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Work Culture: Concept and Relevance

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THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE

Culture around a work place provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the various facets of work behaviour. The concept of culture has been long in use by a number of disciplines in a variety of settings. Hence the concept suffers from surplus meanings. Yet, if operationalised carefully, the concept has the potentials that no other currently used concepts in organizational behaviour seem to possess.

Culture is man made part of environment (Herskovits, 1955) [1]. It reflects a way of life of a people, their traditions, heritage, design for living, etc. It is the air they breathe and the spirit which percolates in their life. It is the totality of beliefs, norms, and values, which are related to the patterned regularity in people's behaviour. "Cultures are systems (of socially transmitted behaviour patterns) that serve to relate human communities to their ecological settings. These ways of life of communities include technologies and modes of economic organization, settlement patterns, modes of social grouping, and so on " (Keesing, 1974) [2]. Culture, according to some (e.g., White, 1948) [3], determines everything that people do, feel, and think: "Human behaviour, therefore, is determined by culture". For others, It is nothing but a bundle of independent variables which might " include basic institutions, subsistence patterns, social organizations, languages and social rules governing inter-personal relations" (Segal, 1983). [4] For still others, " culture has no ontological reality; it is neither a super organic reality external to organism, nor it is an idea in the minds of the organism. Culture is a logical construct, abstracted from human behaviour, and as such, it exists only in the minds of the investigator".

THE CONTEXT OF WORK CULTURE

The setting of work behaviour is the organization with its boundaries, goals and objectives, human resources and constraints, managerial practices, work forms etc. Individuals looking for a job are attached to those organizations where their ability and skill can be best utilised and their expectations can be maximally met. The different rungs of the organization that they join generally have specific, although overlapping, roles. The totality of the roles, organizational demands, norms, values, ethos, etc. constitute the subjective work culture into which the new entrants are ushered into and thereafter socialized gradually. The inter-play of the entrants' expectations and the role demands in the organizational context determine their work behaviour which in turn either strengthens the existing norms, values role demands; etc. or

weaken and modify them. In the process the entrants change too. They either introject the organizational norms and values or assign their work a central place in their life. Or, they get alienated from their roles and look somewhere else or in something else the meanings that might make their life worth living. Work culture, thus, is a dynamic construct encompassing the mutually interactive structural, behavioural, and ideational components of a work setting. The components are in a continuous flux because of the interactive relationship. Work culture is also a sub-cultural systems (Rohner, 1984)[5] in the sense that it reflects a specific configuration of the culture which surrounds a work organization.

In summary, a work culture may be examined at four levels. They are the followings:

(a) Organizational goals and objectives and the way they are perceived and reacted to by the employees.
(b) Technology of an organization, its structure, work forms, and [financial position,] etc.
(c) Social groups, norms, values, power structure, role relations etc.
(d) Work behaviours and other work related activities.

An analysis of a work culture would inevitably lead to trace its roots into the following contextual sources:

(a) The socio-cultural values and systematic features of the surrounding milieu.
(b) The body of knowledge regarding work and work forms.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF WORK

The meanings attached to work have been changing through the developmental stages of human society. The Bible cursed man to work:

> Because you have listened to your wife,
> And have eaten from the tree which I forbade you,
> Accursed shall be the ground on your account.
> With labour you will win your bread from it.
> … You shall gain your bread by the sweat of your brow.
>
> (Gen 3. 17-19)

Thus, work was a punishment for man's ancestral sin. It was necessary for his survival and subsistence. It was physical in nature and the kind of activity which one is "obliged to do" and not what one is likely to enjoy (Twain, 1943)[6]. Hence, one would like to avoid if one can. Mark Twain jokingly said: " Work? I am not afraid of work? I can lie down next to it and go to sleep! "

For the Greek, a perfect man is noble man, who does not engage in labour, has a leisure, takes part in war and produces spiritual work (Jaspers quoted by Misumi, 1983)[7] The Romans followed the same model. They despised most work activities and acquired slaves to perform them; thus keeping themselves available for intellectual pursuits of life. The French noble men before the revolution considered any type of profession unworthy of their noble class (Levy-Leboyer, 1986).[8]

THE INDIAN APPROACH TO WORK

The approach to work in a developing country such as India has been somewhat different. Unlike The Bible, Shri Bhagavadgita preached that

> " Both renunciation and practice of work
> lead to the highest bliss;
> Of these two,
> practice of work is better than,
> renunciation of work".

Work was not necessarily conceived as physical activities for one's subsistence. It was prescribed as "duty" without any concern for the outcomes. The duty, however, was not conceived to be socially neutral. On the contrary, duty meant meeting the obligations of one's relatives, friends, and even strangers.

Detachments of one's duty from any desire for outcome (nishkam karm) were meant to suggest one-way service without any expectation for instant reciprocity. In the Indian village system the approach had an instrumental value for maintaining collectivism and yet ensuring subsistence and security. The castes were the occupational clusters – each discharging their roles and in turn being maintained by the system. Maintaining relationship rather than performing socially neutral economic activities constituted the ethos of the system. In fact the latter were conceived within the framework of social relationship. Work as gainful economic activities was performed either in the family or within inter-caste relationship. The hierarchy within a family or castes, of course, determined the allocation of work. While the Brahmins engaged in intellectual, religious, and spiritual work, the Rajputs protected the community, the Vaishyas managed trade and commerce, other intermediate castes did the farming, and the lower castes served all of them. The manual work was considered to be inferior to mental work. In this respect the Hindus were no better – in fact worse, than the Greeks and the Romans who did not overplay the occupational hierarchy the way Hindus did.

The Hindu's views on work were diluted by the events of history. They were not replaced by the new values of the protestant ethic nature.

But we can say that work is not intrinsically valued in India. There exists a culture of aaram, which roughly means rest and relaxation without preceded by hard, and exhausting work. Although there are large regional variations, it is not infrequent to find a large number of people sitting here and there and doing nothing. Even those who are employed often come to office late and leave early unless they are forced to be punctual. Once in office, they receive friends and relatives who feel free to call on any time without any prior appointment. People relish chatting and talking over a cup of tea or coffee while work suffers. Quite often, people visit ailing friends and relatives or go out of the way to help them in their personal matters even during office hours. While working, one is stuck by the slow

and clumsy actions and reactions, indifferent attitudes, procedures rather than outcome orientation, and lack of consideration for others. (Sinha, 1985,)[9].

McClelland (1975)[10] commented that Indians perform work as a "favour" to others. Work is believed to exhaust a person by draining out his energy which he believes to be precious and limited. Hence he tends to conserve his energy which he can expend only in turn for favour or tangible gain. Ganesh (1982)[11] made equally strong statement that work as " a concept and a culture has not been internalized in Indian organizations…" He went on to elaborate his contention by pointing out that there is a very little concern for

(a) quality of product and services, (b) timeliness,(c) costs,(d) people who work around, (e) employee's future, and (f) organizational process.

All these concerns, we know, are the cardinal features of western organization. If they are grossly ignored, the reasons must be in the indigenous culture. "… Organizations in this country have 'fuzzy' boundaries. Essentially, organizations have come to represent settings in which societal forces interact. Thus, our organizations have provided settings for interaction of familial forces, interest groups, caste conflicts, regional and linguistic groups, class conflicts and political and religious forces among others. … Therefore, organizations do not concern with work but seem to concern themselves more with those activities that maintain 'equilibrium' of the societal forces
Of course, the scenario that Ganesh described is more true for public and less for private sector.

Obviously, Indian organizations seem to be "socially determined" and contrary to Udy's (1970)[12] prescription, and have failed to move towards a state of being determined. This, according to Ganesh (1982) is the prime reason for weak work values in Indians. The compulsions have been compromised with social habits and cultural values.

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