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 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 form, 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 cooperation - a culture that moves away from competition towards co-operation, innovation and job satisfaction (1987; 1994a; 1994b; 1998). 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.
Where the concept of a quality culture is concerned, we do not think that such a culture can exist independently and apart from the broader organisational context. There is no such thing as a "quality culture" and "quality culture" as distinct concepts. It is likely to be symptomatic of organisational dysfunctions and weaknesses.

Clegg (1994a; 1994b; 1996) has identified the virtues of managing through culture. For example, Daft (1995). In its simplest form, culture is defined as the set of values, beliefs, and practices that are shared among members of an organisation. However, managing through culture is not a new concept; it dates back to the works of Elton Mayo, Edgar Schein, and E.W. Deming, as well as Peters and Waterman. The management of culture allows for flexibility, honesty and loyalty to the project as well as to ensure commitment to the project.

The Case Study

As with most project-based organisations, the O-Team (what we call our project team) was not only a team of management control, but also a tool of management control. It is not surprising that managing quality through culture is an end in itself. Indeed, organisations that are well managed tend to have a strong culture. However, this study (part of a larger project investigating collaborative culture) is highly problematic. For example, Brown and Starkey (2000) identified such behaviour as a classic example of organisational politics. Indeed, culture is a "one" with the organisation.

The research for this case study was performed in three phases. First, we conducted field research using a combination of interviews, questionnaires, and unstructured field notes. We also attended meetings and visited the research sites. In addition, we used a variety of research methods, including the collection of artefacts and the analysis of organisational culture. We also used a variety of research methods, including the collection of artefacts and the analysis of organisational culture. In addition, we used a variety of research methods, including the collection of artefacts and the analysis of organisational culture. We also used a variety of research methods, including the collection of artefacts and the analysis of organisational culture. In addition, we used a variety of research methods, including the collection of artefacts and the analysis of organisational culture. We also used a variety of research methods, including the collection of artefacts and the analysis of organisational culture. In addition, we used a variety of research methods, including the collection of artefacts and the analysis of organisational culture. We also used a variety of research methods, including the collection of artefacts and the analysis of organisational culture.
the future. Even when management were providing the correct support and encouragement, resulting from critical path methods, strong belief in the O-Team culture led them to conclude that poor performance could be solved because of everyone's commitment to the project and the O-Team culture. Thus, they became cultists rather than culture managers: Individuals became irrationally zealous in the protection and commitment to a set of beliefs, values and ideals. Typically, cult members develop 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 near', but never actually occurs - so the day the world ends is constantly revised.

Also, the culting out of individuals who did not conform with the cult's dogma, substantially decreased the level of internal conflict and increased the "cultishness" of the quality culture, not necessarily a good thing. We strongly believe that challenging behaviours, may be necessary for effective organisational functioning. To be a strong quality culture, the 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 there seems to be incorrect or misinformed. Our findings suggest that culture must be carefully designed to avoid such 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 everyone's 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 there needs to be a shift in cognition and behaviour. It requires a set of quality principles that existing staff can live by and future staff will be indoctrinated into.

For all intents and purposes it would be a real quality culture that was characterised and infused by a concern for quality – this is a key sign of a vitrified culture.

Conclusion

The O-Team set up a temporary project and new corporate culture 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 project culture that the project created, quality was unconditionally accepted and adhered to, even in the face of deteriorating performance on most of the key performance areas. While managing quality through culture can be beneficial, it turned out to have some severe limitations. To avoid contradicting our initial success, through a strong quality culture management must carefully design culture to avoid a transformation from quality culture to 'quality cult'.

References


ISO 9000 in one set

The International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) has updated its complete volume of the ISO 9000 standards for the 2000 edition. The ISO Standards Compendium - Quality Management includes five of the seven standards that make up the ISO 9000 series. This includes the ISO 9000 vocabulary standard, the ISO 9001 quality assurance standard, the ISO 9004 quality management standard, as well as the draft standards for combined quality and environmental auditing (ISO 14011), measurement control systems (ISO 10012) and management system documentation (ISO 10013).
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?

References

- Edgeman R L and Hensler D A, (2001), "Will you? And even if we do, will we do so in lime?"
- Edgeman R L, (2000a), "BEST Solutions to existing and emerging problems. Fundamentally we are being called to embrace the age-old principles: stewardship, sacrifice, and service. Will I?"

About the Author

Rick Edgeman is QUEST Professor and Executive Director of the QUEST Program for Quality Enhanced Systems and Teams at the University of Maryland. The QUEST Program is a unique honours student program that is a joint offering of the Robert H. Smith School of Business and the A. James Clark School of Engineering at Maryland. He also serves as Executive Director of the Multinational Alliance for the Advancement of Organisational Excellence and as Editor of the quarterly journal, Measuring Business Excellence. Dr Edgeman has served as a visiting professor in the Division of Quality Technology & Statistics at Lund University (Sweden), visiting professor in the Quality & Innovation Research Group at the Aarhus School of Business (Denmark), professor and director of the SABER Institute for Self-Assessment & Business Excellence Research at Colorado State University (USA) and on the faculties of other American universities.