Chapter I
Organizational Culture and the Management of Organizational Memory

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes how organizational culture is both a “vessel” for preserving organizational memory and a force that conditions the way organizational memory is managed by other means. A detailed breakdown of the specific elements of organizational culture is conducted in order to describe this dual relationship. It is argued that the goal of managers should be the creation of a learning-oriented culture while avoiding the politicization of culture. Given that culture can not be manipulated directly, managers need to develop a sophisticated repertoire of leadership skills and a keen sense for socio-psychological dynamics. Specific advice on this count is offered at various points.

INTRODUCTION

More and more managers are using the language of organizational culture and corporate culture. It is not difficult to imagine why. Many managers want to know how people come to share perceptions, interpretations, and attitudes, as well as how workplace symbolism shapes the way people feel and act. The goal may not be conformity per se, as there are countless benefits to intellectual diversity. Nonetheless, there is a widespread belief that certain types of intellectual commonality can reduce unproductive conflict, promote collaboration, and align work towards a single purpose—all without the need for overbearing supervision. There is also something about cultural pride that can lift the heart and inspire the mind to better serve the common good. Organizational culture is a potentially powerful force.

That potential goes largely unrealized. It is partly due to the non-instrumental nature of culture. An organization’s culture can not be
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manipulated directly, as a manager might allocate resources or dictate a course of action. Culture is influenced indirectly and evolves erratically over time. The deliberate influencing of culture requires a sophisticated repertoire of leadership skills and a keen sense for socio-psychological dynamics. Organizational culture also goes largely untapped because of its multidimensional nature. When we speak about culture, we are actually referring to several distinct things: from the shared principles people espouse to the open secrets people fain ignorance of; from fickle fads and fashions to enduring taboos and norms; from arduous rites of passage to the status symbols of power; the list goes on. This complexity is not widely recognized. Despite four decades of scholarship on organizational culture, the term is used in countless ways, usually without precise meaning. In the workplace, wherever conceptual laxity and empty buzzwords reign, sloppy thinking and cynicism are sure to prevail. Much needs to be done to rehabilitate the concept for general consumption.

Knowledge managers have a big stake in this rehabilitation. Organizational culture relates to the management of organizational memory in two ways. First, organizational culture is a means by which meaning is transmitted over time within a workplace. Workers pass down lessons through oral histories. Knowledge is embedded in collective work habits. The shared assumptions and mental models that evolve within a collective frame the way work is understood and decisions are made. These are all examples of how organizational culture is a “vessel” that contains ideas and experiences from the past. Second, organizational culture influences the way information and knowledge is shared and preserved by other means. For example, the bonds of trust formed within a workplace affect how candid and direct workers dare to be. Social boundaries, such as those which surround cliques, can undermine the flow of information. Values and norms can affect people’s willingness to reflect on work and codify worthwhile lessons. These examples show how culture is part of the work environment that conditions the way people think and act.

This chapter will explore the complexities of how organizational culture and organizational memory intertwine. This includes a discussion of the cultural features that help or harm the management of memory. One particular set of features is helpful: a learning-oriented culture of candor, constructive debate, joint reflection, respect for the past, and habitual knowledge sharing and preservation. A very different set of cultural features is harmful: a politicized culture of internecine conflict, territoriality, fad surfing, and sharky, egoistic careerism. What can a manager do to cultivate the good and weed-out the bad? The chapter will provide answers to that question at various points. Some comments about the future will round-out the discussion.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

If you ask a sample of managers about what they think “organizational culture” means, two typical responses will emerge. The first response is the notion of culture as a unified social and ideological orientation. For example, the managers may talk about an organization as having a “bureaucratic culture” or an “entrepreneurial culture.” They are speaking metaphorically about an organization as having a general attitude, disposition, or “personality.” The culture may be described as “strong” or “weak” (i.e., more or less coherent, evident, and changeable) but, other than that, any specific features will likely be described in vague, impressionistic terms. The second typical response is the notion of culture as a social milieu or climate. This can include any aspect of the social and physical context that influences the way people feel and think about their workplace. The culture may be described in terms of the general “currents” (or other environmental metaphor) that push and pull individuals in particular directions.
or lead them to think in particular ways. Managers may also speak about the aesthetics, acoustics, and frenetics of an organization—those things which give the place a palpable “vibe.”

Uncoincidently, both notions of organizational culture have analogues within the management literature. Most pop management and leadership books that address organizational culture will describe it as a unified orientation or sense of “we-ness” (collective identity and social cohesion). This literature evolved with the rise of the pop genre in the 1980s, although there is a scholarly variant that dates back to the late 1960s. In contrast, the organizational climate literature was launched in the late 1930s, specifically Lewin et al. (1939). Historically, this literature has been broader in scope and more quantitative. Today, the notions of organizational climate and organizational culture tend to be used interchangeably in management parlance, with climate used less. The term “climate” is most often invoked by authors looking specifically at workplace conditions and social threats (e.g., a “climate of fear and intimidation” and a “climate of hostility and intolerance”).

These depictions of organizational culture are problematic for several reasons. The most obvious problem is the mixing of metaphors, a sure sign of the lack of theoretical clarity. The bigger problem is the heavy reliance on a purely metaphorical characterization in the first place. If organizations only have cultures in a vague, metaphorical sense, then it is difficult to make precise and verifiable claims about the role of symbolism and attributed meaning in the workplace. Yet organizations, like other types of long-standing social collective, can have cultures in the literal sense. When resorting to metaphor, it is also difficult to determine where organizational culture begins and ends. Many scholars and practitioners have treated culture as potentially anything within the organization. Any concept that means potentially anything is just not useful as a concept.

These frustrations led Andrew Pettigrew (1979) and several followers (notably: Lundberg, 1990; Hatch, 1993 and 2004; Martin, 2002) to unpack the concept of organizational culture and itemize the component elements. This chapter builds on these efforts with the aim of creating a nearly comprehensive list. This is important because it allows us to see how specific aspects of organizational memory relate to specific elements of organizational culture. Before that can be done, it is necessary to say a few words about selection criteria while stipulating a definition.

An organizational culture signals to workers what is acceptable, what is worthwhile, and what makes sense. These signals are acquired gradually as a person learns from older hands and gains a sense of membership in a collective—a process of acculturation. Lundberg (1990) best describes the defining features of an organizational culture:

**Organisational culture is:** a shared, common frame of reference, i.e. it is largely taken for granted and is shared by some significant portion of members; acquired and governs, i.e. it is socially learned and transmitted by members and provides them with rules for their organizational behaviour; a common psychology, i.e. it denotes the organisation’s uniqueness and contributes to its identity; enduring over time, i.e. it can be found in any fairly stable social unit of any size, as long as it has a reasonable history; symbolic, i.e. it is manifested in observables such as language, behaviour and things to which are attributed meanings; at its core, typically invisible and determinant, i.e. it is ultimately comprised of a configuration of deeply buried values and assumptions; is modifiable, but not easily so. (p.19, emphasis added)

It follows that culture does not include social structures but is about the shared symbolic and acquired-psychological aspects of the workplace (to draw from a traditional sociological distinction between social structures and belief systems). A culture does not have to be shared by everyone. Indeed, many workplaces contain distinctive
subcultures within internal groups and in rare cases these may actually oppose the dominant culture (contracultures). Not every organization will have a fully fledged culture or even a culture at all. Some time must pass and shared experience accumulate before a culture coalesces within a collective.

The component elements of organizational culture are listed in Figure 1 (Stoyko, 2009). The elements are grouped into three categories: (1) ideas and attitudes, (2) behaviors, and (3) object orientations. The inclusion of physical objects might be considered controversial at first blush. What is being referred to here, however, is only the socially constructed perceptions of the physical work environment. For example, the arrangement of the physical work environment into cubicles and offices is not an aspect of culture, although it is a design decision that is often influenced by organizational culture. In contrast, there is a social status associated with having an office and a higher status associated with coveted office space. This social status, along with other widely recognized meanings attributed to workspaces, is an aspect of culture.

Think of organizational culture as an iceberg with most of it unseen because it sits below the surface of the water. The visible part—the peak jutting out of the water—includes language, fashion, lore, vision, and group routines. The part around the waterline that takes effort to see but is nonetheless observable includes spirits, aspira-

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**Figure 1. Elements of organizational culture**

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<tr>
<th>IDEAS &amp; ATTITUDES</th>
<th>Social Regulation (manners/social graces, norms and taboos; i.e., the informal “rules of the game”)</th>
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<tr>
<td>IDEAS &amp; ATTITUDES</td>
<td>Observance of the Past (customs, traditions, rituals, rites of passage)</td>
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<td>Informal Group Routines and Habits (including embedded skills)</td>
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<td>Group Dynamics (informal group boundaries, cliques, alliances, informal roles, social and group status)</td>
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<td>Widely Recognized Symbolic Meaning Associated with Artifacts (notably status symbols)</td>
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<td>Atmosphere created by Physical Work Environment</td>
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tions, stable opinions, and preferences. The rest composes the largest portion of the iceberg, with the deep center of buoyancy being the values, assumptions, principles, and mental models. The visible is most readily diagnosable. The deep and invisible elements are the most difficult to detect and change because they are the most strongly embraced. They influence thinking in ways that are not always conscious and straightforward. Identifying them may require collective reflection exercises involving probative questioning, although the analytically astute observer with some critical distance may be able to surmise their content after careful study. Culture is knowable because of its shared nature but a trained eye is crucial.

This description puts paid to the myth that organizational culture can be manipulated directly in an instrumental fashion. Culture can be changed quickly and decisively, but only insofar as any aspect of an organization can be vandalized by the powerful in short order. For example, group bonds of trust form after a long track-record of honesty, openness, consistency, mutual consideration, and reciprocity. Yet these bonds can be broken by a quick succession of betrayals by a cadre of managers. Likewise, management interventions that lead to high levels of employee turnover may cause a culture to even lose deeply held values and principles in a relatively short span of time. Many advocates and demonstrators of core values may flee and their cherished values supplanted by those of newcomers—a situation that often happens during mergers or other major reorganizations. The manager’s introductory lesson to organizational culture is to first do no harm, especially if that manager happens to parachute in from outside of the organization.

How does a manager develop the “antenna” required to properly diagnose the state of an organization’s culture? It starts with an active presence in the workplace and a commitment to earnest conversational exchange with others. Many managers remain aloof because they lack a basic situational awareness and access to “street level” cultural signals. Situational awareness includes attention to socio-psychological details (related to interpersonal and group dynamics), including the nuances and subtleties of communication and attention. This is helped greatly by thinking in terms of the component elements of culture outlined here. More will be said about each element and the leadership interventions that are beneficial. For the moment, it is sufficient to acknowledge the diagnostic complexities involved.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AS VESSEL OF MEMORY

In a society, culture tells people who they are and where they have been, including the seminal ideas that have moved the society forward. An organizational culture serves much the same purpose as a “vessel” of collective memory. Organizational culture is a roll-up of the experiences, observations, formative events, preferences, and lessons over time. Those things that do not resonate with the larger population and people in positions of persuasive authority are usually filtered out. Ultimately, the fragments that remain are molded into something coherent that most members can relate to (consciously and unconsciously). This coherence has its own inertia, so that new experiences and lessons are compared and judged according to what has come before. Culture is a living memory.

Yet, as this description implies, this memory is not entirely composed of knowledge (defined as semantic understanding and how-to), information (declarative statements), and “wisdom” (axiomatic statements). This makes a portion of organizational culture less interesting to knowledge managers who are focused on culture as a vessel of useful meaning from the past. Things such as tastes, preferences, and group bonds do not generally offer knowledge preservation as such.
Organizational memory embedded in culture is not necessarily accurate given that the filtering process is highly fallible. Organizational cultures that generously accommodate divergent ideas or place a high value on novelty are less censorious. However, in most organizational cultures, valuable knowledge will likely be filtered out if it is deemed heterodox: ahead of its time, behind the times, beside the point, of dubious worth, contrarian, eccentric, et cetera. These are labels that are normally attached to things which do not conform to deeply held assumptions, values, principles, and mental models (the cultural core). Indeed, societal cultures throughout history have inspired institutional resistance to innovative artists, discoverers, and philosophers who were then forced to toil in obscurity unless they were lucky enough to find a powerful sponsor and champion. When looking at the enduring lessons found in organizational myths and oral histories, for example, the revisions, omissions, and erosions ought to be taken into careful consideration.

An organization’s memory is knowledge, information, and experience that can be brought to bear on the present, although that use may not necessarily bring about improvement (Stein & Zwass, 1995, p. 89). An uncritical over-reliance on past knowledge can make it difficult for organizations to adapt to changing circumstances. For example, organizational memories may be bad if they “lead to bias against necessary change, conformist tendencies, an unhealthy fixation on past mistakes, and a reluctance to consider worthwhile ideas from elsewhere.” (Stoyko and Fang, 2007, p. 12) Organizational memory is not a substitute for intelligence, it merely serves intelligent thinking (Spender, 1996).

A robust organizational memory is one in which knowledge is mirrored in many places throughout the organization (Morgan, 1996, pp. 92-106). If a piece of knowledge is lost because, for instance, a document is destroyed, then it still exists elsewhere in the organization and a good document management system will retrieve it with relatively little fuss. Given that cultural knowledge is necessarily shared, it is mirrored in many places within an organization, making it a particularly durable form of memory. Thus, although culture is a partial and highly fallible form of organizational memory, one advantage is durability. Sometimes this durability may only be in the forensic sense; that is, if an organizational culture erodes significantly after several major downsizing and employee defections, as an example, then valuable knowledge may be pieced together by interviewing experienced employees who continue to serve as custodians of old stories, linguistic conventions, animating concepts, and such. Organizational memory management is often a form of triage and retrieval (Delong, 2004).

Which elements of organizational culture can act as a “vessel” of useful knowledge and information? The rest of the section revisits Figure 1 to answer that question.

The most obvious “vessel” is common knowledge, or semantic understanding and how-to understanding that are shared by a broad cross-section of employees. Semantic understanding is insights about ideas, objects, and events, as well as how they operate (Sparrow, 1998). How-to understanding is insights about the way things are accomplished, including tacit feel, skills, and unconscious interpretations (Ibid). Common knowledge can have a short shelf-life because it is only useful for the duration of a project, tenure of a governing executive, or the existence of a strategy. This type of common knowledge can not be said to be imbedded in culture. It becomes part of the culture as it is actively passed along to new employees, through formal teaching (e.g., orientation sessions, mentorship relations, and on-the-job training) or informal and spontaneous knowledge sharing. This knowledge sometimes comes in the form of “the tricks of the trade”; that is, proven rules-of-thumb that are circulated by members of occupational and professional groups throughout an organization.
Workplace lore includes several types of accounts of the past which bestow useful lessons. Oral histories and stories—also called myths or legends if they achieve a reverence and become highly stylized—can convey knowledge in a way that is easy to relate to and retell. As Seely Brown and Duguid (2000) explain:

Stories are good at presenting things sequentially (this happened, then that). They are also good for presenting them causally (this happened because of that). Thus stories are a powerful means to understand what happened (the sequence of events) and why (the causes and effects of those events) ... More generally, people tell stories to try to make diverse information cohere ... Stories, moreover, convey not only specific information but also general principles. These principles can then be applied to particular situations, in different times and places. (pp. 106-107)

This powerful mechanism of knowledge transfer also comes with dangers. Distortions occur when shoehorning information into the story format, which requires protagonists, plot, episodes, and a dénouement. These distortions include adding extra drama, exaggerating claims, embellishing to cover-up gaps in knowledge, abandoning information that does not fit with the story-line, simplifying motives, and resorting to simplistic (mono-causal) explanations. Moreover, the anecdotal nature of evidence in stories can also lead to empirical errors. As Kida (2006) points out, statistical evidence is often a better basis for decision-making, yet statistics are routinely ignored because they tend to be dry and technically complex, whereas stories can be enjoyable and engage the imagination (p. 17).

Shared assumptions, core beliefs, and mindsets contain information and knowledge, as well as frame the way people think about new knowledge. This includes an orientation towards the world in general (ideology, world view, and philosophy), a particular domain of knowledge (issue orientation and policy disposition), and a practical topic (mental model, theory, and classification scheme). When management pundits talk about the dangers posed by past success, they are referring to the ways in which previous methods of solving problems and thinking about issues become unquestionable despite outliving their usefulness. When these operate at the level of assumptions, belief, or mindset, they are more difficult to dislodge. Often, workers will disregard new information and knowledge that does not correspond to an existing mindset (confirmation bias) or jump to conclusions without considering new information at all (pre-mature cognitive commitment). For the manager, the goal is to help others avoid automatic ways of thinking and look at past contributions as simply one source of insight instead of embracing a singular perspective. This is the promotion of mindfulness, which involves being more conscious of cultural “scripts”, avoiding false barriers to thinking, paying greater attention to context, and being open to new categories and points-of-view (Langer, 1990, pp. 9-18; Van Hecke, 2007, pp. 133-143).

Language is a conveyor of knowledge and a framer of thinking, although linguists dispute the specific mechanisms at play. The way concepts are defined and labeled, plus the use of metaphors and catch-phrases, help people understand various subjects. Even the simple act of labeling is a deliberate singling-out of something for special consideration. This can be especially helpful as precise terminology and insightful coinages becomes widely used and, in so doing, help others better understand complicated phenomena. The coinage or adoption of new terms and metaphors can also help leaders persuade in subtle but lasting ways. There is a danger when buzzwords, loaded terms, and clichés are used habitually as a substitute for rigorous thinking. Indeed, the move towards passive sentence structures and latinate diction in English-speaking workplaces is arguably a sign of organizational cultures that discourage confrontational debate and encourage
As Fritz Machlup (1962) observes, knowledge can be embedded in work processes. This can include informal, social patterns of work behavior, such as rites and rituals, as well as informal group routines, habits, and dynamics. Ideas about how best to do things often spread, becoming routine or habitual work practices. These cultural manifestations are rarely sanctioned officially, although they can form part of an “unwritten curriculum” as experienced workers teach less experienced ones. In some cases, these practices can be undesirable habits that allow people to shirk responsibilities or do the minimal requirements (satisfice). Organizations with poor labor relations often give rise to peer pressure among classes of workers that ensure these habits persist as part of the culture.

As this overview stresses, organizational culture can be a useful yet imperfect “vessel” of organizational memory. The shortcoming is not that knowledge, information, and experience from the past are partial. Filtering is a necessary part of culture and other parts of organizational activity. However, this filtering is biased by the specific medium (to obliquely paraphrase Marshall McLuhan) and can potentially distract attention from sources of better, new knowledge. Managers ought to keep these biases in mind to achieve the critical distance necessary to identify and diagnose the state of organizational memory.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AS CONDITIONER OF MEMORY

Nancy Dixon (2000) claims that one of the big misconceptions of knowledge management is that organizational culture must change before widespread knowledge transfer can occur (pp. 2-6). That is certainly true for all but the most poisoned workplaces. Dixon is speaking about the widespread misconception that culture must change as a prerequisite for any kind of effective organizational change. Yet it is equally true that technological and organizational systems can not be implemented in a purely asocial way if they are to be successful. Knowledge management techniques designed to preserve organizational memory—from the more technological, such as electronic document repositories, to the more social, such as communities of practice—are inherently socio-technical systems. The technologies and formal procedures require users (as individuals and groups) to learn and adapt to some degree. Conversely, if a technology is to avoid languishing underutilized, it has to be designed and implemented in a way that accommodates individual proclivities and social circumstances. Culture plays a role on both sides of this equation.

Even if a supportive organizational culture is not strictly a prerequisite for the systematization of knowledge transfer, there are several elements of culture that act as obstacles. Identifying and coping with these obstacles is a determinant of success. Therefore, it is useful to revisit Figure 1 and look at how culture plays a role in efforts to manage organizational memory.

Along the way, the ideal features of an organizational culture will emerge. Taken as a whole, this culture can be thought of as a learning-oriented or a learning-supportive organizational culture. A few disclaimers are in order. Organizations rarely have monolithic cultures that can be aptly described with a tidy label. It is also a mistake to assume that there is only one type of organizational culture that is conducive to the effective management of organizational memory. Finally, as Rozenzweig (2007) points out, research on the cultural attributes that lead to success tend to be biased by the halo effect: respondents to surveys and interviews tend to uncritically perceive organizational cultures as having desirable attributes if they also think that the organization is successful. That said, it is still possible to pro-
vide constructive insights into beneficial cultural characteristics.

Flows of information and knowledge can be undermined by organizational boundaries. Not enough attention is accorded to informal group boundaries that form around cliques, alliances, and occupational groups. These groups regulate access to insider information and knowledge, as well as determine who gets to be an insider. They are often difficult to spot until patterns of communication, networking, and friendship are observed over time, or until members of a subgroup tip their hand and overtly acknowledge their social status and allegiances. A variety of dynamics can also develop between groups, such as when members of one informal group or alliance become hostile towards another group. This type of behavior also poses the risk of group-think, or the tendency of an isolated group of individuals to repeatedly reaffirm prevailing opinions without benefiting from corrective outsider perspectives.

On a related note, a great deal of scholarship has taken place on the relationship between bonds of trust and the sharing of information (e.g. Al-Alawi et al., 2007). As mentioned, bonds of trust form as members of a group behave with honesty, forthrightness, consistency, mutual consideration, and reciprocity. These bonds do not have to form between each pair of individuals in a workplace in order for a workplace to be considered to have high levels of trust. In most cases, what employees look at are the relationships that have built-up between themselves (and those in similar circumstances) and supervisors. People want to be treated with due regard and fairness. They also want the psychological safety to be able to speak candidly, forthrightly, and authentically without fear of reprisals if they say something that others disagree with or object to. Thus, information and knowledge is shared most (and hoarded least) when the prevailing culture gives people the sense that they are in a “safe space” for social interaction. Information and knowledge will be better scrutinized to ensure quality and relevance when people are able to critique openly and have acquired the social graces to do so constructively and considerately.

Group norms and taboos can also influence information sharing. In some organizational cultures, the failure to share vital information can result in snubs, rebukes, sarcastic jabs, ostracism, or other social sanctions. Yet in other organizational cultures, the sharing of information to the wrong people (or to right people in the wrong order) may result in similar sanctions. In either case, norms dictate what is acceptable and expected of people. These are the informal “rules of the game” that regulate behavior. These norms can also encourage collaboration. For example, the Internet-search firm Google is noteworthy for developing norms that encourage employees to help others solve problems when a general request for aid is circulated via email or instant-messaging system. Those who are seen as helping the most—repeatedly sharing their expertise on-the-fly with seemingly little effort—are seen as heroes, whereas those with little to contribute are often made to feel guilty. This has little to do with official job requirements. There is no written rule. It is the organic development of reciprocal expectations within a highly cohesive and pressure-filled workplace. It comes with a downside—personal stress, guilt, workload, and burnout—but nonetheless supports the reapplication of existing knowledge and expertise.

Group spirits and collective identity can go a long way towards encouraging knowledge sharing and preservation activities. As people see themselves as members of a larger collective—one in which they recognize their own personal identities and aspirations as reflected—they are more willing to expend discretionary effort on memory management tasks (e.g., codifying what they know). Indeed, these organizational citizenship behaviors tend to be more prevalent in organizations with higher levels of morale, camaraderie, and job satisfaction (and are influenced by non-cultural factors, such as the nature of job tasks).
Without a prevailing cultural sense of the common good, people have less intrinsic motivation and enthusiasm for preserving the shared history of the organization. It is difficult for a worker to see the point of expending the extra effort. Moreover, organizational cultures with clear visions and aspirations—those that are widely held instead of those which are simply written down after a contrived group exercise—are more likely to develop a coherent identity.

As Podsakoff et al. (2000) point out, there are a number of different types of organizational citizenship behavior (pp. 516-526), some of which have a more obvious relationship to knowledge sharing and preservation. When an organization’s knowledge management system requires extra work, then “sportsmanship” behaviors (tolerance of inconveniences and impositions) and organization compliance behaviors (obedience to rules, procedures, and protocols) help ensure follow-through. As mentioned, helping behaviors and “civic virtue” (commitment in the organization as a whole) are important for voluntary and impromptu memory management. Most importantly, self-development behaviors include an interest in continually updating knowledge and skills, which is a key mechanism by which shared knowledge is renewed and stewarded over time. All told, the combination of the availability of organizational learning mechanisms (e.g. formal systems for scanning, storing, and disseminating information) and a supportive learning culture play a significant role in promoting these behaviors (Somech and Drach-Zahavy, 2004, p. 293).

Self-centered work-flows and work-styles are major barriers to knowledge sharing. As lone workers do their jobs in isolation, pockets of knowledge build up that escape the notice of colleagues and remain vulnerable to loss. Interdependence and ongoing sharing are instrumental to mirroring knowledge and reducing that vulnerability. These work-flows and styles are mostly a function of job design, the information technology infrastructure, and the design of formal procedures. These are structural, not cultural, aspects of the workplace. Yet informal group work routines and habits can help or harm knowledge sharing regardless of the structural amenities in place. Indeed, self-centered work-flows and styles can be an undesirable “cultural residue” from a previous reliance on highly discrete and specialized job arrangements. Such situations are further reinforced if the culture lacks teamwork values (e.g., an acknowledgment of the mutual benefits of multidisciplinary or multifunction collaboration) and principles (e.g., a clear understanding how credit is to be shared in a team to preserve fairness). Moreover, collaborative values improve uptake of knowledge management technologies, although the use of technologies can also be uneven because of the influence of local subcultures (Alavi et al., 2006: 216-217).

Reflecting on both recent experience and the distant past have a basis in group attitudes and informal habits. A general respect for the organization’s past and traditions, as well as the contribution of experienced colleagues, should be encouraged so long as it does not lead to a hidebound focus and uncritical acceptance of received ideas. The ability to routinize informal reflection on experience and then sharing the lessons learned is a source of organizational memory. Indeed, studies of after-action reviews—brief postmortems for teams focused on answering a battery of questions that are essential for drawing constructive lessons—have shown that they are particularly effective when they pass from being formal requirements to informal habits.

This overview has described many of the cultural dynamics that shape the management of organizational memory. The main theme of this overview is that learning-oriented cultural elements are particularly beneficial. However, management is as much about mitigating the bad as fostering the good. This leads us to a discussion of the more severe ways organizational culture can undermine memory management.
THE POLITICIZED ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

When most of us think about organizational politics, we usually think of the discord caused by highly ambitious, conniving, and unscrupulous villains—the cynical Machiavellis of the world of work. The truth is that all workers regularly engage in political behaviors, either consciously or unconsciously. These are surreptitious actions that benefit an individual at the expense of colleagues or the general welfare of the organization. Manipulative interpretations (spin) of the meaning of information and knowledge are widespread, as are the organizational pressures to “sell” messages with trickery. This happens in service of either personal self-interest, the interests of a work unit, or an ideology. Indeed, very little information and knowledge that exists in the workplace can be considered politically neutral. Most people are not accomplished “office politicians” but are nonetheless drawn into political struggles on a regular basis.

Organizational culture plays a central role in regulating and encouraging political behavior. Many politically manipulated meanings are embedded in the language and knowledge contained within a culture. Culture determines which political moves raise eyebrows and which are waved-off as “par for the course.” Knowledge managers need to be aware of the dangers of politicized organizational cultures because they tend to be particularly detrimental to the management of memory. For example, cultures that encourage individual power-brokering and competitiveness will motivate people to hoard information (DeLong and Fahey, 2000). This section itemizes a number of politico-cultural threats to organizational memory management. This is not an exhaustive list of threats but a list that managers ought to be particularly wary of.

Few things are more likely to sever bonds of trust and poison work-relations than destructive careerism. Destructive careerism includes claiming behaviors, blame-avoidance behaviors, ingratiation behaviors, and other forms of impression management—all intended to advance a person’s career at the expense of others. These are highly divisive when they involve dishonesty, unfairness, undue manipulation, and roguish egoism. This has an impact on the management of memory, as it can result in everything from hoarding information to sabotaging it. That much is obvious.

Beyond the obvious, there is a particular group of informal careerist tendencies that, when embedded in or condoned by culture, can harm organizational memory. The most common and effective ingratiation behavior is opinion conformity (Rosenfeld et al., 1995, p. 35). Revisiting Figure 1, the formation of prevailing opinions is a form of culture. Yet, when people conform their opinions at the behest of the wrong motives (such as getting a step up the job ladder) then they damage the collective good. When this conformity involves turning a blind eye to flaws in information and knowledge, then organizational memory will carry forth the flaws that potentially undermine future decision-making. When this opinion conformity becomes a part of the culture, it can also have a long-lasting distortionary effect on the interpretation and application of information, which further undermines the effective functioning of memory management.

Fad surfing is the habitual adoption of new ideas and courses of action based solely on novelty, superficial appeal, or personal benefit. Its prevalence is a symptom that past lessons are undervalued within a culture, a big sign of memory management problems. Novelty is prized without careful consideration of what has gone before. New fads arrive with much fanfare but, once a fad peters out, there is a disincentive to draw constructive lessons from the episode. Those who overzealously supported the fad may be embarrassed by a postmortem or may harbor grudges against those who did not jump onto the bandwagon (Best, 2006). Or the next fad has
already been launched, leaving little opportunity to take stock of the previous one. Both situations prevent organizational memory formation. Faddish agendas tend to be articulated using vague buzzwords and promises, which make it easier for them to be sold because they can mean “all things to all people” and are thus difficult to pin down and rebut (Ibid). Moreover, buzzwords often outlive the fad within an organization’s shared language and add to an ongoing susceptibility to faddish thinking. This is the tainting of an organization’s memory with ephemera.

Fad surfing may not simply be the act of a powerful decision-maker pursuing whims and self-aggrandizement. A culture that values novelty and an impatience for success over tried-and-tested methods will be susceptible to faddish thinking. Managers can offer a counter-weight by hailing the virtues of constructive skepticism, encouraging the consideration of risks and opportunity costs, and implementing practices that force the drawing of constructive lessons.

Rankism is the valuing of knowledge, insight, and opinion based solely on the organizational or social status of the person offering it. It occurs when the formal position or social status of an individual determines how favorably particular claims and arguments are perceived, regardless of the merits of the case. Many half-truths and fallacies persist within an organization because they are not appropriately scrutinized. Meanwhile, important insights from those without a lofty status are ignored. Of course, in hierarchical organizations, the final decision-making power resides in the hands of those higher up. Rankism is different in that it is a type of fallacious thinking (the appeal to authority) combined with an enduring allegiance to particular ideas because of the status of those who are the original advocates. Accurate and reliable organizational memories do not come with this cultural baggage.

A great deal of information and knowledge-management technology relies on clarity of meaning. Meta-tagging protocols for labeling documented information, for example, can accommodate many different synonyms and slang terms to help people find what they are looking for. Unfortunately, these systems breakdown when evasive language and spin-doctoring become part of the culture. Evasive language is the use of vague buzzwords, loaded terms, clichés, and catch-phrases to obscure meaning. This typically happens when people are trying to hide gaps in knowledge or make themselves look smart. Spin-doctoring is the deliberate manipulation of language in order to unduly and surreptitiously influence others or distract attention. For knowledge managers, these tendencies undermine findability, to use Peter Morville’s term (2005). Findability is the ability to discover and access relevant information as required, an essential characteristic of any document system designed to preserve memory. Moreover, evasive language and spin-doctoring undermine the ability to make productive use of information once found because it contains vague and slippery advice.

Here the manager’s job is to promote plain language, such as precise terminology, clarifying definitions, and active verbs. Calling-out suspected evasion with probative questions (and encouraging others to do so) is an important counter-vail. These measures only have widespread impact if they become a common habit and shape the way language is used in the workplace. These measures are not designed to eliminate jargon (such as legalese) that comes into an organization through employees who are also influenced by a cross-cutting professional or occupational practice. Professional jargon serves an important function and, from the knowledge manager’s point-of-view, tends to be easily defined and well referenced.

Open secrets or “conspiracies of silence” are cases whereby “a group of people tacitly agree to outwardly ignore something of which they are all personally aware.” (Zerubavel, 2006, p.2) It is essentially a form of common knowledge that reveals uncomfortable truths and is therefore
unmentionable and undiscussable in public (op.
cite, p. 3). This is a unique vessel of organizational
memory in that it can be preserved in hushed
conversations between trusting individuals or
be implicitly denied in countervailing myths and
legends. A strange characteristic of open secrets
is that mentioning them in a way that does not
conform to the traditional “script” often invokes
angry rebukes. Offended and scared people will
demand that others leave the matter alone. All
told, these open secrets are persistent inaccuracies
within an organization’s memory and are driven
by the force of culture. They are especially prob-
lematic in the way they discourage inquiry and
memory retrieval. Highlighting an open secret
and exposing it to reason will inevitably result in
political animosity and a long-fought campaign
of correction.

The politico-cultural dynamic that knowledge
managers are perhaps most familiar with is terri-
toriality. This is the zealous guarding of a personal
or group fiefdom within an organization. It can
include the guarding of responsibilities, personnel,
and resources. Territoriality makes any form of
integrative management difficult. Given that the
effective management of organizational memory
involves breaking down organizational barriers to
implement technologies and change work patterns,
overcoming territoriality is a necessary struggle.
Yet territoriality includes a specific variant that
relates directly to the management of memory:
controlling access to information, knowledge, and
expertise. Often hoarding happens when someone
is attempting to wield power in a self-serving way.
Yet it can also become habitual as an individual
or group gains a sense of ownership, propriety, or
suspicion with respect to sought-after knowledge.
As Simmons (1998) points out, territoriality can
come in particularly malicious forms, such as: the
hiding of employees and denying the existence of
information; placing valuable information amid a
haystack of other documents in order to conceal;
and false cooperation that gives the impression
of full disclosure (pp. 57-66).

The challenge with territoriality occurs when
it has become culturally condoned within many
workplaces. Many valid justifications exist to
limit access to information. For example, the
information may not be complete and ready for
circulation. As another example, information
may contain trade secrets (private sector) or
national-security secrets (public sector). These
are relatively straightforward cases for knowl-
edge managers to handle. Yet when territoriality
becomes imbedded in culture—forming a habit
to protect and conceal as an entitlement—it is
particularly difficult to locate problematic cases
and cope with them. The design of information
and knowledge management systems is crucial
for providing fewer opportunities for territorial
manipulation.

In the final analysis, managers wanting to
promote the good and mitigate the bad have to
demonstrate the behaviors they expect of others.
This is where transformational leadership plays a
role. Transformational leadership involves devel-
opring a personal mastery, integrity, and consid-
eration for others as an inherent part of a person’s
character. In other words, it is not simply a set of
skills to be applied, but a vocation and a life style.
Bonds of trust and the willingness of others to
deeper consider certain messages depend heavily
on managers developing this authentic form of
leadership. Of course, the influence that a leader
will have on a culture depends on the stage of
cultural formation: it is easier to influence culture
during the early stages of development than after
the build-up of several years or decades of cultural
meaning and behavior (Schein, 2004). Yet there
is a strong correlation between transformational
leadership among senior decision-makers and
the use of organizational learning mechanisms,
as well as a correlation between a learning-sup-
portive culture and the use of such mechanisms
(Barkai and Samuel, 2005, p. f5). This type of
leadership is a factor in promoting organizational
citizenship behaviors (Podsakoff et al., 2000, p.
516). Most importantly, the honesty and integrity
modeled by leaders—as well as outward signs of supportiveness for openness, debate, truthfulness, and differing views—will generate a shared belief in the value of disagreement and questioning, as well as the norms of truthfulness and candid communication (Serpa, 1985, p. 429).

THE FUTURE OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND MEMORY

The picture only gets more complicated as we look ahead to what the future might bring. Socio-economic changes in economically advanced democracies, coupled with changing workplace norms, will most likely make it more difficult for knowledge managers to tap organizational culture.

Societies are becoming more ethno-culturally and intellectually diverse. Populations are also becoming less deferential towards authority of all kinds. It is possible to overstate the tendency of younger generations to be less conformist and more individualist: every generation thinks of itself as more rebellious than the previous one. However, successive generations are weakening the hold that organizational culture has on their personal identities. Organizational cultures still play a major role in socializing young workers into the workforce—and will do so for the foreseeable future. Yet those cultures will have to be increasingly accommodating of individual variation and less reliant upon coercive forms of conformity. In many organizations, this implicit “social contract” will pay dividends insofar as intellectual diversity and greater autonomy are reliable sources of innovation. This might lead to greater worker empowerment but the reductions in cultural coherence will erode the cultural transmission of past knowledge and experience.

Just as the implicit social contract in the workplace is changing, so is the explicit employment contract. For a long time, people used to self-identify with their organization. For example, a person might think of themselves as an “I.B.M. man” or a lifelong civil servant. Today, people are more likely to switch employers repeatedly throughout their career, as well as have more than one career during their lifetime. They see their career as part of their personal identity, but do not form the same personal identification with an organization. In some industries and cohorts, employee turnover is extremely high, with people climbing job ladders with successive moves up-and-out to other organizations. There are two main implications of this trend. First, turnover is a major cause of organizational memory loss. Higher turnover and lower organizational attachment are also causes of less stable organizational cultures. This makes it more difficult for organizations to develop coherent collective identities. It also makes it more difficult for managers to rely on organizational culture as a vessel of memory unless there is a stable core of old-timers to act as culture bearers. Second, this trend will likely cause workers to become more inter-culturally aware. People develop exposure to a larger number of organizational cultures and learn to function according to a wider array of socio-psychological dynamics. It is expected that people will develop preferences, which in turn will compel organizational cultures to become less punctilious (abiding, discreet, careful, and imitative) and more accommodative (open, tolerant, flexible, and improvisational). This pressure will only increase as the competition for scarce talent intensifies due to demographic change and the growth of knowledge-intensive work.

The tendency of organizations to externalize a significant portion of their functions has led to an erosion of organizational memory. Organizations are increasingly surrounded by constellations of contractors, suppliers, and freelancers. When finished with a project, much of the organizational memory leaves along with the outsourced labor. This trend further undermines organizational culture as a conveyor of past experience. As functions become less organizational and more transactional with networks of outsiders, organizational culture
is maintained by a smaller population. Outsiders are not carriers of organizational culture because they lack the prolonged exposure to others within the collective. They may have insights about the culture because they are detached observers but they will almost always lack an intimate knowledge of it.

As organizations become increasingly multinational, the cultures of organizational branches will usually take on a very different character due to the intermingling influence of local and national cultures. This is a common source of organizational subcultures, as more than one culture suffuses together to create something different. Even with the spread of international business norms and fashions, local and national cultures will continue to influence worker values, attitudes, and behaviors. Fortunately for organizational memory management, organizational culture can potentially have a mediating effect on the more self-centered or distrusting aspects of a local or national culture (Pauleen et al., 2007, pp. 13-14). The traditional knowledge embedded in local and national cultures may also prove useful for members of the larger organization (Mason, 2007), thus having a cross-fertilizing influence.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has stressed the dual nature of organizational culture with respect to organizational memory. Organizational culture serves as a “vessel” of organizational memory. It also conditions the way organizational memory is preserved by other means. To fully understand how culture serves both purposes, it is necessary to look at the specific elements that make up culture. As this is done, it becomes clear that organizational memory is not a panacea. The way organizational culture filters and encodes memory is highly fallible and results in many potential distortions. Culture can also serve as both an enabler and barrier to organizational memory management. Culture can breed a hidebound conservatism and it can lead to destructive politics. Yet a culture that supports learning can supplement and enhance socio-technological systems for preserving memories.

As the relationship between organizational culture and organizational memory is described, advice is offered to managers about what to do to create a culture that supports learning. Managers are advised to develop an understanding of the elements of culture and, as a matter of first resort, refrain from damaging a culture unknowingly. As cultural elements and dynamics become more familiar, the manager ought to maintain an active presence in the workplace, gain a situational awareness, and actively glean cultural signals. Developing a culture that supports learning involves creating a “safe space” wherein people can speak candidly, reflect on what they do, and act authentically. Yet, an influential leader plays a significant role by ensuring this psychological safety and modeling the behaviors expected of others. This includes a cultivation of mindfulness, respect for the past, use of plain language, and constructive skepticism. When routinized and valued, these practices fuel the necessary scrutiny to improve the substance of an organization’s memory and improve the application of that memory. It also involves the combating of divisive politico-cultural dynamics that eat away at the integrity of an organizational memory. These are not quick fixes but long-term commitments.

REFERENCES


Organizational Culture and the Management of Organizational Memory


