

UNCOVERING THE LEVELS OF CULTURE

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The culture of a group can now be defined as

A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.

The purpose of this chapter is to show that culture can be analyzed at several different levels, where the term *level* refers to the degree to which the cultural phenomenon is visible to the observer. Some of the confusion of definition of what culture really is results from not differentiating the levels at which it manifests itself. These levels range from the very tangible overt manifestations that one can see and feel to the deeply embedded, unconscious basic assumptions that I am defining as the essence of culture. In between we have various espoused values, norms, and rules of behavior that members of the culture use as a way of depicting the culture to themselves and others.

Many other culture researchers prefer the concept of "basic values" for describing the deepest levels. As I will try to show with later examples, my preference is for "basic assumptions" because these tend to be taken for granted and are treated as nonnegotiable. Values can be and are discussed, and people can agree to disagree about them. Basic assumptions are so taken for granted that someone who does not hold them is viewed as crazy and automatically dismissed. The levels at which culture can be analyzed are shown in Figure 1.

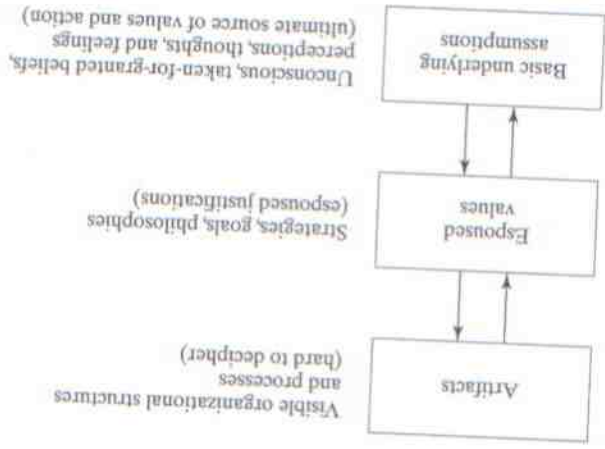


FIGURE 1 Levels of Culture

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At the surface we have the level of *artifacts*, which includes all the phenomena that one sees, hears, and feels when one encounters a new group with an unfamiliar culture. Artifacts would include the visible products of the group such as the architecture of its physical environment, its language, its technology and products, its artistic creations, and its style as embodied in clothing, manners of address, emotional displays, myths and stories told about the organization, published lists of values, observable rituals and ceremonies, and so on. For purposes of cultural analysis this level also includes the visible behavior of the group and the organizational processes into which such behavior is made routine.

The most important point about this level of the culture is that it is easy to observe and very difficult to decipher. The Egyptians and the Maya both built highly visible pyramids, but the meaning of pyramids in each culture was very different—tombs in one and temples as well as tombs in the other. In other words, the observer can describe what she sees and feels but cannot reconstruct from that alone what those things mean in the given group, or, whether they even reflect important underlying assumptions.

On the other hand, one school of thought argues that one's own response to physical artifacts such as buildings and office layouts can lead to the identification of major images and root metaphors that reflect the deepest level of the culture (Gagliardi, 1990). This would be especially true if the organization one is deciphering is in the same larger culture as the researcher. The problem is that symbols are ambiguous, and one can only test one's insight into what something might mean if one has also experienced the culture at the level of its values and the level of its basic assumptions.

It is especially dangerous to try to infer the deeper assumptions from artifacts alone because one's interpretations will inevitably be projections of one's own feelings and reactions. For example, when one sees a very informal, loose organization, one may interpret that as inefficient if one's own background is based on the assumption that informality means playing around and not working. Alternatively, if one sees a very formal organization, one may interpret that to be a sign of lack of innovative capacity if one's own experience is based on the assumption that formality means bureaucracy and formalization.

Every facet of a group's life produces artifacts, creating the problem of classification. In reading cultural descriptions, one often notes that different observers choose to report on different sorts of artifacts, leading to noncomparable descriptions. Anthropologists have developed classification systems, but these tend to be so vast and detailed that cultural essence becomes difficult to discern.

If the observer lives in the group long enough, the meanings of artifacts gradually become clear. If, however, one wants to achieve this level of understanding more quickly, one can attempt to analyze the espoused values, norms, and rules that provide the day-to-day operating principles by which the members of the group guide their behavior. This kind of inquiry takes us to the next level of cultural analysis.

ESPPOSED VALUES

All group learning ultimately reflects someone's original values, someone's sense of what ought to be as distinct from what is. When a group is first created or when it faces a new task, issue, or problem, the first solution proposed to deal with it reflects some individual's own assumptions about what is right or wrong, what will work or not work.

Those individuals who prevail, who can influence the group to adopt a certain approach to the problem, will later be identified as “leaders” or founders, but the group as a group does not yet have any shared knowledge because it has not yet taken a common action in response to the new problem. Therefore, whatever is proposed can only have the status of a value from the point of view of the group, no matter how strongly the proponent may believe that he or she is uttering absolute proven truth. Until the group has taken some joint action and its members have together observed the outcome of that action, there is not as yet a shared basis for determining what is factual and real.

For example, in a young business if sales begin to decline, a manager may say, “We must increase advertising” because of her belief that advertising always increases sales. The group, never having experienced this situation before, will hear that assertion as a statement of that manager’s values: “She believes that when one is in trouble it is a good thing to increase advertising.” What the leader initially proposes, therefore, cannot have any status other than a value to be questioned, debated, challenged, and tested.

If the manager convinces the group to act on her belief and if the solution works and if the group has a shared perception of that success, then the perceived value that advertising is “good” gradually starts a process of *cognitive transformation*. First, it will be transformed into a *shared value or belief* and, ultimately, into a *shared assumption* (if action based on it continues to be successful). If this transformation process occurs—and it will occur only if the proposed solution continues to work, thus implying that it is in some larger sense “correct” and must reflect an accurate picture of reality—group members will tend to forget that originally they were not sure and that the proposed course of action was at an earlier time debated and controverted.

Not all values undergo such transformation. First of all, the solution based on a given value may not work reliably. Only values that are susceptible to physical or social validation and that continue to work reliably in solving the group’s problems will become transformed into assumptions. Second, value domains dealing with the less controllable elements of the environment or with aesthetic or moral matters may not be testable at all. In such cases consensus through social validation is still possible, but it is not automatic.

By social validation I mean that certain values are confirmed only by the shared social experience of a group. Such values typically involve the group’s internal relations, where the test of whether they work or not is how comfortable and anxiety-free members are when they abide by them. Social validation also applies to those broader values that involve relationships to the environment but in a non-testable fashion, such as religion, ethics, and aesthetics.

In these realms the group learns that certain such values, as initially promulgated by prophets, founders, and leaders, work in the sense of reducing uncertainty in critical areas of the group’s functioning. And as they continue to work, they gradually become transformed into nondiscussable assumptions supported by articulated sets of beliefs, norms, and operational rules of behavior. The derived beliefs and moral/ethical rules remain conscious and are explicitly articulated because they serve the normative or moral function of guiding members of the group in how to deal with certain key situations and in training new members in how to behave. A set of values that becomes

embodied in an ideology or organizational philosophy thus can serve as a guide and as a way of dealing with the uncertainty of intrinsically uncontrollable or difficult events. Values at this conscious level will predict much of the behavior that can be observed at the artifactual level. But if those values are not based on prior learning, they may also reflect only what Argyris and Schön (1978) have called *espoused values*, which predict well enough what people will say in a variety of situations but which may be out of line with what they will actually *do* in situations where those values should, in fact, be operating. Thus, a company may say that it values people and has high quality standards for its products, but its record in that regard may contradict what it says.

If the espoused values are reasonably congruent with the underlying assumptions, then the articulation of those values into a philosophy of operating can be helpful in bringing the group together, serving as a source of identity and core mission. But in analyzing values one must discriminate carefully between those that are congruent with underlying assumptions and those that are, in effect, either rationalizations or only aspirations for the future. Often such lists of values are not patterned, sometimes they are even mutually contradictory, and often they are inconsistent with observed behavior. Large areas of behavior are often left unexplained, leaving us with a feeling that we understand a piece of the culture but still do not have the culture as such in hand. To get at that deeper level of understanding, to decipher the pattern, and to predict future behavior correctly, we have to understand more fully the category of basic assumptions.

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

When a solution to a problem works repeatedly, it comes to be taken for granted. What was once a hypothesis, supported only by a hunch or a value, comes gradually to be treated as a reality. We come to believe that nature really works this way. Basic assumptions, in this sense, are different from what some anthropologists call dominant orientations in that such dominant orientations reflect the preferred solution among several basic alternatives, but all the alternatives are still visible in the culture, and any given member of the culture could, from time to time, behave according to variant as well as dominant orientations (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961).

Basic assumptions, in the sense in which I want to define the concept, have become so taken for granted that one finds little variation within a cultural unit. In fact, if a basic assumption is strongly held in a group, members will find behavior based on any other premise inconceivable. For example, a group whose basic assumption is that the individual's rights supersede those of the group members will find it inconceivable that members would commit suicide or in some other way sacrifice themselves to the group even if they had dishonored the group. In a capitalist country, it is inconceivable that one might design a company to operate consistently at a financial loss or that it does not matter whether or not a product works. Basic assumptions, in this sense, are similar to what Argyris has identified as *theories-in-use*, the implicit assumptions that actually guide behavior, that tell group members how to perceive, think about, and feel about things (Argyris, 1976; Argyris and Schön, 1974).

Basic assumptions, like theories-in-use, tend to be those we neither confront nor debate and hence are extremely difficult to change. To learn something new in this realm requires us to resurrect, reexamine, and possibly change some of the more stable

portions of our cognitive structure, a process that Argyris and others have called double-loop learning or frame breaking (for example, Argyris, Putnam, and Smith, 1985; Bartunek and Moch, 1987). Such learning is intrinsically difficult because the reexamination of basic assumptions temporarily destabilizes our cognitive and interpersonal world, releasing large quantities of basic anxiety.

Rather than tolerating such anxiety levels we tend to want to perceive the events around us as congruent with our assumptions, even if that means distorting, denying, projecting, or in other ways falsifying to ourselves what may be going on around us. It is in this psychological process that culture has its ultimate power. Culture as a set of basic assumptions defines for us what to pay attention to, what things mean, how to react emotionally to what is going on, and what actions to take in various kinds of situations. Once we have developed an integrated set of such assumptions, which might be called a thought world or mental map, we will be maximally comfortable with others who share the same set of assumptions and very uncomfortable and vulnerable in situations where different assumptions operate either because we will not understand what is going on, or, worse, misperceive and misinterpret the actions of others (Douglas, 1986). The human mind needs cognitive stability. Therefore, any challenge to or questioning of a basic assumption will release anxiety and defensiveness. In this sense, the shared basic assumptions that make up the culture of a group can be thought of at both the individual and group levels as psychological cognitive *defense mechanisms* that permit the group to continue to function. Recognizing this connection is important when one thinks about changing aspects of a group's culture, for it is no easier to do that than to change an individual's pattern of defense mechanisms. In either case the key is the management of the large amounts of anxiety that accompany any relearning at this level.

To understand how unconscious assumptions can distort data, consider the following example. If we assume, on the basis of past experience or education, that other people will take advantage of us whenever they have an opportunity, we expect to be taken advantage of and then interpret the behavior of others in a way that coincides with those expectations. We observe people sitting in a seemingly idle posture at their desks and interpret their behavior as loafing rather than thinking out an important problem. We perceive absence from work as shirking rather than doing work at home.

If this is not only a personal assumption but one that is shared and thus part of the organization's culture, we will discuss with others what to do about our "lazy" work force and institute tight controls to ensure that people are at their desks and busy. If employees suggest that they do some of their work at home, we will be uncomfortable and probably deny the request because we will assume that at home they would loaf (Bailyn, 1992; Perin, 1991).

In contrast, if we assume that everyone is highly motivated and competent, we will act in accordance with that assumption by encouraging people to work at their own pace and in their own way. If someone is discovered to be unproductive in the organization, we will assume that there is a mismatch between the person and the job assignment, not that the person is lazy or incompetent. If the employee wants to work at home, we will perceive that as evidence of wanting to be productive even if circumstances require him to be at home.

In both cases there is the potential for distortion. The cynical manager will not perceive how highly motivated some of the subordinates really are, and the idealistic manager will not perceive that there are subordinates who are lazy and who are taking