees and then swept the St. Louis Cardinals to win their first World Series in 86 years. They reversed the "Curse of the Bambino," and the power of the Red Sox Nation culture was felt all over Boston and, indeed, across the country. I was there for the second game of that World Series, and the excitement was palpable at Fenway and throughout Boston. Looking back from the distance of half a dozen years, one might wonder if such a culture can maintain its strength. Judging from ticket sales, media coverage, and sports memorabilia, the answer is clearly yes. The Red Sox won it all again in 2007, and there is still never an empty seat at Fenway. Apparently, the curse of the Bambino has been reversed, and the culture of Red Sox Nation will endure.

Alternative Approaches to Culture

Today, most scholars interested in organizational culture eschew the simple prescriptive approaches discussed above. Rather than seeing culture as a "thing" that can and should be "managed," these researchers see culture as the emerging and sometimes fragmented values, practices, narratives, and artifacts that make a particular organization "what it is". Putnam (1983) introduced this interpretive approach in the communication discipline, noting that this approach requires a consideration of "the

way individuals make sense of their world through their communicative behaviors" (p. 31). Although this chapter cannot fully explore the multitude of positions taken by those trying to describe and understand organizational culture (see, especially, Eisenberg & Riley, 2001; Martin, 1992, 2002), four issues highlight the distinction between prescriptive approaches to culture and the approaches taken by most cultural scholars today: culture is complicated; culture is emergent; culture is not unitary; and culture is often ambiguous.

Organizational Cultures Are Complicated

The complexity of organizational culture is demonstrated by the wide variety of "markers" that scholars use to investigate it. We will consider just a few. Beyer and Trice (1987) argue that an organization's culture is revealed through its rites, and they differentiate among rites of passage, rites of degradation, rites of enhancement, rites of renewal, rites of conflict reduction, and rites of integration. Dandridge (1986) looks at organizational ceremonies as indicators of culture. Quinn and McGrath (1985) focus on the roles of values and belief systems in the transformation of organizational cultures. Smith and Eisenberg (1987) consider the metaphors of employees and management in a study of the culture at Disneyland. Boje (1991) and Meyer (1995) contend that culture can be best revealed through the stories that organizational members tell. Schall (1983) and Morley and ShockleyZalabak (1991; Shockley-Zalabak & Morley, 1994) investigate communication rules in the development of culture. Even organizational hallway talk can be a lens for viewing culture (Gronn, 1983).

Rites, ceremonies, values, belief systems, metaphors, stories, communication rules, and hallway talk are just a few of the windows through which researchers attempt to gain a glimpse of an organization's culture. Moreover, some scholars concentrate on a single cultural marker, whereas others attempt to examine the ways in which a variety of cultural manifestations are woven together. Given this diversity of cultural markers, it is not surprising that most scholars see organizational culture as a highly complex phenomenon.

Organizational Cultures Are Emergent

A second point of agreement among most organizational culture scholars is the notion that cultures are socially created through the interaction of organizational members. This idea is central to a communication focus on culture in which culture is not merely transmitted through communication but in which communication is "constitutive of culture" (Eisenberg & Riley, 2001: 294). Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1983) took this emergent approach into the cultural realm in their work on "Organizational Communication as Cultural Performance," arguing that a study of organizational culture should concentrate on the communication processes through which culture is created. They further argue that these communication processes can be best conceptualized as "performances" that are interactional, contextual, episodic, and improvisational.

Cultural performances are interactional in that they require the participation of multiple organizational members. Cultural performances are contextual in that they are embedded in organizational situations and organizational history. Cultural performances are episodic in that they are distinct events in organizational life. Finally, cultural performances are improvisational because there are no scripts that guide organizational members. By pointing to the importance of "cultural performance," Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo highlight the communicative processes through which organizational cultures emerge and shift over time.

Organizational Cultures Are Not Unitary

Most organizational culture researchers agree that it is impossible to characterize an organization as having a single culture. Rather, most scholars agree that organizations are characterized by a multitude of subcultures that "may co-exist in harmony, conflict, or indifference to each other" (Frost, Moore, Louis, Lundberg & Martin, 1991: 8). Martin (2002) highlights this aspect of culture in her discussion of a differentiation approach in which inconsistencies among cultural views are expected and often seen as desirable.

But where are these various subcultures found in an organization, and how do they work? Louis (1985) addresses these questions in her consideration of the sites of culture and cultural penetration. Louis first argues that there are a number of sites where

culture might develop in an organization, including a "vertical slice" (e.g., a division), a "horizontal slice" (e.g., a particular hierarchical level), or a specific work group. Martin (2002) also points out that subcultures might emerge around networks of personal contacts or demographic similarity. These cultural sites all "serve as breeding grounds … for the emergence of shared meaning" (Louis, 1985: 79). Thus, a wide range of subcultures could spring up at various sites in a single organization. For example, Marschall (2002) conducted a study of a software development firm and found that skilled workers in the Internet economy created their own occupational community. This community—although perhaps divided by geography—shared work practices, ideas about what was important in the workplace, and even adopted a distinct language and vocabulary.

One additional consideration of the nonunitary nature of organizational culture is that various subcultures within an organization may represent important differences in power and in interests (see, e.g., Alvesson, 1993). In other words, not only can the subcultures of the corporate boardroom and the assembly line be described as "different," but these differences also point to fundamental schisms in power and ideology in the organization. For example, at your own university, the student population might have a distinct subculture that is quite different from those of faculty or staff (see Kramer & Berman, 2001). However, it is likely that the values espoused through the student culture hold less sway than those espoused by others. (These differences in power and ideology are discussed in much greater detail in Chapter 6)

Organizational Cultures Are Often Ambiguous

Finally, scholars of organizational culture recognize that there is not always a clear picture of the organization's culture—or even of its various subcultures. There may be multiple manifestations of culture that are difficult to interpret. Martin (2002) discusses this approach to culture as the fragmentation perspective and argues that fragmentation studies will see an ambiguous culture as "a normal, salient, and inescapable part of organizational functioning in the contemporary world" (p. 105).

This notion that culture is oftentimes ambiguous and hard to pin down is particularly important when considering organizations that are rapidly changing. Many scholars argue that we now live in a "postmodern world" that is multifaceted, fragmented, fast-moving, and difficult to understand (see, e.g., Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). In such an environment, it is not surprising that organizational culture might also be in a state of flux. For example, Risberg (1999) analyzed the culture of a Swedish manufacturing company that had just been acquired. Risberg noted that "a post-acquisition process cannot be understood in one clear way. There are ambiguities in interpretation of situations and statements. These ambiguities illustrate the multiple realities within the organization and during the postacquisition process" (Risberg, 1999: 177). These ambiguities can be particularly challenging for individuals as they try to forge their own identities within these reconfigured organizational cultures (Pepper & Larson, 2006).

In summary, current organizational culture scholars take an approach to culture that seeks to understand the ways in which communication and interaction create a unique sense of place in an organization. These scholars look for the complex web of values, behaviors, stories, rules, and metaphors that comprise an organization's culture, acknowledging that culture is socially created through the communicative performances of organizational members. These scholars also look for the similarities and differences among various subcultures that exist simultaneously in any organization and acknowledge that culture is often ambiguous and in a state of flux. In the next section, we review one specific model of organizational culture. Although this model does not capture all the nuances of contemporary approaches to culture, it provides a helpful lens for analyzing organizational cultures and subcultures.

Schein's Model of Organizational Culture

Edgar Schein is a management scholar and consultant interested in the role of leaders in the development and maintenance of organizational culture. His 1992 book—Organizational Culture and Leadership—describes a model of culture that pulls together several of the notions we have already considered in this chapter. Although this book is

two decades old, the model it describes provides a helpful way to understand how culture can be understood in a variety of organizational forms and contexts.

Spotlight on Scholarship

From smoky newsrooms to loud and dirty pressrooms to sitting around on the police beat, the newspaper business has traditionally been viewed as a "man's world". This has changed to some extent, of course, since the 1970s, as women have entered the workforce in greater numbers. However, these changes have come slowly in journalism. "Compared to the U.S. civilian workforce in 2000, women journalists are considerably less prevalent than women in other professions. Women journalists are also less likely to be managers than women in other areas of the professional work force" (Everbach, 2007: 478). Indeed, Al Neuharth, while CEO of Gannett Co.—one of the largest U.S. newspaper companies—commented, "Too many middle-aged white men still make the decisions" in newsrooms around the country (Everbach, 2007: 478).

But what happens when there are women in control of a large newspaper? Does their leadership make a difference? Does the kind of news produce change? Does the organizational culture change?

Tracy Everbach (2007) explored these questions in her recent article, "The Culture of a Women-Led Newspaper: An Ethnographic Study of the Sarasota Herald-Tribune". In this study, Everbach conducted interviews and made observations at a large Florida newspaper that was the first in the country to have an all-women management team. Her findings illustrate many of the concepts regarding organizational culture discussed in this chapter.

First, Everbach found that having a women-led management team definitely made a difference in terms of the organizational culture. The workplace was marked by more family-friendly policies, more openness in communication patterns, and more participative and egalitarian decision-making. As Everbach (2007: 484) notes, "the female leaders at the Herald-Tribune made a point of welcoming employee input, offering open-door conversation policies, and coming out of their offices to communicate with the staff". All these processes have been identified as more "feminine" forms of management, and the editors at the newspaper very consciously saw themselves as role models for these kinds of policies and behaviors. Workers at the paper also identified negative aspects of a "feminine" culture. Some staffers believed that assertive reporting behaviors were discouraged, and others thought that the atmosphere had become more "gossipy" and "catty".

It is interesting, though, that in spite of this large change in the culture attributed to a women-led organization, there was little change in the product of that organization. As Everbach (2007: 479) points out, "the Herald-Tribune's front page, local news, business, sports, and lifestyle sections represented few women, so the female management team clearly did not change news values regarding content selection". This may point to the limits of a local organizational culture to influence the values of an industry or occupation. The value for hard news becomes almost hardwired into journalists. Everbach (2007, pp. 480–481) notes, "Female journalists are socialized to view these [masculine] standards as journalistic objectivity, allowing the news to become 'masculinized' even when reported by women". The values of leaders can make a big difference, but shifting the larger professional values of an occupation is clearly a long-term process.

Everbach, T. (2007). The culture of a women-led newspaper: An ethnographic study of the Sarasota Herald-Tribune. Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, 83, 477– 493.

A Definition of Culture

Schein (1992) first defines the culture of a social group—an organization or other collective—in the following way:

> A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has 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 (p. 12)

This definition raises several critical issues. First, Schein defines culture as a group phenomenon. An individual cannot have a culture because cultural formation depends on communication. However, cultural groups can exist on many levels, ranging from

civilizations and countries to small organizational or social groups. Schein acknowledges that cultures are often fragmented, as we discussed earlier. However, Schein believes that it is important to highlight the human need for stability, consistency, and meaning and thus the push of many cultural forms toward patterning and integration.

Second, Schein defines culture as a pattern of basic assumptions, suggesting that the beliefs that make up culture are relatively enduring and difficult to change. Indeed, individuals may not even be aware of the cultural assumptions they hold. As we will see in the model he developed, Schein acknowledges that organizational culture also encompasses values, behaviors, rules, and physical artifacts. However, he believes that the core of culture is its basic assumptions and that values and behaviors are better seen as reflections of that culture.

Third, Schein sees culture as an emergent and developmental process. According to his definition, cultures are learned or invented as a group meets internal and external challenges. Consider, for instance, the trajectory of Internet startup firms in the 1990s and the early part of the 21st century. In the mid to late 1990s, many fledgling Internet companies were riding high, looking for venture capitalists to finance grand schemes of expansion. The culture of such a company would reflect the contingencies of this environment. It might be aggressive, confident, fast-moving, perhaps even brash. But when the "dot-com bubble" burst in 2000 and 2001, the culture at these companies changed substantially.

Finally, Schein's definition highlights the socializing aspect of organizational culture. We will discover more about this topic in Chapter 7. At this point, though, it is enough to point out that when individuals enter an organization, a major part of "learning the ropes" consists of developing an understanding of the assumptions and values that make up that organization's culture. This is not to suggest that newcomers are blank slates upon which culture is written, however. Indeed, Schein believes that, in many cases, "the new members' interaction with old members will be a more creative process of building a culture" (Schein, 1992: 13).

A Model of Culture

After presenting his definition of culture, Schein sets forth a model that sorts out the various elements of culture into three distinct levels. These levels of organizational culture differ in terms of their visibility to those observing the organization and in terms of their meaning and influence for organizational members.

Level 1: Artifacts

The most visible level of culture in Schein's model consists of the physical and social environment that organizational members have created. A number of different cultural indicators could be included at this observable level. The most obvious of these are the artifacts—or things—displayed by organizational members and the overt behavior of organizational members. A researcher attempting to investigate and understand an organization's culture would normally begin by considering these overt manifestations. An investigator looking at artifacts might consider such diverse items as architecture, furniture, technology, dress, written documents, and art. An investigator looking at behaviors might consider communication patterns such as forms of address, decision-making styles, communication during meetings, the use of various technologies, and the extent to which work takes place in dispersed physical locations.

Of course, as Schein (1985) notes, "whereas it is easy to observe artifacts— even subtle ones, such as the way in which status is demonstrated by members— the difficulty is figuring out what the artifacts mean, how they interrelate, what deeper patterns, if any, they reflect" (p. 15). Hence, even this observable layer is labeled as "difficult to decipher" in Schein's model. Imagine, for instance, that you notice that faculty members in a communication department all address each other by formal titles (e.g., "Professor Jones" or "Doctor Smith") rather than by first names. How are you to interpret this observation? Perhaps faculty members hold each other in such high esteem that the use of titles seems natural and appropriate. Perhaps formality is the rule throughout the university. Perhaps faculty members are trying to set an example for students. Perhaps faculty members dislike each other intensely and hence try to maintain a distant relationship. Any of these explanations might be plausible, and each says very different things about the organizational culture. Thus, to get a better handle on the cultural

meaning of observable behaviors and artifacts, we must move to Schein's second level of culture.

Level 2: Espoused

Values The second level of Schein's model of culture is composed of individual and group values. Values represent preferences or what "ought" to happen. For example, an individual with a value for hard work will probably spend long hours at the office. A manager who values innovativeness will reward workers who come up with new and better ideas for getting the job done. Thus, this level of culture represents a mosaic of beliefs about how things ought to be done in an organization.

Several interesting points should be raised about this second level of culture. First, organizations do not have values, but individuals do. The individuals in an organization may hold a wide range of values whose variety will contribute to the existence of the organizational subcultures that we considered earlier. However, not all values will hold equal "weight" in an organization. Indeed, many scholars believe that the values of the organizational founder or current leader play a critical role in shaping the organization's culture (Morley & ShockleyZalabak, 1991). It is likely, for example, that the organizational culture of the west wing of the White House shifts substantially whenever there is a new presidential administration.

A second point about the value level of culture is that sometimes individuals say they hold a particular value, but their behavior belies that statement. Thus, Schein labels this second level of culture "espoused values," emphasizing that stated value and behavior don't always match. For example, a manager might say that she values the contributions of her employees in decision-making. However, that same manager might consistently make decisions without seeking employee input. Thus, when studying an organization's culture, it is critical to look at the correspondence between the behaviors and artifacts of Level 1 and the values of Level 2. If there is a strong match between these two levels, it is likely that both the behaviors and the values are indicators of underlying cultural assumptions. However, if espoused values do not match artifacts and behaviors, it is possible that the values are really "either rationalizations or only aspirations for the future" (Schein, 1992: 21). Because of the contradictions that might be found at this

value level of culture, it is often important to look even further—to the third level: the basic assumptions of organizational members.

Level 3: Basic Assumptions

Schein's third level of culture is the "core" assumptions that individuals in a group hold about the world and how it works. As indicated in Schein's definition of culture, these assumptions have become "taken for granted" because they have been reinforced time and time again as the group deals with internal and external problems. These basic assumptions are uniformly held by cultural or subcultural members. However, individuals can rarely articulate them because they have become such a natural part of "the way we are" or "the way we do things around here".

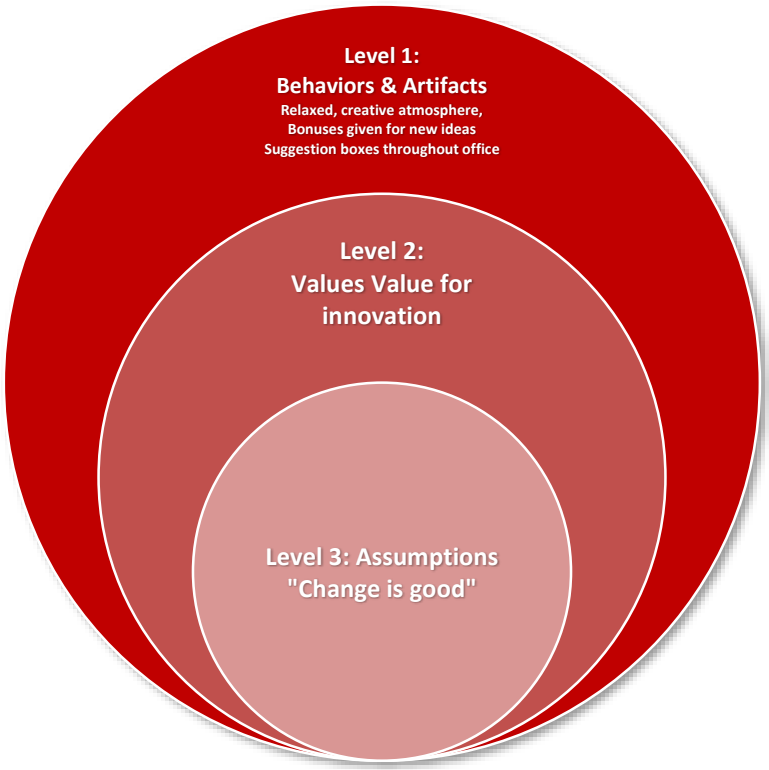
Schein believes that an examination of the basic assumptions might reveal a coherent paradigm that guides a strong and united culture. Or the cultural assumptions might be fragmented and contradictory and point to problems of adapting to external and internal organizational problems. As Schein (1985) states: "Unless we have searched for the pattern among the different underlying assumptions of a group and have attempted to identify the paradigm by which the members of a group perceive, think about, feel about, and judge situations and relationships, we cannot claim that we have described or understood the group's culture" (p. 111).

Schein's definition and model, then, represent culture as a complex pattern of assumptions, values, behaviors, and artifacts. The cultural pattern that develops over time in a group might be a consistent one. That is, underlying assumptions about the world might be reflected in a set of values that in turn generates behaviors and artifacts. In this case, Schein's model might be seen as an "onion" with interconnected levels. Consider, for example, the "onion" pattern of assumptions, values, and behaviors illustrated in Figure 5.1. In this illustration, the organization has an underlying assumption that change is good. This underlying assumption might be reflected in the valuing of innovation in products and services. On the outside layer of the onion, then, are behaviors and artifacts that reflect this value. These might include bonuses for new ideas, electronic or physical "suggestion boxes," and a relaxed atmosphere that encourages creative thinking.

Of course, organizations will also exist in which the assumptions do not match the espoused values or where the values are not reflected in observed behavior and creations. These cases might indicate the existence of fragmented subcultures or a culture in transition from one set of assumptions and values to another. Furthermore, underlying assumptions can lead to dysfunctional behaviors or can fail to shift as the contingencies of the organizational environment change. Consider, for example, the rapid rise and fall of Enron at the turn of the twenty-first century. Sloan (2002) noted that the underlying cultural assumption of "confidence and aggressiveness" led to beliefs and behaviors of "cockiness and arrogance". Thus, "what made Enron successful—innovation and daring—got the company into trouble" (Sloan, 2002: 21).

Schein's model, of course, oversimplifies the nature of organizational culture and the role of communication in creating and sustaining that culture. As we discussed in considering research related to the descriptive approach to culture, theorists and researchers increasingly see culture as a fragmented and often ambiguous phenomenon, and Schein's model can obscure this complexity.

An "Onion Model" Example of Organizational Culture



However, Schein's model provides a helpful heuristic for looking at the multiple indicators of organizational culture and how these indicators might—or might not—be indicative of more enduring values and assumptions (see, e.g., Schein, 2004).

One example of how cultural assumptions and values are expected to permeate the values and behaviors of organizational members can be seen in high reliability organizations that are increasingly important in our technologically advanced society. High reliability organizations are those that "are engaged in production or services that require extraordinary attention to avoiding major errors because errors could lead to destruction of the organization and/or a larger public" (Roberts, 1990: 160). These organizations include nuclear submarines (Roberts, 1990), airplane flight decks (Weick & Roberts, 1993), and others in which operations include very little—if any—margin for error. LaPorte (1996) argues that if such organizations are to uphold high safety standards, they must cultivate a "culture of reliability" in which underlying assumptions of the work lead to error-free behaviors. LaPorte argues that these assumptions include a strong value for skilled performance, an insistence on a high degree of discretion, and an appreciation for the tension between system experts and system operators.

Case in Point: Googling Cultural Values

Google is among the largest corporations in the world, and it has a huge impact on both daily life and the health of the global financial system. Ted Leonsis (2010) points out that Google's success may be based on more than just an incredible business model and savvy decision-making. Leonsis argues that Google is "a prime example of … a doublebottom line company—an organization that measures its success by both its fiscal results and its positive impact on humanity" (p. 16). The first bottom line is the one we all know about—profits—and Google is clearly no slouch in this area. But Google also considers a second bottom line in the higher calling reflected in its motto ("Don't be evil") and in its goal to make information universally accessible.

These two bottom lines that form the core assumptions of Google's culture permeate into behaviors including a 2010 decision to flout China's censorship laws, using a herd of sheep to trim the lawn at corporate headquarters, switching names with Topeka, Kansas, for a day, and an organizational setting that provides supportive services for employees. Leonsis notes that some of these behaviors don't make sense on the surface — "by refusing to participate in Chinese censorship, the company imperiled billions of dollars in future profit" (2010: 16). The other side of the coin, however, is the second bottom line of pro-social values. Google "protected its status as a happy company at peace with its values—and happy companies are more, not less, likely to continue being successful" (Leonsis, 2010: 16).

The importance of a high reliability culture can be seen in situations ranging from shuttle disasters experienced by NASA (see the case study at the end of this chapter) and the BP Gulf of Mexico oil disaster in 2010. Many commentators considering events that led to the BP rig explosion and subsequent oil leak have pointed to possible problems in the

BP corporate culture that suggest that the organization may have strayed from a "culture of reliability". For example, Edersheim (2010) argues that "BP's culture allowed extreme shortsightedness in pursuit of profit at the cost of safety or environmental stewardship". Thus, for some organizations, cultural assumptions, values, and behaviors can have important consequences for others well beyond the organizational borders.

Methods for Studying Organizational Culture

In our discussion of organizational culture, several points have been emphasized. First, an organizational culture is reflected in a complicated set of assumptions, values, behaviors, and artifacts. Second, organizational cultures change over time as groups adapt to environmental contingencies. Third, organizations are usually composed of subcultures existing in varying degrees of harmony or competition. Fourth, organizational cultures are created and maintained through the communicative interactions of organizational members. Research methods used to investigate culture, then, need to account for these facets of culture.

Although a variety of analytical tools have been used to investigate organizational culture, many researchers believe that qualitative methods are the most appropriate for gaining an understanding of the complicated, fragmented, and changing nature of cultural groups (see Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In particular, because the metaphor of culture was borrowed from the field of anthropology, many scholars have turned to an anthropological method—ethnography—for the investigation of organizational culture. The term ethnography means the "writing of culture," and ethnographic methods differ dramatically from traditional social science techniques (Goodall, 2000). To begin with, an organizational ethnographer approaches an organizational culture as a "text" to be read. In order to decipher this cultural text, an ethnographer will try to become immersed in organizational life. For example, an ethnographer attempting to learn about the culture at a fast-food restaurant might get a job flipping burgers (participant observation); might spend a great deal of time watching interactions at the restaurant (nonparticipant observation); might examine training manuals and work-related memos

(archival analysis); or might talk with employees about their values, heroes, metaphors, rules, and stories. Actually, the ethnographer would probably do several or all of these things. Whatever the specific observational technique, the goal is to minimize the distance between the researcher and the culture being investigated. It is assumed that a rich understanding of culture can be garnered only through personal experience (Jackson, 1989).

Through this intense observation of the cultural group, the ethnographer begins to develop an understanding of the values and assumptions at work. In other words, through the observation of organizational behaviors and artifacts (Level 1 of culture) and discussion about organizational values (Level 2 of culture), the researcher develops ideas about the assumptions that drive organizational members (Level 3 of culture) and how all three levels of culture interrelate. Bantz (1993) systematizes this inference process in his "organizational communication culture method". This method suggests that the researcher should first gather organizational communication messages and then analyze these messages in terms of their vocabulary, themes, and symbolic forms (e.g., metaphors and stories). Inferences can then be made from these messages and symbolic forms with regard to organizational norms, roles, motives, and style.

Through these methods of observation and inference, the ethnographer thus creates a mini-theory that is grounded in observations of a particular organizational culture (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Consider again, for instance, the communication department in which the faculty always addresses each other by using formal titles. If an ethnographer were studying this department, she might observe many other behaviors and artifacts. She might note that male professors always wear suits and ties when lecturing and that female professors always wear skirts or dresses. She might observe that faculty members socialize together and engage in much more informal behavior outside of the university setting. In talking to faculty members, our ethnographer might find that they often refer to their university and profession in reverential tones. From these and other observations, our ethnographer might begin to build a grounded theory about the department's culture. This theory might revolve around the importance of

scholarly tradition in this culture and discuss the manner in which behaviors and artifacts reflect this basic value.

Once a cultural researcher has developed a grounded theory about an organization's culture, the ethnography of that culture can be written. For a cultural researcher, the writing of the research report rarely takes the form of a traditional social science article (e.g., literature review, methods, results, discussion). Rather, the ethnographer is trying to tell a "cultural tale" to help the reader understand the organization in all its rich and varied detail. Van Maanen (1988) has discussed three kinds of cultural tales that can be told about an organizational culture. The first—a realist tale—is like a documentary, as the ethnographer tries to provide a complete and relatively objective account of what was observed in the organization (e.g., Carbaugh, 1988). The second—a confessional tale—is as much about the ethnographer as about what was observed. That is, the researcher talks personally about how he or she experienced the culture under investigation (e.g., Goodall, 1991). Finally, an impressionist tale is a narrative in which information about the culture is slipped into a story that could stand on its own dramatic merits (e.g., Goodall, 1989). Critical tales—narratives with the express goal of uncovering the deep power structures implicit in organizational functioning—could also be added to this list (e.g., Wendt, 1994).

Thus, research regarding organizational culture is often quite different from traditional social science research. The researcher usually uses qualitative methods of observation, including participant observation, nonparticipant observation, archival analysis, and interviews. The researcher then tries to gain an understanding of the culture that is grounded in these local and detailed observations. Finally, the researcher shares this cultural understanding with readers through tales that reflect the complex, emergent, and interactional performance of a particular organizational culture.

Summary

This chapter has presented approaches that view organizations and communication through the lens of a cultural metaphor. We began by considering two books about business practices that popularized the notion of "organizational culture". These

books—Corporate Cultures by Deal and Kennedy and In Search of Excellence by Peters and Waterman—conceptualize culture as a "thing" that belongs to an organization. In this view, having the "right" organizational culture is a prescription for success.

This prescriptive view of culture, however, has been largely rejected by academics. Instead, scholars now take an approach that emphasizes the description and understanding of culture. This approach emphasizes that cultures are very complex, are socially constructed through the communicative interaction of organizational members, are composed of fragmented subcultural units, and may be fraught with ambiguity.

We then considered an approach developed by Schein that emphasizes the emergent and complex nature of culture. Specifically, Schein argues that cultures can be best conceptualized as having three levels: behaviors and artifacts, espoused organizational values, and takenfor-granted assumptions about how the world works. An example of a contemporary organizational culture—the high reliability culture— was presented to illustrate the intersection of assumptions, values, and behaviors.

Finally, we looked at the research methods used by researchers of organizational culture. We noted that cultural investigators—ethnographers—typically use qualitative methods to build a grounded theory that enhances cultural understanding. Research results are then communicated to the audience through the telling of cultural tales.

Discussion Questions

- Why is "organizational culture" such a powerful concept for both practicing managers and those who want to have insight into organizational functioning? In what ways does this metaphor for organizing provide a better (or at least different) lens for looking at organizations than the metaphors we've considered in previous chapters of this book?
- What are the key differences between prescriptive and descriptive approaches to culture? Is Schein's model of organizational culture a descriptive model or a prescriptive model?
- Think about an organization you know well. This could be a workplace, a church, or perhaps the school you attend. What would you look for in developing a "cultural profile" of this organization? How would you link your observations about this organization with conclusions about the culture? And what specific conclusions would you draw?

CASE STUDY

The Cultural Tale of Two Shuttles

The first space shuttle flight occurred on February 18, 1977, with the launch of Enterprise. It was a proud day for NASA and the beginning of a new age in space exploration. Less than nine years later, on January 28, 1986, the nation was stunned when the space shuttle Challenger disintegrated seventy-three seconds after launch. All seven crew members perished. The technical explanation for this disaster was the "O-ring" problem—a crucial shuttle component was compromised by the cold weather on that launch day. Subsequently, it became clear that there were voices speaking against the launch because of worries about the O-ring problem. However, there were pressures to launch and a belief in the infallibility of the decision-making process. Thus, the voices speaking against launch were silenced.

During the late 1980s and 1990s, there were a plethora of studies considering the Challenger disaster, and many pointed to the organizational culture at NASA as a crucial contributing factor leading to the launch decision (McCurdy, 1992). For example, in 1990, the U.S. government issued the "Augustine Report" on the future of the U.S. space program (U.S. Advisory Committee, 1990). This report was built largely on the premise that organizational culture directly contributes to organizational performance. The report notes that "the most fundamental ingredient of a successful space program … is the culture or work environment in which it is conducted" (U.S. Advisory Committee: 16). This committee also worked from the assumption that the culture at an organization like NASA needs to be fundamentally different from that at many organizations. NASA works with the most complex of technologies, and the stakes are incredibly high. As McCurdy notes, "errors that might be forgotten in other government programs can produce in NASA a myopic space telescope or an exploding space shuttle" (McCurdy, 1992: 190). Given these assumptions, the report pointed to many specific aspects of organizational culture at NASA and made recommendations regarding cultural beliefs and assumptions that should characterize a successful space program. These include the beliefs that:

- The success of a mission should take precedence over cost and deadlines. Mission success is more important than the role of any individual or group.
- Space flight requires open communication in which individuals are encouraged to report on problems or anomalies. Issues need to be "put on the table" for consideration.
- The space program cannot succeed in an environment where "avoiding failure" is seen as an important goal. Instead, the risky nature of the operation must be acknowledged.
- The space program should not get "spread too thin" by working simultaneously on different projects, such as flight, research and development, and design. "Either operations dominates to the detriment of research and development, or employees working on new projects neglect operations" (McCurdy, 1992: 190).

NASA seemed to be following these "cultural guidelines" in the 1990s. The first "post-Challenger" mission occurred on September 29, 1988, with the launch of Discovery. The one hundredth shuttle mission occurred on October 11, 2000. However, as we all know, there was yet another tale of shuttle disaster to be written. On February 1, 2003, the space shuttle Columbia disintegrated during re-entry. Pieces of the shuttle fell over eastern Texas, and all seven crew members died. The sense of déjà vu was mournful and unavoidable. And the reports dissecting this disaster came quickly.

Of course, a different technical problem led to the Columbia disaster. In this case, a piece of foam fell off during launch and ripped a hole in the left wing. During re-entry, this allowed superheated gases to enter the wing interior, and the wing frame melted. But were the underlying cultural traits that led to the Columbia disaster similar to the ones that doomed Challenger? Sadly, the Columbia Accident Investigation Board concluded that the cultural themes of the two tales were much the same. Indeed, "the board's final report said that NASA had done little to improve shuttle safety since it lost the shuttle Challenger in 1986" ("Concerns Raised That Changes in NASA Won't Last," 2003). This report listed specific cultural traits that contributed to the Columbia disaster, including:

- Reliance on past success as a substitute for sound engineering practices
- Organizational barriers that prevented effective communication of critical safety information and stifled professional differences of opinion
- The evolution of an informal chain of command of decision making that operated outside the organization's rules

So, had NASA learned at all from the Challenger disaster? Had the organization learned and just fallen back into old bad cultural habits? The chairman of the investigation board, Harold Gehman Jr., thought that this was possible. He noted, "Over a period of a year or two, the natural tendency of all bureaucracy, not just NASA, to migrate away from that diligent attitude is a great concern to the board because the history of NASA indicates that they have done it before" ("Concerns Raised," 2003).

Perhaps the most poignant comment during this time period came from Jonathan Clark, a NASA flight surgeon whose wife, Laurel Clark, died in the Columbia disaster: "I wasn't here during the Challenger disaster but I certainly talked to a lot of people who were. And, yes, there were similarities, as Diane Vaughn pointed out earlier in her book [The Challenger Launch Decision, 1996]. You could almost erase the O-Ring problem and put in the tile shedding and put 'Columbia' instead of 'Challenger'" ("Columbia Spouse: Report a Prescription for Change," 2003).

Fourteen brave Americans lost. The separate tales of two destroyed space shuttles linked by one organizational culture. The first post-Columbia launch occurred on July 25, 2005, and the final shuttle launch is slated for around the time this book is published: February 2011. Let's hope that as NASA completes this important period of its history and moves forward that it heeds Jonathan Clark's advice: "I think we are really going to have to look very carefully at what lessons we didn't learn from Challenger and make sure we absolutely learn them this time" ("Columbia Spouse," 2003).

CASE ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

1. What factors in NASA's culture contributed to the Challenger and Columbia shuttle disasters? Using Schein's "onion model" of culture, is it possible to show how basic assumptions are linked to beliefs and values and then to potentially fateful behaviors?
2. Cultural change was obviously difficult at NASA. Can you think of specific things that could have been done to make cultural changes more lasting or more effective?
3. Are there particular aspects of NASA that might make cultural change particularly challenging? Are bureaucracies particularly susceptible to these difficulties of cultural change? How does the concept of a "high reliability culture" contribute to the challenges facing NASA throughout the years?