RESEARCH: From "Quality Culture" to "Quality Cult"

The Odyssey of Project Management: From "Quality Culture" to "Quality Cult"

Tyrone S Pitsis, Thekla Rura-Polley, Stewart R Clegg and Marton Marosszeky

Definitions

PBOs: Project Based Organisations
O-Team: What we call the project organisation
KPIs: Key performance indicators

Abstract

Managing quality through culture is a growing area of interest to both practitioners and academics. However, the overwhelmingly positive slant given to strong culture should be viewed with some scepticism. Using a range of methods within a large case study of a project based organisation, comprised of a partnership between a client and three service providers, we investigate the effects of a strongly designed culture upon project management. We conclude that a strong quality culture, if not designed and managed adequately, can transform itself into a strong 'quality cult'. This has consequences for managing quality in project-based organisations.

Introduction

Culture is generally defined in terms of the sets of values, guiding beliefs, understandings, and ways of thinking that members of an organisation share (Daft, 1995). In its simplest from, culture is "the way we do things around here." In quality management, organisations must design an appropriate "quality culture" for success in hyper-competitive and uncertain environments. Of course, managing quality through culture is not a new concept - it dates back to the works of Elton Mayo, Edgar H Schein, and W E Deming, as well as Peters and Waterman. There has been a steady stream of literature and research espousing the virtues of managing through culture. For example, Davis (1985) argued that while the core values and beliefs of an organisation are the cultural principles upon which strategies are formulated, the fundamental culture would determine how well strategies are implemented. One would expect, therefore, that a strong culture would be required to successfully implement any quality program, but it is surprising that much of the literature treats organisational culture and quality culture as distinct concepts.

We argue that when management and other practitioners treat "organisational culture" and "quality culture" as distinctly different concepts it is likely to be symptomatic of organisational dysfunction. How can "quality culture" stand independently and apart from the broader organisation culture? Following Kono and Clegg (1998) we do not think that such a separation is an appropriate way of arriving at a "vitalised culture" in organisations - indeed, it seems to us a way of producing "quality cynicism" rather than "quality consciousness". Where the concept of a quality culture is not embedded in that of the organisation culture we would not expect particularly beneficial outcomes.

Similarly, Bartlett & Ghoshal, (1994: 79) stated that: "Management of successful companies share a consistent philosophy...they are less concerned with controlling employees' behaviour than with developing [employees] capabilities and broadening their perspectives...For many top-level managers, softening the strategic focus isn't easy. They worry that the organisation will interpret such an approach as...indecision. But, these concerns evaporate when senior managers realise that they are not abandoning their responsibility for the strategic direction but rather improving the quality of its formulation and the odds of its implementation."

The notion that through designing the "right kind of culture'" organisations can minimise employee resistance, align values, beliefs, and behaviour at work is appealing. Culture can shape workers' attitudes and in this way quality can become part of the language, behaviour and cognition of all employees. Organisations must have an organisational culture of quality, quality culture is not, nor should it be seen, as an addendum to organisational culture in general - as something separate or as a management tool. Quality culture and organisation culture are one and the same.

W Edwards Deming conceived the notion, management by positive co-operation - a culture that moves away from competition towards co-operation, innovation and job satisfaction (1987; 1994a; 1994b; 1996). However, since Deming, much contemporary discussion of organisational culture has transformed the notion of 'culture" into methods of securing workers' cooperation, compliance, and commitment to create team spirit and limit recalcitrance at work. That is, culture has come to be perceived more as a tool of management control rather than a shared sense of values, beliefs and behaviours. As such, a strong culture can only be one where 'everyone does what they are told.'

It is not surprising that managing quality through culture is a complex endeavour - more so than much of the contemporary literature suggests. If this is essentially true of organisations in general it is especially so in modern 'project-based organisations'. Project based organisations are often constituted through inter-organisational collaborations, strategic alliances, joint ventures, or partnerships. We shall use the term 'project based organisations' (PBOs) to refer to a process of organising that emphasises routine and recurring organisational relationships, usually between separate legal entities, in pursuit of some common goal. PBOs are increasingly becoming a preferred form of organising and thus a growing area of interest and concern to researchers and managers alike.

What characterises PBOs is that they do not adhere to traditional hierarchical and bureaucratic structures and they generally operate within highly ambiguous, uncertain and volatile environments. In such environments, quality cannot only be seen as a simplistic concept such as a "tick in a box", it is not just what is done on the factory floor, or on a construction site - Quality must be a state of mind, whether a person is the CEO, in management, staff, a supplier or customer.

However, transforming quality into a state of mind is highly problematic. For example, in PBOs the relationship between culture and quality management is challenging because many different organisational cultures come together, with differing ways of "doing quality."

So these PBOs invest heavily in developing a single, strong quality culture. Indeed, organisational culture and quality culture are one and the same in such projects. However, we believe that while culture is a vital aspect of organisational success, there are some great risks to the "over design" of organisational culture. Hence, this study (part of a larger project investigating collaborative quality across a number of industries) aims to investigate the effects a strong quality culture has upon project management.

The Case Study

As with most project-based organisation the O-Team (what we call the project organisation) was especially designed to cope with highly ambiguous circumstances, a need for innovative solutions, and considerable time pressure. It involved the construction of a large, complex infrastructure for the Sydney Olympics by a temporary organisation set up for the duration of the project as a strategic alliance of the client and the three main service providers. Using stratified sampling,

We identified information-rich respondents who were familiar with either the overall collaboration or the detailed operations under investigation. We conducted 22 semi-structured, in-depth interviews ranging from 1 hour to 4 hours long. All interviews were conducted by at least two researchers and were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed.

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We argue that when management and other practitioners treat "organisational culture" and "quality culture" as distinctly different concepts it is likely to be symptomatic of organisational dys-function. How can "quality culture" stand independently and apart from the broader organisation culture? Following Kono and Clegg (1998) we do not think that such a separation is an appropriate way of arriving at a "vitalised culture" in organisations - indeed, it seems to us a way of producing "quality cynicism" rather than "quality consciousness". Where the concept of a quality culture is not embedded in that of the organisation culture we would not expect particularly beneficial outcomes.

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We identified information-rich respondents who were familiar with either the overall collaboration or the detailed operations under investigation. We conducted 22 semi-structured, in-depth interviews ranging from 1 hour to 4 hours long. All interviews were conducted by at least two researchers and were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed.

In addition, researchers attended almost all O-Team leadership meetings, initially held monthly and later bi-monthly.

The field study also used photography of the research sites, field diaries, and informal discussions to record an often neglected and rich source of data - that of artefacts. Gagliardi (1990:3) defines artefacts as: first, products of human action which exist independently of their creator; second, as intentional in that they aim to solve a problem or satisfy needs; and third, as what we can see, smell, touch, feel and hear. Indeed, when used in conjunction with interviews and surveys, the study of artefacts is an ideal method of investigating organisational culture.

The project had an "O-Team Culture", designed by members of the client organisation that included a set of fundamental cultural principles. These included several dimensions.

First, there was a no-blame-culture, where all members were to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions.

Second, what's best for project, where the achieving of project objectives was the foremost priority?

Third, a commitment, corporately and individually, to openness, integrity, trust, cooperation, mutual support, respect, flexibility, honesty and loyalty to the project as well as to honour commitments to each other.

Artefacts reflecting a culture of quality were evident at all levels of the organisation. These included O-team culture indoctrination workshops for all people involved on the project, whether these were sub-contractors, front line staff or managing directors. The emphasis was on personnel's 'goodness of fit' and individuals who did not fit with the culture were relocated to other projects or left the project on their own accord.

The O-team also designed an intricate system of banners, icons, literature, public relations material, and rewards (monetary and other types). All were designed to sell and reinforce the O-team culture and what was to be achieved in the future - a quality outcome, through quality processes. Indeed, quality was managed through an intricate system of key performance indicators: to build a major public infrastructure project while exceeding quality outcomes in 5 key areas of Budget, Schedule, Community, Health and Safety, and Environment. Rewards would only be paid for outstanding results on all KPIs.

In analysing the interviews, it became evident that characterising it as a 'strong culture' would be an understatement. There was an undying commitment to the project and to the O-team members. The quality of the outcomes was never in question for the O-Team, "...quality is outcome...quality is process/we know what we have to achieve and we have all the processes in place to achieve those outcomes" as one team leader told us (February 2000). This was in the face of growing community dissatisfaction, poor

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performances on occupational health and safety scores, time slippage, and budget blowouts. Similarly, "...we have the KPIs [key performance indicators], quality are our KPIs in that we know what we have to achieve...and we'll achieve it" (June 1999). Also "...we have the best people, we have the [O-Team] culture...we used to be afraid to do things differently, but we can now think outside the box...we are more willing to try new things...we have something special here" (June, 1999). "We are committed to [O-team] culture, our principles...you know like a no blame culture, what's best for project (February, 1999). Indeed, there were an overwhelming number of such statements and all coders agreed that there was an explicit undeniable belief in the O-team culture. It was believed that because of this culture the project would achieve its outcomes, irrespective of any problems that occurred.

Discussion: Quality Culture to Quality Cult

The O-team quality culture worked splendidly in many ways: it led to creativity in problem solving and generally ensured commitment to the project. Most members of the O-Team organisation, from executive managers to subordinates, were strongly committed to, and defensive of the O-Team culture.

Team invested heavily in ensuring that all actors could make sense of the O-Team culture. Great importance was attached to all actors making the same sense of project quality. Shared sets of values, beliefs, ways of thinking and understanding were the hallmarks of the project culture.

However, our findings also suggest that a strong culture may be prone to severe problems, the most serious being what we will refer to as the transition to a "cult". By cult, we mean organisational members adherence to an exclusive system of beliefs and practices with exaggerated zeal.

As with many cults, events occurred that should have caused members to question the validity of the strongly held belief systems and practices of the O-Team culture. Instead, the O-Team culture ensured an escalation of commitment to key notions comprising the culture, "blinkering" the staff and project leaders, and restricting them from seeing problems in a rational manner.

In its simplest form a strong culture leads to what is commonly referred to as 'group think'. However, what occurred with the O-Team was different to 'group think' in a critical way. When groupthink occurs consultants, team facilitators and so on, can be brought in to help correct or alleviate the problems of groupthink. However, as is the case with cults, any outside influence is seen as an attempt to infiltrate and weaken the established and strongly held belief systems and practices. Theoretically, Brown and Starkey (2000) identified such behaviour as a classic example of organisational ego defence mechanisms. Brown and Starkey suggest that when individuals identify with their organisation to the extent that they become "one" with the culture, they often develop certain defence mechanisms to face change or challenging issues. We clearly found instances of ego defensiveness: The no blame culture allowed these to flourish unchecked, supported by the strong commitment to the quality outcomes.

Facts, such as the time lost, budgetary blow out, and poor results on the KPIs of community and occupational health and safety, were biased in their interpretation to support the cult style beliefs of the project. In essence, we saw an escalation of commitment to the O-team culture at the expense of the O-team project outcomes. At all levels of the O-team key individuals championed the O-team culture so strongly that they down-played the negative signs evident in progress reports, in media reports, government inquiries and community protests. Surprisingly, even when some individuals within the O-team highlighted issues that should not be ignored by the majority, these issues were brushed aside as temporary and recoverable in

the future. Even when management were provided with detailed progress charts resulting from critical path methods, strong belief in the O-team culture led them to believe, somewhat irrationally, that poor performance could be solved because of everyone's commitment to the project and the O-team culture. Thus, they became cultists rather more than culture managers: individuals became irrationally zealous in the protection and commitment to a set of beliefs, values and ideals. Typically, cult members developed intricate explanations as to why expected events did not occur, revise forecasts and commit even more strongly to the new date on which the expected event will manifest itself. Similar to cults where 'the end of the world is nigh', but never actually occurs - so the day the world ends is constantly revised.

Also, the culling out of individuals who did not "fit" well with the culture substantially decreased the level of internal conflict and increased the "cultishness" of the culture, not necessarily a good thing. We strongly argue that a degree of conflict, and other challenging behaviours, may be necessary for effective organisational functioning. Indeed, the problem of groupthink often occurs because of a lack of conflict in a team. Thus, there is a blind acceptance of ideas, behaviours and information, and a distinct lack of challenge of behaviours or information, even when these appear to be incorrect or misinformed. Our findings suggest that culture must be carefully designed to avoid the transformation from a quality culture to a quality cult. In other words, managers must avoid a commitment to the process of managing quality at the expense of managing the outcome of quality, and should have mechanisms in place to ensure that some degree of conflict or challenging behaviour is encouraged and valued.

What would it mean for an organisational culture also to be a quality culture? For a true quality culture to exist

what would need to happen? Our argument is that it requires a shift in cognition and behaviour. It requires a set of quality principles that existing staff can live by and that future staff will be indoctrinated into.

For all intents and purposes it would produce an organisational culture that was characterised and infused by a concern for quality - this is a key sign of a vitalised culture.

Conclusion

The O-Team set up a temporary organisation as a strategic alliance of the client and three main service providers. The designers of the O-Team believed it was better equipped to cope with highly ambiguous circumstances, a need for innovative solutions, and considerable time pressure through its unique project culture. Because of great faith in the management of quality that could be achieved through the specific quality culture that the project created, quality processes were unconditionally accepted and adhered to, even in the face of deteriorating performance on most of the KPIs. While managing quality through culture can be beneficial, it turned out to have some severe limitations. To avoid compromising quality, and project success, through a strong quality culture management must carefully design culture to avoid a transformation from quality culture to 'quality cult.'

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"Quality Certification News has become an important medium for up-to-date information on all matters surrounding quality certification in Australia. QCN has quickly established itself as the most current source of publicly available intelligence on certification and covers the widest spectrum of industry and government," Said John Hulbert, president of the Quality Society of Australasia.

"The articles are always relevant and well-written, and are a good source of information for practitioners at all levels, and those just wanting to better understand quality management. Of particular interest in recent times has been the coverage of the 2000 edition of ISO 9000 and its impact on industry.

"I would recommend QCN to all with an interest in quality system certification." continued John Hulbert.

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Quality Systems take off in Defence - Robert Schonberger, QAS

The 501 Wing of the Australian Defence Force is responsible for providing commercial contract management, maintenance and overhauls of the F-111 aircraft. It's interesting work in an exciting industry that requires skill, expertise and excellence in management.

Embarking on the road to certification is one way to ensure that excellence. According to Kevin Mulholland, Quality Manager, Department of Defence 501 Wing, all defence deeper aircraft maintenance units are required to implement an effective management system such as ISO 9001. "In a labour and materials intensive industry like the defence force, a quality system ensures that resources are being effectively utilised, processes are streamlined and every task is done right the first time," he explains.

"We're lucky that thorough documentation has always been a part of our work culture. As a result, we've been able to map our processes and verify the compliance of established practices," Kevin continues.

"We've concentrated on providing the most reliable and consistent goods and services to our clients and stakeholders. Our new system helps us to do this, and customers are already noticing the positive changes. Gaining certification may take a while, and require hard work, but if the benefits we're already experiencing are any guide, it's definitely worth it.

"One of the future aims of the Systems Program Office is to provide commercially viable services to support both defence and civil aviation. Our certified management system will be a fundamental part of achieving this strategy, as it provides independent assurance to customers that our organisation and the aircraft we manage are worthy of their trust and patronage," says Kevin.

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meaningful intersection between the two areas that may be referred to as **BEST Business Excellence**. It is up to us to more fully explore the intersection, expand it, and to develop and apply meaningful solutions to existing and emerging environmental, social, and economic problems. Fundamentally we are being called to embrace the age-old principles: stewardship, sacrifice, and service. Will I? Will you? And even if we do, will we do so in time?

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