

Building Commitment Through Organizational Culture

BY SUGATO LAHIRY

A GROWING BODY OF RESEARCH ON ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE OFFERS A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR PROMOTING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE AND IMPROVEMENT.

A bunch of individuals does not an organization make. Business leaders increasingly grasp what organization development specialists have long understood: Groups are the building blocks of organizations. This being the case, organizations are most likely to change for the better if they target improvement efforts at groups of employees. Widespread efforts at team building are one example of this trend.

In their efforts to promote organization-wide improvements, organization development practitioners try to understand the dynamic between the organization itself and the groups that it comprises. One group dimension of an organization is its culture. Organizational culture recently has garnered much attention from both researchers and corporate managers.

Definitions of organizational culture vary, but they tend to contain certain common themes. For example:

- ▶ Culture represents the values, beliefs, and expectations shared by its members.

- ▶ Culture exerts pressure on its members to conform to shared codes.

- ▶ Culture shapes people's behaviors.

From an organization development standpoint, the concept of organizational culture suggests an avenue for fostering changes in behavior and attitudes in order to bring about desired results. But to do this successfully, OD experts must find out if they can predict certain behaviors and attitudes based on patterns of organizational culture.

For example, research has shown that employees' commitment to an organization affects how well the organization performs in various ways. If it turns out that employee commitment varies in certain predictable ways from one cultural pattern to another, OD specialists could try to strengthen employee commitment—and therefore, organizational

effectiveness—by changing the organizational culture.

The concept of commitment

Researchers generally define organizational commitment as the psychological strength of an individual's attachment to the organization. Researchers differ on the basis of the attachment.

Recently, John P. Meyer and Natalie J. Allen developed a comprehensive, integrated model of organizational commitment. According to this model, organizational commitment is a mixture of three components—*affective*, *continuance*, and *normative* commitment—that vary in influence.

Affective commitment refers to employees' emotional attachment to the organization. *Continuance* commitment is based on the costs that employees associate with leaving the organization. *Normative* commitment is employees' feelings of obligation

to remain with the organization.

Or, as Meyer and Allen put it, "Employees with strong affective commitment remain [with the organization] because they want to, those with strong continuance commitment because they need to, and those with strong normative commitment because they feel they ought to do so."

Numerous studies have correlated organizational commitment with what one author calls "a laundry list" of variables. Unfortunately, OD specialists cannot easily convert data about scores of variables into workplace applications. To build comprehensive programs, OD practitioners need to piece data on organizational and work-related experiences into patterns and to organize those patterns into workable categories.

The concept of organizational culture offers a way to categorize general patterns of experiences. So far, the few studies that have examined links between organizational culture and organizational commitment have focused on links between the strength of an organization's culture and the strength of its employees' commitment. These studies and anecdotal evidence suggest a positive link between strong organizational cultures and employee commitment.

Potential links between the content of organizational cultures and levels of employee commitment remain largely unexplored. The relative strength of a culture is an indicator of how widely people share the organizational values and beliefs—whatever the values and beliefs may be—and how intensely people feel about them. The content and direction of a culture is concerned with what the values and beliefs actually are, and what behavioral norms they promote in the organization.

An exploratory study looked at the nature and degree of relationships between various elements of organizational culture on one hand and the three components of organizational commitment on the other.

Method and findings

The study took place in large, multi-unit company operating in India's public sector. The company's three functionally autonomous divisions are involved in manufacturing and

marketing petroleum products, high-technology engineering goods, and industrial explosives. The company has sites nationwide.

The study focused on a random, stratified sample of managers from the eight units that make up the three divisions. Participants' levels ranged from supervisors to general managers.

Altogether, 188 participants, or about 25 percent of all managers in the company, returned completed questionnaires. The typical respondent was 36 and had been with the organization for an average of 10 years. Respondents' educational levels ranged from high school to the doctoral level.

The questionnaire had two parts. The Organizational Culture Inventory measured the extent to which each of the organization's three divisions encourages certain behaviors or thinking styles along 12 dimensions. The OCI was designed to generate an organizational-culture profile characterized by three main culture patterns.

Constructive cultures. Members are encouraged to interact with others and approach tasks in ways that will help them meet their higher-order satisfaction needs. The following styles dominate in constructive cultures: achievement, self-actualizing, encouraging, and affiliative.

Passive/defensive cultures. Members believe they must interact with people in ways that will not threaten their own security. The cultures are characterized by the following styles: approval, conventional, dependent, and avoidance.

Aggressive/defensive cultures. Members are expected to approach tasks in forceful ways to protect their status and security. The prevalent styles in these cultures: oppositional, power, competitive, and perfectionist.

Because culture is an organization-level phenomenon, individuals' scores on the OCI were averaged to produce measures of the three types of organizational cultures (constructive, passive/defensive, and aggressive/defensive) for each of the eight units of the organization.

Organizational commitment was measured using a questionnaire developed in 1990 by Allen and Meyer that provides measures on three scales: affective commitment,

continuance commitment, and normative commitment.

Individual scores on the three commitment scales also were compiled into scores for each business unit.

Statistical analysis of the aggregated data found no significant difference among the culture patterns of the three divisions. This finding suggests that the organization has a strong culture. Managers across divisions have similar perceptions of the organization's norms and expectations for behavior. In short, work values are widely shared by members across all organizational divisions.

On the other hand, the three divisions differ significantly in the level of commitment of their employees. The study showed that a constructive culture pattern was not found to be related to commitment. This finding seems to contradict earlier research on links between commitment and employees' work experiences.

Studies of what's called the "person/environment-fit" hypothesis suggest that employees who find their work experiences fulfilling and in harmony with their values are more committed to their organizations than employees whose work experiences conflict with their values and leave their needs unsatisfied.

Affective commitment

Constructive cultures provide work experiences that fulfill employees' higher-order satisfaction needs; they are the least likely to conflict with the value systems of most people. Given the person/environment-fit studies, researchers would expect a constructive culture to translate into higher affective commitment. But in this study, it did not.

It appears that the person/environment-fit hypothesis assumes that as employees amass positive work experiences, affective commitment rises accordingly. But current studies do not demonstrate that assumption. The results of earlier studies suggest that other factors also play into this link.

Some researchers suggest that for positive work experiences to increase commitment significantly, employees must believe that such work experiences are a result of effective management policies. So parlaying a constructive culture into increased

commitment might depend on how well managers succeed at getting employees to credit good management for their positive experiences.

Continuance commitment

Other findings show a significant relationship between passive/defensive culture patterns and continuance commitment. This finding supports the premise that not only the strength, but also the content, of organizational culture is related to organizational commitment.

The correlation between the aggressive/defensive pattern and continuance commitment was relatively high, but not significantly so. Still, together these findings prompt some theoretical speculation.

In defensive cultures, people are basically concerned with protecting their status and security. The difference between passive/defensive and aggressive/defensive patterns is that in the former, employees believe that they must interact with others in nonthreatening or somewhat subservient ways; in the latter, employees expect to act aggressively. In both cultures, most people have to think and behave in ways that might conflict with their normal predispositions. This conflict generates stress.

It seems probable that in defensive, highly stressful organizations, employee commitment hinges on the high cost of leaving, rather than on an attachment based on satisfaction (affective) or obligation (normative).

In general, some conceptual logic, albeit speculative, appears to explain the association between passive/defensive culture patterns and continuance commitment.

Normative commitment

No significant relationship emerged among normative commitment (staying out of obligation) and the three culture patterns. This result bears out earlier research—the circumstances that are likely to make an individual feel obligated to stay with an organization are only peripherally related to an organization's culture.

One theory suggests that a feeling of obligation to remain with an organization develops from familial and societal norms, before an individual ever enters an organization.

Development of normative commitment also might result from organizational socialization, especially in organizations that value loyalty and that systematically and consistently communicate that value to employees. (This is what many Japanese organizations do.) But the instrument used in this study did not measure the behavioral norms and expectations that result from loyalty as an organizational value.

Situations in which an exchange takes place can lead to the development of normative commitment as well. For example, an individual might develop normative commitment if he or she has received some reward (such as tuition reimbursement) that he or she feels obligated to repay by serving the organization. But, like familial and societal norms, reciprocity norms operate differently for different people and do not result from a common set of organizational experiences.

Implications

The study's findings suggest that—from an OD perspective—the actual content of organizational cultures is as important as the strength of those cultures.

The finding that the content of an organizational culture is associated with employee commitment offers a foundation for considering cultural-change programs as a means of OD intervention.

OD practitioners should pay special attention to the finding that defensive culture patterns were found to be positively related to continuance commitment. A high level of continuance commitment may well keep an employee tied to an organization, but it is unlikely to produce a high level of performance.

According to Meyer and Allen, people who stay because they believe they can't afford to leave often do the minimum amount of work required to keep their jobs. In fact, Meyer and his associates found that employees who showed a high degree of continuance commitment were more likely to earn poor marks from their supervisors on performance and potential.

Consequently, organizations mounting culture-change programs might try to reduce defensive elements within their cultures. Further

research is needed to explore the link between defensive cultures and continuance commitment, especially the cause-and-effect relationship between the two variables.

More empirical data also are needed to explain how such factors as organizational communication affect whether constructive organizational cultures produce high levels of affective commitment among employees. (Meanwhile, organizations would do well to ensure that internal communications help employees make the connection between positive aspects of their workplace and effective management policies.)

Finally, researchers have largely overlooked how feelings of obligation can form the basis of organizational commitment. The OD field needs a much stronger empirical data base on such issues as how normative commitment develops and how it affects organizational performance. What specific cultural attributes are associated with higher levels of normative commitment? What processes moderate the relationship? These are some of the questions that need to be answered before we fully understand the culture/commitment link.

In sum, such variables as motivation, job satisfaction, productivity, and leadership behavior that have been the focus of OD research and applications are gradually giving way to such newer concepts as organizational culture and organizational commitment. The field of applied organization development stands to gain a lot from the fresh perspectives that continuing research into these concepts will provide. ■

Sugato Lahiry designs and implements HRD programs for IBP—Balmer Laurie Group of Companies, Gillander House, 8 Netaji Subhas Road, Calcutta 700001, India. Lahiry is the winner of a research grant from the Organization Development Professional Practice Area of ASTD.

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