On Reading Lines in Shifting Sands:

making organisational culture relevant

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

of

The Australian National University

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Declaration

I, Garth Murray Britton, hereby declare that, except where otherwise acknowledged in the customary manner, and to the best of my knowledge and belief, this work is my own, and has not been submitted for a higher degree at any other university or institution.

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Garth Murray Britton

Acknowledgment

The list of those to be thanked in producing this dissertation would necessarily be too long to reasonably include in it, and I will therefore not try to be exhaustive. However, in addition to the acknowledgements made to former colleagues and associates and to those who participated in the fieldwork described in the pages which follow, I would like to specifically highlight at this point my gratitude to my supervisors, and particularly my Principal supervisor, for their support and guidance during this research. The challenges that a project like this presents for a rather more than mature-aged student with little academic background in the previous 25 years are of a very different kind to those usually encountered by either student or supervisor, and I am grateful, in addition to the professional guidance I received, for the good humour, common-sense, and flexibility that has been shown me as I have progressed through it.

Of course, any journey as long and intense as the one which has led me here is at least as demanding on the family as the voyager. There is very little I can say which recognises sufficiently how much I have valued their ongoing support and understanding – and their ability to achieve their own successes despite my sometimes distracted presence (or absence). Thanks isn't enough – but it is very much meant!

Abstract

Despite the ubiquity of the term 'organisational culture' in both popular and scholarly management literature, it remains an ambiguous concept, whose practical application is recognised as being far from universally successful. Models which seem to be preferred by practitioners are often criticised as being static or mechanistic, while more dynamic scholarly approaches tend to discount the possibility of deliberately influencing organisations at the cultural level. This dissertation, instead of focussing on culture as some sort of objective or unchanging attribute of an organisation, treats it as a phenomenon emerging from social interaction and individual sense-making. It draws on, and extends, George Kelly's Personal Construct Psychology to build a framework for understanding the production of meaning by individuals in their social context, and how this contributes to the establishment of the collective boundaries between which cultural effects are observed. This framework is applied to the case of a business school attached to a large university, which is first absorbed into its Commerce Faculty, and then dissolved into a new Department, as the overall university structure is modified. Grounded Theory methodology is used to develop an approach to the description of the cultural interaction and changes that occur, and to generate theory that goes some way to explaining how and why they do. The theory gives insight into how latent cultural distinctions become, or are made, salient and the different means by which divisions may be resolved or superseded, sometimes resulting in conflict. Implications are explored for the management of organisations undergoing change, particularly where this involves merging or restructuring organisational units, and for the training and development of managers who are to be involved in such activities.

At a theoretical level, building on a constructivist and processual ontological base, the dissertation makes contributions to the understanding of behaviour in organisations and draws on pragmatic epistemologies such as those advanced by George Herbert Mead. It brings concepts from psychology, sociology and management disciplines to bear on the problem of cultural interaction, and suggests that integrating them in this way may enhance their value in this context.

By focussing on culture as a phenomenon produced at the interface of collective constructions, the dissertation proposes that it be viewed as fundamentally dynamic – once eloquently described as 'multiple cross-cutting contexts' – but, nevertheless, explains how it may be recognised more through its apparent intractability than its

fluidity. Whilst rejecting managerialist approaches which would suggest that culture and, through it, people, can be manipulated at will to reliably produce desired effects, the dissertation suggests ways in which insight into cultural interactions might be generated for those who are participating in them, and options developed to influence these interactions that might otherwise not have been available. It therefore has potentially valuable implications for management practice.

A Note about the Author

I embarked on this research with a practical rather than academic intent, from the standpoint of a long time manager. Of Australian origin, I have spent most of the last 20 years working as a manager in a large Swiss multi-national company, initially in marketing, then in general management positions with both national and international scope. During this time, I have lived in Switzerland, Thailand, Malaysia, Taiwan, and France, worked extensively throughout Asia, Europe and the Middle East, and been involved in, and in some cases responsible for, several acquisition projects and change initiatives. This background, together with the fact that my undergraduate degree was in Linguistics and Anthropology, probably goes some way to explaining my interest in cultural and cross-cultural phenomena, and my belief in the central importance of language and communication.

However, much more importantly, my experience of international management has informed my position in countless ways throughout this work, even where I have not been able to make direct reference to it. Certainly, having lived the ambiguities and frustrations of managing across cultures, and making most of the mistakes and some of the successes possible along the way, has made me rather sceptical of management dogma, whether it originates in academia or the boardroom, a perspective which I am sure can be detected in the following pages. I do not in any sense, however, intend this scepticism to be read as criticism of the countless people with whom I have worked, or the organisations we belonged to. On the contrary, it has been my privilege to work with and learn from colleagues who have displayed the highest standards of professionalism and ethics, in a corporate environment which demanded nothing less.

If I am critical of anything in what follows, it is of judgements made from a safe distance, where time and selective attention have been able to work their clarifying magic. Ultimately, my greatest satisfaction will be if this work helps people who do not have that luxury, who must make the best of mess and mayhem, to make a little more sense out of it.

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