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Positioning Organizational Culture



❖ INTRODUCTION

If asked to do so, you could name many organizations. It is likely that you would first name the school you attend, where you work, and companies that manufacture products or provide services that you purchase and use. You might also name government institutions at local, state, and federal levels, nonprofits like the American Cancer Society, and civic and religious institutions such as neighborhood associations and churches. Each type of organization contributes to our collective economic, civic, community, and social lives in some fundamental way.

Each organization has a culture, and that is the focus of this book. *Organizational culture* is the set of artifacts, values, and assumptions that emerge from the interactions of organizational members. Although it is often difficult to describe, as employees we *know* what it's like in our organization. Whether we buy into them entirely or not, we are intuitively aware of values and beliefs that our co-workers, subordinates, and superiors hold about the work they perform in our particular organization. You may have even decided to join a company because it *felt* like an environment in which you could be successful. As

a customer or client, we encounter an organization's culture through our interactions with organizational members. Perhaps you return to a specific store—even though you have many other choices—because the service is good and the employees are friendly and personable. Or, perhaps you vow “to never return” because the store's return policy distinctively advantages their rights over yours. As an employee or a customer or client, you are exposed to the culture of every organization you encounter.

Managers and executives are particularly interested in organizational culture, often as a means for improving productivity, effectiveness, or efficiency. Other managers pay attention because they believe their organization's culture is unique and can be an effective tool in attracting quality employees or distinguishing the organization from competitors.

Employees can be interested in organizational culture, particularly when they make employment choices. Most of us need to work, and we want to work in environments that resonate with our values and ideas.

Trainers and consultants are interested in organizational culture. A web search for *organizational culture* conducted August 2010 using the Google search engine (www.google.com) resulted in over 4.2 million hits (up from 1.5 million hits in 2004). Clearly, organizational culture has become part of the business lexicon, and stories about organizational culture are regularly reported in the business press. Many commercial websites promote trainers' and consultants' strategies for implementing, changing, or improving organizational culture. Obviously, scholars who study management and organizational communication view organizational culture as central to their interest in organizations. In addition, psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists also study and explore organizational culture.

With this level and type of attention from practitioners, trainers, consultants, and scholars, one would think that we know all that we need to know about organizational culture. To the contrary, interest in organizational culture exists and continues to be stimulated because organizational culture is both changeable and complex, as it emerges from the interactions of organizational members. As organizational structures continue to morph in response to changes in economic, business, and social climates, our understanding of organizational culture is challenged.

Based on the research literature, this book treats organizational culture as a complex, communicative, and multidimensional process and introduces differing research and practical perspectives. The text

reveals conclusions that scholars have drawn from different research approaches. The text also has a practical side by drawing realistic applications from research findings. The primary objective of this book is to help you make sense of organizational culture and thereby help you to make informed work and employment decisions. Thus, this text encourages you to develop answers for four questions:

1. What is organizational culture?
2. How is organizational culture created?
3. Why does organizational culture matter?
4. What is my role in creating organizational culture?

Material in the text is presented in five sections. This first section—Positioning Organizational Culture—answers four questions: (a) What is an organization?, (b) What is organizational communication?, (c) What is culture?, and (d) What is organizational culture? This section concludes with the argument that understanding organizational culture is a primary means for understanding organizations and their communication practices.

The second section—Unpacking Organizational Culture—explores five core characteristics of organizational culture. These are the following: organizational culture (a) is inextricably linked to its employees; (b) is dynamic; (c) can hold competing values and assumptions; (d) is emotionally charged; and (e) is both the foreground and the background of the organization's communication system. This section also explores how organizational members communicate (and create) culture and how communication among organizational members reveals cultural elements. Central to the exploration of organizational culture are subcultures. Thus, this section also addresses subcultures: how subcultures are both a part of the culture yet also distinct and how subcultures are identified and structured relative to one another. This section closes by addressing what organizational culture is *not* and some common myths about organizational culture.

The third section—Lenses for Understanding Organizational Culture—starts with a description of the development of the organizational culture construct to show us how to position different lenses, or perspectives, for investigating and understanding organizational culture. Subsequent parts of this section explore the reflexive relationship of communication and organizational culture from the lenses of symbolic performance, narrative and textual reproduction, management, power and politics, technology, and globalization.

The fourth section—Developing, Managing, and Changing Organizational Culture—addresses the pragmatic issues of communication’s constitutive role in developing and managing organizational culture. A significant part of this section explores the ways in which organizational culture can change, intentionally or not. The role of formal and informal leaders and the role of ethics are explored for their influence on organizational culture.

The final section—The Culture Toolkit—concludes the book by providing descriptive and analytical tools to use in the exploration of organizational culture. The toolkit provides methodologies for conducting basic research studies of organizational culture or for use in applied studies with pragmatic consequences.

❖ WHAT IS AN ORGANIZATION?

Ordered and Purposeful Interaction Among People

One way to define *organization* is to identify its common elements. First, an organization is composed of people. Without people and their interaction, an organization could not exist. Whether as salaried, hourly, or contract employees or volunteers, these organizational members interact with one another and the organization’s clients and customers in purposeful goal-directed activity. Interaction in organizations is purposeful because people interact with organizations with a goal in mind. For example, cashiers at the grocery store expect that they will scan the products that customers bring to their checkout lanes. Customers visit the grocery store to buy items and expect products to be on the shelves in a reasonable order. Whether you are the cashier or the customer, you have an expectation about the communication that will occur as you engage in these organizational roles of store clerk and customer. The point here is that people in organizations do not act randomly. Rather, organizations are sites of controlled and coordinated activity. As Taylor (2006) describes, “the modern organization is a universe of endless talk, occurring both simultaneously and successively” (p. 147) across place and time. As a result, an organization “is always in the communication” (p. 156) and always being reconstituted by ongoing conversation in the social reality talk creates.

Our organizational role provides us with expectations and structures for our behaviors while we are engaged in that role. Admittedly, there may be occasional variations in expectations, but when I take on the role of professor at my university I expect to teach students in a

prescribed set of classes for a specified period. Communicating with others at the university (i.e., administrators, faculty colleagues, staff members, and students) helps me to both understand and enact my role. My set of interactions combined with the sets of interactions of other organizational role players (e.g., the department chair, the dean, other faculty, the computer technician, the librarian, and students) become the purposeful and ordered interactions that facilitate the university's achievement of its organizational goals.

Despite the organization's overall goals and ordered patterns of interaction, it is very likely that not all organizational members are directly connected to one another. It is possible even in small organizations that some employees will never communicate with each other. However, the patterns of ordered activity and the communication channels that support that activity in and of themselves create links among organizational members, so that despite the lack of direct connection, employees are indirectly linked through some type of network structure (Stohl, 1995).

Communicating Within and Across Structures

In most organizations, what we label as organizational structure is the way in which organizational activities are organized into functional or operational units. For example, employees who provide services to other employees are often part of a human resources or personnel department, while employees who create the goods an organization sells are part of the production or manufacturing unit. This type of deliberate structure is based on functional expertise. It is common for organizational structures to be delineated in this way. Common structural labels include *manufacturing*, *research and development*, *client services*, *accounting*, *information technology*, and so on. However, an organization's structure could also be delineated by time frame or geographical region. Manufacturing plants that operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week, are structured by shifts (e.g., the first shift starts work at 7:00 a.m. and is relieved by the second shift at 3:00 p.m., which is relieved by the third shift at 11:00 p.m.) Alternatively, an organization's structure could be geographically determined. For example, a construction management firm is organized by regional offices (New England, Delaware Valley, New York, Mid-Atlantic, Southeast, Central, Midwest, Southwest, and West), with its corporate office in Rhode Island. Of course, some organizations are so large that their structures are organized and identified by function, time frame, and geography (e.g., reservation clerks who work the overnight shift at the Phoenix

call center). In all organizations some type of hierarchy is created, and the power associated with hierarchical levels is distributed through the organizational structure, with some members having more rights, responsibilities, and power than others. Traditionally, there is a distinction among the organization's executive, supervisory, and employee levels. We can identify the power and responsibility associated with each by examining the messages communicated among levels, as well as by looking at how those messages are communicated. Executives administer the organization and are responsible for its overall direction and strategy. Supervisors facilitate groups of employees in the day-to-day work that supports this direction and strategy, and employees engage in the work to create and deliver the organization's product or service. Even alternative organizational forms that include greater employee participation or are team-based have some type of organizational structure that creates and maintains power (Harter, 2004). These structural elements are so powerful that, real or perceived, they become "the architect of organized participation" (Stohl & Cheney, 2001, p. 359).

Regardless of how an organization is structured, organizational members are distributed across space and time in different units, shifts, or locations by division of labor and by position or hierarchical level. While most organizational members regularly communicate with others within their unit, organizations cannot survive without their employees communicating across units as well. For example, the interdependence required to achieve continuous plant production demands a shift change meeting so that the operators on the first shift can describe how the equipment is working to those on the second shift. The organization's vice presidents, each responsible for a specific organizational function, will need to meet periodically as an executive team to discuss how functional goals of each area integrate to influence the success of their organization's long-term strategic goals. And, even though sales reps are responsible for different geographical territories, periodic sales meetings will be scheduled at the home office so that home office and field employees can address procedural issues to create better working relationships and serve customers more effectively. Thus, communication interdependencies within and across organizational structures create and maintain organizations.

A Superordinate Goal

Interdependent interaction is required because organizations are created to achieve superordinate goals. A superordinate goal is one that is

so difficult, time-consuming, and complex that it is beyond the capacity of one person. By bringing together people with different strengths and skills, an organization is able to achieve its goal. Few organizations can operate effectively using the resources of only one person. Even small or family businesses are dependent on the skills and talents of several organizational members, or contract employees, to achieve their goals.

Whether for profit or nonprofit, an organization must have its economic viability as part of its goal. For-profit organizations, like Target, McDonald's, and Visa, have superordinate goals of selling general merchandise, fast food, and financial services, respectively. However, these goals are intended to accomplish another superordinate goal, that is, to make money to pay operating expenses and deliver profits, which are then distributed to the organization's owners and perhaps the stockholders or employees. In a capitalistic society, making money is always an underlying organizational goal regardless of what type of product or service the organization manufactures or provides.

Even nonprofit organizations, whose purposes might be to provide services to children who have been abused or to protect the oceans and forests, must be concerned about their economic viability. While nonprofits typically do not make money by selling products or services, they cannot operate without capital. In the case of nonprofits, capital and operating expenses are raised through donations, earned from invested monies, or provided by institutional grantors or individuals who want the nonprofit to continue to provide services. The United Way and your local animal shelter are examples of nonprofits. Other nonprofits are more dependent upon cash received for services. Hospitals are a good example, as those that operate as nonprofits bill patients and insurance companies for services provided. However, regardless of its income source and the nature of its mission, whether it is charitable, religious, scientific, or educational, a nonprofit organization cannot legally make distributions to organizational members, officers, or directors. Rather, any surplus monies must be spent on providing the services for which the nonprofit organization was initially formed.

Government institutions and agencies at all levels must also raise monies to pay employees to provide us with our public services, such as trash collection, fire and police protection, emergency services, public school education, and highway maintenance. These institutions and agencies levy taxes on the people who use or benefit from their services, or they raise money through fees, such as the fee you pay to obtain your driver's license, register your car, or use a campsite.

Accordingly, economic viability is a part of any organization's superordinate goal. While it may appear that an organization's goal is to provide a service or sell a product, the unstated part of this goal is to make a profit. If a municipality's goal is to provide quality K–12 education, the unstated part of this goal is to provide the best quality of education that the municipality's educational budget will allow. Even if we were to remove the monetary aspect, the superordinate goals implicit in running a computer manufacturing or retail operation, for example, are so complex that no one person could efficiently and effectively achieve them. Regardless of the size of the organization, a superordinate goal implies that two or more individuals will work interdependently and cooperatively to facilitate the achievement of the organizational goals, which, in turn, serve as a vehicle or purpose for obtaining monies or the other resources required to sustain goal-directed activities.

A Dynamic System

Considering these first three characteristics of organizations—organized and purposeful interaction, communication within and across structural units, and a superordinate goal—it is easy to see that organizations are dynamic systems. Despite the ordered and purposeful interaction employees pursue in achieving a superordinate goal, communication within and across structural units is not predictable. An organizational system is dynamic because an organization must be responsive to and interact with its customers and clients, suppliers, and regulatory and economic environments. Although an organization has a target audience, or public, for its products and services, other stakeholders interact with and influence the organization. For example, Ford Motor Company expects suppliers to deliver components as they are needed in the car manufacturing process, rather than stockpiling parts and warehousing them until needed. This type of just-in-time manufacturing creates interdependencies between a Ford auto assembly plant and the organizations in its supplier network. Likewise, Ford, whose employees are members of the UAW (The International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America), must manufacture cars that meet emissions control standards set by governments in the locales where Ford vehicles are sold. Working with these organizations, the suppliers, the union, and the government agency, Ford is part of a dynamic system through which it influences other organizations, and at the same time is influenced by them.

The dynamics of these interdependent systems are further enhanced when Ford considers its customers, the auto-buying public.

Simply because Ford manufactures certain models does not ensure that these are the cars people want to purchase. Customers have preferences that may or may not be satisfied by Ford's current car designs. Moreover, the economic environment (e.g., the cost of living or the unemployment rate) can make it more or less likely that people will have money to spend on a major purchase such as a car.

Just as the needs of its external public contribute to the interdependencies and dynamics of the Ford organization, the internal public (Ford's employees) contributes to its dynamic nature. Organizations lose (through firing, layoffs, and retirements) and gain employees (through hiring and acquisition) on a regular basis. Although job functions and the number of employees may remain fairly stable across a period of time, the people who hold jobs in the organization can have different levels of skill and motivation. A successful employee can be promoted or transferred, temporarily or permanently, to another position. Employees take vacations and other types of leaves of absence. New employees take on the responsibilities of those who quit or are terminated. While the job functions are arguably the same, the people performing them are not.

Because organizations are dynamic, different people can perform the same functions, but the communication experience will not be the same.

Thus, an organization is an open social system (Weick, 2001), which creates a dynamic as it develops and maintains interdependencies with both internal and external stakeholders. Internally, an organization is dynamic because employees move in and out of the organizational structure as they are promoted, hired, or fired. The relationships among employees can also differ based on which employees are promoted and which are scheduled for a particular shift or task. Because the contingent of employees is not stable, an organization's relationships among its external stakeholders are also dynamic.

Organization Defined

Thus, an *organization* is a dynamic system of organizational members, influenced by external stakeholders, who communicate within and across organizational structures in a purposeful and ordered way to achieve a superordinate goal. With this definition, an organization is not defined by its size, purpose, or structure. Rather, an organization is defined by the linguistic properties that reside in its internal and external communication interdependencies (Deetz, 1992; Weick, 1979). An organization can change its physical location and replace its members without breaking down because it is essentially a patterned set of

discourses that at some point were created by the members and codified into norms and practices that are later inherited, accepted, and adapted to by newcomers. Because an organization emerges through communication, it is always being constituted; it is “a property of communication” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 37).

An organization is also a real and practical place (Boden, 1994; Kuhn & Ashcraft, 2003). Several streams of communication through multiple channels in multiple contexts continually constitute the organization. Face-to-face informal conversations among a group of co-workers, a written performance evaluation of a subordinate by a superior, phone conversations between customer service agents and clients, a formal meeting among executives with others in a video conference, and a persuasive plea by an employee to a boss for an extra day of vacation prior to a holiday—all constitute ongoing moments of the organization. It is a flexible, interactional system composed of layers of ongoing conversations. Although it is common to reference *the* organization, it is not necessarily a monolithic or unified actor (Martin, 2002; Trice & Beyer, 1993; Weick, 1985). It is a symbolic and social construction of the ongoing and overlapping conversations of its members (Taylor & Van Every, 2000).

Assumptions About Organizations

In any study or discussion of organizations, two assumptions about them must be addressed (Weick, 2001). First, organizations are open social systems. Everything an organization does is done through its members who process and communicate information from both internal and external sources. Yet an organization does have a memory of sorts. “Individuals come and go, but organizations preserve knowledge, behaviors, mental maps, norms, and values over time” (Weick, 2001, p. 243). When information is shared among organizational members and codified or captured in some way, an organizational interpretation exists beyond that of its individual members. These interpretations get passed from employee to employee, creating a “thread of coherence” (Weick, 2001, p. 243) even though there may not be full convergence. The interactions of individuals create an organizational-level interpretation that can be passed on to others and acted on by others.

Second, organizational-level interpretations more commonly reflect the views of upper-level managers or owners. Charged with the strategic operation of the organization, executives (e.g., vice-president level and higher) have multiple opportunities to purposely direct or unintentionally influence what the organizational-level interpretation will become. In most organizations, top-level executives are a relatively small

proportion of employees, yet their influence is disproportionately large. Because their job responsibilities include analyzing information drawn from a variety of sources, departments, or functions, top-level executives create interpretations that speak for the organization as a whole.

Defining an organization as a dynamic system of organizational members, influenced by external stakeholders, who communicate within and across organizational structures in a purposeful and ordered way to achieve a superordinate goal forces us to take a closer look at what constitutes organizational communication. Although communication is required for an organization to exist, it is common for us to refer to *the organization* separately from the communication processes that sustain it.

❖ WHAT IS ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION?

Without communication, could an organization . . .

- Develop products or services?
- Market or sell its products and services?
- Respond to the concerns of its customers or clients?
- Respond to the demands and influences of external stakeholders?
- Coordinate employees?
- Plan and manage its internal affairs?

It should be obvious that organizations cannot exist without communication. Even before the members are communicating with potential customers and clients, they must communicate with one another to create and develop the organization's products and services. Thus, an organization emerges from communication and continues to emerge from the communication of its members (Taylor & Van Every, 2000).

Organizational communication is not confined to messages within or to any particular stakeholder group. For an organization to exist, communication must occur with all stakeholder groups—current and potential employees, current and potential clients and customers, current and potential suppliers, and regulators or those who may have a regulatory role in the future. Some organizational communication is devoted solely to socializing new members or negotiating one's position in the organization. Some organizational communication, particularly that of management, is devoted to structuring or

controlling the organization. Some organizational communication is devoted to negotiating and coordinating work activities—in other words, the communication that produces the work. Finally, some organizational communication is devoted to positioning the organization within the marketplace and society. Although initially directed to different stakeholders, these four types of role-related or work-related communication are likely to be interrelated or to overlap (McPhee & Zaug, 2001).

Frequently, business communication is confused with organizational communication. Organizational communication includes business communication, which includes formalized and planned messages codified in letters, memos, reports, websites, and advertising campaigns. Thus, business communication is what we refer to as the activities of leadership, supervision, decision making, managing conflict, hiring, firing, and so on.

However, organizational communication also includes informal and day-to-day interactions among organizational members. Informal conversations include personal stories, gossip, rumors, and socializing that also reveal important cultural information (Ibarra & Andrews, 1993), especially when informal or casual talk is intertwined with task talk, such as when casual conversation begins or ends professional meetings (Boden, 1994).

Together the formal and informal message systems across many channels create a context in which any one message is interpreted and understood relative to the others. A message cannot be isolated or disassociated from an organization's context. Rather, any message sent or received by an organizational member is interpreted for meaning against the background of all other messages sent and received. A more complete picture of organizational communication is created when we think of messages in a pattern of coordinated moves among organizational members. Interaction requires two or more people, and, from a transactional view of communication, one person cannot dictate how others will respond to or initiate conversations. Viewing organizational communication in this way reminds us that new possibilities are continually being realized because the conversation can never be controlled (Barge & Little, 2002).

Organizational Communication Defined

Thus, *organizational communication* is a complex and continuous process through which organizational members create, maintain, and change the organization. Two important issues need to be addressed with this

definition. First, it is important to note that all organizational members participate in this process. Communication is not the sole responsibility or privilege of managers. Even if managers create and send most of the messages, their subordinates and peers create meaning from those messages. Second, while the process is said to be transactional in which all parties enact both sender and receiver roles to create mutual and shared meanings of messages, shared meaning is not always achieved in organizational settings. Certainly, the process is mutual, and understandings are created. However, the interpretations created or derived from these interactions may not be mutual (Stohl, 1995).

Because organizations must address and meet their monetary needs, organizations are also sites of hierarchy, dominance, and power, with organizational members having varying degrees of power and status and varying degrees of control over message creation and message meaning. For example, Cedric, the family member who manages his family's specialty retail store, has more power and status than non-family members employed there. In this role, Cedric will create more of the organizational messages intended to prescribe organizational policies and practices. However, of the nonfamily employees, Sarah, who has worked there the longest, is likely to be perceived as having more power and status than the others have. Indeed, other employees look to Sarah for her advice about interacting with customers and, as a result of her mentoring, increase their commissions. However, what if a new employee who is also a family member has just been hired? Would this new employee have more power and status due to his familial connections? Or would nonfamily employees have more power and status due to their experience at the store? This example identifies two realities of organizational life. First, that power and status vary among organizational members. Second, that power and status vary along a number of dimensions. Thus, it is likely that on some level you will have more power and status than other employees.

Certainly, the varying degrees of organizational power and status will influence how you create meaning for and from organizational messages. Other factors will also influence what you communicate about, how you communicate, and how you create meaning in an organization. These include your interest in the job you perform or the profession with which you identify, your interest in the organization you work for, the people you work with, and the rewards work provides to you.

Finally, the number and nature of competing roles you are enacting will also influence what you communicate about, how you communicate, and how you create meaning in an organization. Many students who work part time consider their work roles secondary to their roles

as students. Employees with families or those who are heavily vested in a hobby or volunteering may also view their work roles as secondary to their other commitments. However, there are individuals in every organization who view their organizational role as primary over all others. Although we are voluntary members of organizations, our membership in organizations differs along a number of characteristics, each of which influences our level of participation in the communication process.

As a result of these characteristics, organizational messages vary across several dimensions. Some organizational messages are intended to be strategic and task oriented. For example, imagine that you are the afternoon supervisor at a restaurant. It is your responsibility to oversee three simultaneous goals. First, you must ensure that the customers are served. Second, you must check that your employees prepare the ingredients needed for dinner meals. Third, you must be certain that the restaurant is kept clean because it is subject to random inspection by your manager or the country health inspector. As you have gained experience as a supervisor, you have learned which employees can be relied upon to effectively perform specific tasks, how the tasks are interrelated, and how to estimate the flow of dining traffic during the afternoon hours. Therefore, as you start your shift, you are able to give specific instructions to your employees. These are strategic messages because you are instructing employees on *what* to focus on and *how* to carry out these tasks. Your communication with the employees is strategic in nature because as their supervisor you want to control their behavior and work performance. Other instances of communication that you have with them are informal and more personally oriented, such as chatting with your manager about your weekend plans while waiting for a conference call to begin.

Some information in organizations is communicated verbally or nonverbally, while other messages are communicated in writing or electronically. Certain messages are communicated solely to an individual; others are communicated to groups. Some messages are internal, as they are communicated to other employees; some are external, as they are communicated to people external to the organization such as customers or vendors.

To illustrate these varied message types, return to the previous restaurant scenario. As the afternoon supervisor, you start the shift with a brief shift meeting explaining the prep work that needs to be done for the evening shift and the cleaning tasks that need to be accomplished. Once given their instructions, the employees conduct their duties and you return to the office to finish your month-end reports and to put the finishing touches on a cake to celebrate one server's

upcoming college graduation. Before you can surprise your employee with the graduation celebration, you notice that the buzz in the restaurant is louder than what is customary for this time of day. You walk toward the serving area to find that a bus of tourists is visiting your restaurant. These patrons are waiting to have their orders taken. By observing the wait staff's hurried movements, you can tell that they are overwhelmed, so you pitch in by taking orders from the large tables the tourists have pushed together for themselves. After writing down the orders, you deliver them to the cooks and begin assisting in preparing the food. As one server prepares a salad, you look at the monitor for other salad orders and see that a second customer has ordered the same item. To save time, you ask this employee to prepare the salad needed by the other server. As the cook finishes the meals and places them under the serving lights, you let another server know that you will help her to deliver her customers' meals. As you empty your tray, you notice a raised hand from a customer whose order you took. You walk over to answer her question. Finally, all of the orders have been delivered and the unexpected afternoon rush is over. The restaurant traffic returns to normal and you determine that the afternoon crew can handle the remaining customers and prep tasks. You return to your office and write out a procedure for handling a large volume of customers. However, before you print it out, you e-mail the procedure to your manager to obtain her feedback and approval. Once approved, you intend to use the new procedure as a training tool. After all this is done, you look around to see what should be done next and notice that you have forgotten the graduation cake. Meekly you take the cake out to the serving area, hoping to gather enough employees to celebrate the server's graduation from college even though the afternoon and evening shifts are changing places.

Within these few minutes, you have sent and received strategic and spontaneous, formal and informal, verbal, nonverbal, written, and electronic messages. You have communicated internally with other employees and your manager and externally with customers, and you have communicated with individuals and groups of people. Moreover, like most employees, you moved flexibly among these types and methods of communicating without even thinking of them in this discrete way. Although you sent specific and distinct messages, the messages were not independent. Rather, the messages were part of a communication system in which meaning was derived from the communication context that included the roles (e.g., manager, wait staff, cook, customer) in which individuals were engaged. Some of your messages were strategic. For example, you instructed one server to prepare a salad for an order taken by another to save time. Some of your messages

were spontaneous. You noticed a customer's raised hand and responded immediately to her request.

Thus, *organizational communication* is a complex and continuous process through which organizational members create, maintain, and change the organization by communicating verbally, nonverbally, electronically, and in writing with individuals and groups of people engaged in roles as internal and external stakeholders. It is important to note here that this definition views communication as consequential. Real consequences, intended or not, arise from our communication in organizations.

Do you notice the similarity in the definitions of *organization* and *organizational communication*? These two concepts are inextricably linked. Communication is not superimposed on an organization. Rather, organizations emerge from communication, making all communication organizational (Taylor & Van Every, 2000).

❖ WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture was initially a concept applied to social groupings that were geographically distinguished from one another, and became the focus of anthropological studies. One early definition provides that culture

consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constitutes the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values. (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952, p. 181)

From early anthropological studies, the focus was on the complex whole, not any one element of culture, and culture was synonymous with societal boundaries. Over time, as the discipline of anthropology evolved, so did the concept of culture.

Hofstede (2001) has offered that culture is "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (p. 11). With this definition, we can view culture as a system of values for any group of people, not just societies or nations. Regardless of perspective, anthropologists search for the "meaning underlying human creations, behaviors, and thoughts . . . by observing cultural aspects" (Sackmann, 1991, p. 14). The primary contribution of anthropologists to the study of culture has

been their integrated and detailed accounts of cultural phenomena, which have been adopted by communication scholars.

Sociologists also study culture, but they do so in a different way. The sociological tradition is to focus on subgroups of society (e.g., first-year college students, blue-collar workers). From this perspective, culture is conceptualized as a collection of the ideas, themes, and values expressed by a particular social group (Sackmann, 1991). Thus, a sociological view of culture examines culture across a type of person (many of whom do not interact with each other, not even indirectly), while an anthropological view of culture examines the integrated patterns within an interacting community.

In today's society, references to culture are many. We commonly speak about national culture (e.g., American culture), ethnic or racial cultures (e.g., African American culture, Jewish culture), regional culture (e.g., Southern culture), and more localized cultures (e.g., Memphis, Tennessee, your university, or even your neighborhood). In each of these instances, people interacting in these social structures create their culture. Culture is not produced for them; it is produced by them as they interact with one another. Moreover, a culture is continually reproduced by its members. Thus, patterns, expectations, and norms emerge as meanings and are negotiated and renegotiated as members enter and exit the social structure.

Like any social group, the complex web of messages sent and received by members in an organization is interpreted by these members, and the interpretation results in patterns and expectations. The interplay of messages and meanings creates a culture, or a set of artifacts, values, and assumptions, by which people choose their subsequent behaviors and messages and against which the behaviors and messages are interpreted. Hence, culture is both a process and a product (Bantz, 1993).

Furthermore, just as culture is both a process and a product, culture is also confining and facilitating. Culture is confining because it acts as a perspective or framework, limiting what we see and how we interpret what we see. On the other hand, culture is also facilitating, as it allows us to make sense of what is happening so that we can function in that setting. The social reality of any group is simultaneously tied to its traditions anchored in the past, and open to revised or new interpretations based on the interactions of its members. Indeed, culture is learned and passed on from one generation to another, and defines groups and distinguishes them from other social groups (Stohl, 2001).

How do we know when something becomes a part of culture? Three criteria guide our acceptance of something as culture. These are

when meanings are: (a) deeply felt or held, (b) commonly intelligible, and (c) widely accessible to the cultural group (Carbaugh, 1988a). At the same time, any specific aspect of culture is intertwined with other cultural aspects. No one symbol or value exists in isolation; rather, a combination of symbols and values creates culture.

Cultural symbols—physical indicators of organizational life (Rafaeli & Worline, 2000)—are deeply felt or held when they tap into emotions or identity. For example, students at the University of Kansas identify strongly with the Jayhawk, the university's mascot. Students, staff, and faculty proudly display the Jayhawk on their hats, sweat-shirts, and jackets. The Jayhawk appears on university posters, business cards, and websites. Jayhawk statues are on display on campus and in the community. The Jayhawk is a cultural symbol at the university. Students, staff, faculty, alumni, and local businesspeople identify with the Jayhawk symbol. It identifies them as belonging to a specific university and, as a result, ties them to others who are part of the Jayhawk community.

Classifying or referring to someone as a Jayhawk separates people into two cultural groups: those who are Jayhawks and those who are not. Not only do those in the University of Kansas community identify themselves as Jayhawks, others outside this group are able to label them as Jayhawks as well. Within the University of Kansas community, the Jayhawk is more than just a convenient way to identify with the sports team and display loyalty to it. The legend of the Jayhawk and how it became the university's mascot is retold every fall during student and faculty orientations. The meaning of the Jayhawk is commonly understood. No one would point at another mascot and say, "That's a Jayhawk."

However, while there is a common identification of what a Jayhawk is, and acknowledgment that this symbol stands for the University of Kansas, there is some variety about what beliefs and values are represented by the Jayhawk. For some, the Jayhawk denotes excellence in college basketball. For others, the Jayhawk represents democratic values championed by the Civil War-era individuals who made Kansas a free state. For still others, the Jayhawk is simply a way to label oneself as being part of the University of Kansas community. Each of these interpretations is generated from the same Jayhawk symbol. Some individuals may carry multiple interpretations of the symbol; others may carry only one. Often the interpretation is context dependent.

The Jayhawk itself is not the culture; it is a physical identifier of the University of Kansas community and a symbolic representation of the

artifacts, values, and assumptions created by the individuals who comprise the University of Kansas social structure. A symbol always represents something different or more than itself because it combines the concrete or direct experience with an abstract feeling or attitude (Alvesson & Berg, 1991). In summary, a symbol is a collective representation of a culture when the symbol or meaning is deeply felt or held, is interpretable within a community, and is widely accessible to members of the community.

Thus, it would be impossible for any culture to be stagnant. Although some cultures change more dramatically or frequently than others, there is always opportunity for new cultural interpretations to be generated as individuals enter and exit a community and as members interact to make sense of their environment. The culture creation process is not simple. Members of the community influence it as they interact with one another and as they respond to threats and opportunities in both their internal and external environments.

❖ WHAT IS ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE?

Given the definitions of *organization*, *organizational communication*, and *culture* introduced in this section, it should be clear that some type of culture would emerge from any collection of individuals who comprise themselves as an organization. Individuals in an organization are held together—positively or negatively, loosely or tightly—by their communication within and across the organizational structure as they work to satisfy the organization’s superordinate goal, as well as their personal or professional goals. Just as an organization is enacted through the interactions of its members, an organizational culture emerges from the complex and continuous web of communication among members of the organization.

There are many definitions of *organizational culture*. Schein (2004) defines it as

a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group 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. (p. 17)

His definition implicitly recognizes the structural stability of culture that is both deep (often unconscious) and broad (covering all of a

group's functions), which results from the human need to integrate elements into a coherent whole. Schein further argues that culture can be analyzed at three different levels: artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions.

Martin (2002) defines organizational culture as "patterns of interpretation composed of the meanings associated with various cultural manifestations, such as stories, rituals, formal and informal practices, jargon, and physical arrangements" (p. 330). Further characterizing the boundaries of organizational culture as fluctuating, permeable, and blurred, Martin also argues that organizational culture is a subjective phenomenon viewed differently by different people. Her perspective cautions us in making quick decisions about who is in or out of an organizational culture simply by identifying employees as organizational members. She also argues that we should not assume that organizational culture is tied to a specific physical location or to a specific collection of people.

For example, a sales representative for a footwear manufacturer travels throughout his territory west of the Mississippi River; the other sales rep covers the territory east of the Mississippi. The manufacturer's headquarters, or home-office, is in South Carolina, which the two sales reps visit three times per year. If we were to view organizational culture as residing in a location, then the two sales reps would not be part of it. To the contrary, their frequent phone and e-mail contact with one another and home-office employees contributes to the creation of the organization's culture just as much as the more frequent and face-to-face interactions among home-office employees contribute to the organization's culture. Are the sales reps influenced by the organization's culture? Yes, but the intensity of that cultural connection is likely to be different from the cultural influences felt by employees in the home office. The intensity of the employee-cultural connection can also vary among home-office employees; some employees are more connected to and more influenced by the organization's culture than others. There must be some degree of collective interaction to create and share patterns of interpretation, yet what is shared is not complete or total.

Parker (2000) argues for a perspective in which *culture* and *organization* fold into one another, with the culture making process occurring in organizations and the organizing process occurring in culture. His view also stresses that culture is not a mechanism internal to an organization. Rather, "culture making processes take place 'inside,' 'outside' and 'between' formal organizations," resulting in many different senses of culture (p. 82). He points out that neither organization nor culture are cohesive or definitive wholes with stable references because

history and everyday practice are being drawn together. This results, he argues, in a continual process of creating shifting and temporary meanings that are often contested or competing. Thus, Parker's definition of organizational culture is "a continually contested process of making claims of difference within and between groups of people who are formally constituted as members of a defined group" (p. 233).

Common to these definitions are several features. First, organizational culture must be shared by a collective. That collective, or group, can vary in size from a small work unit to a division, or from a handful of employees to all employees. Those who share cultural elements may not be confined to any one department or unit. Organizational members who share cultural elements are drawn together by their meaningful and shared interpretation, not necessarily by their job function or location. Those organizational members who share these interpretations are likely to say, "It's how *we* do things around here."

Second, organizational culture is a multilevel construct comprising many elements—primarily artifacts, values, and assumptions. As a set, these elements guide our organizational behavior, help us make sense of the organizational world in which we operate, and create a mechanism for identifying with others at work. Although the artifact, value, and assumption categorization scheme is commonly referenced, organizational culture phenomena are not so neatly identified.

These categories are hardly ever seen as exclusive. Instead, they may be associated with different layers of social practice and consciousness, some visible and accessible, while others are hidden and, for that reason, thought to be much harder to change. (Schoenberger, 1997, p. 117)

An organizational culture is a system of artifacts, values, and assumptions—not any one artifact, value, or assumption. For example, an artifact (e.g., Monday morning sales meetings with bagels and fruit) may reflect values (e.g., a strong emphasis on employee participation, leadership visibility) that, in turn, reflect underlying ideological assumptions (e.g., get employees together on Monday morning while they are fresh; motivate them with this week's goals so that the organization can meet its monthly sales target). In this case, the artifacts, values, and assumptions create a congruent pattern of understanding.

It is also possible that an artifactual representation of organizational values is not meaningfully or similarly held by all employees. For example, at a global transportation company, all employees are given a card to carry in their wallets and a plaque for their desks. On one side is the organization's vision statement. On the other side are the company's

guiding principles about leadership. Despite the presence of the artifact—and some would say despite the top management’s obvious preoccupation with having the organization’s vision and leadership principles in front of the organization’s managers—not all managers adhere to the leadership principles. Some even scoff at them or interpret them in humorous ways among trusted colleagues. Top management expects all managers to have the vision and principles memorized. However, doing so does not move the vision and leadership principles from artifacts to enacted values. The following sections provide a more detailed explanation of artifacts, values, and assumptions, and their roles in the process of creating organizational culture.

Artifacts

Artifacts are visible or tangible—anything that one can see, hear, or feel in the organizational experience—and often the first things we notice about an organization when we enter it. Norms, standards, and customs are artifacts just like the more physical attributes of organizational life. Social conventions (e.g., celebrations, forms of address) of the organization are easy to observe, but they can be difficult to decipher because the path back to the value that prompted the artifact is not always direct or clear. Interpretation of artifacts is further complicated because organizational life produces a great number of artifacts and observers cannot focus on all of them. Therefore, most analyses of an organization’s artifacts are partial. Thus, a valid interpretation of an organization’s culture cannot be constructed from its artifacts alone (Schein, 2004). While artifacts are easy to observe, it is difficult to reconstruct what artifacts mean to a particular group of employees.

Often the first artifact associated with an organization is its logo. Not only does a logo indicate the presence of the organization, it also distinguishes it from other organizations. Created with a unique font, color, spacing, and often artwork and a slogan, a logo not only represents an organization, but also what the organization stands for—promises to employees and other stakeholders (Schultz, Hatch, & Ciccolella, 2006). In addition to representing an organization, logos are often placed on everyday functional objects, such as coffee cups and keychains, to further embed what the logo stands for with employees and external stakeholders. Used in this way, the logo is used as a device for “embedding identity claims in organizational culture” (p. 159).

Not all artifacts are as obvious as logos. One artifact that becomes especially important in studying organizational culture is norms. A norm is a way in which a collective, or group of people, engages in routine behavior. More specifically, a norm is a (a) pattern of behavior or

communication (b) that indicates what people should do in a specific setting. It is also a (c) collective expectation of what behavior should be or what reaction should be given to a particular behavior. Thus, norms are informal or unconsciously held rules for how people should behave and communicate (Bantz, 1983; Feldman, 1984; Gibbs, 1965) and powerful forms of social control (Bettenhausen & Murnighan, 1985).

Despite this power, norms are rarely explicitly or directly addressed or acknowledged. Rather, norms become routine and unstated expectations about behavior. Organizational members do not regularly discuss what the norms are, but they are likely to admit that a particular communication practice is a norm if it is pointed out to them. In many organizations, the normative practice is to use first names when speaking with other members of your work group. However, the norm shifts to using a person's last name when that individual is not present. For example, in a meeting, my colleagues will use "Joann" to get my attention or ask me a question, but when referring to me in my absence, the norm is to say, "I'll talk to Keyton about that." As with assumptions and values, artifacts are derived from symbols and, as such, are the basis of organizational culture.

Values

Individual organizational members can hold values, but it is the values shared by organizational members that are of importance to organizational culture. A value is "a broad tendency to prefer certain states of affairs over others" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 5) and determines our view of reality. *Values* are strategies, goals, principles, or qualities that are considered ideal, worthwhile, or desirable and, as a result, create guidelines for organizational behavior. Values have both intensity and direction. Thus, values can be seen as being dimensional with each having a plus and minus pole; for example, rational versus irrational and dangerous versus safe. Frequently, we talk about organizations having values. More accurately, individuals within an organization share values. Values are human properties, thus when we talk about organizations having values, we mean so only metaphorically (Stackman, Pinder, & Connor, 2000).

Values that are often associated with work and organizations include prestige, wealth, control, authority, ambition, pleasure, independence, creativity, equality, tolerance, respect, commitment, politeness, and harmony (see Table 1.1). Organizational cultures comprise many values that are interdependent in some way. While one set of values may support one another (e.g., independence and personal achievement), other values may conflict (e.g., autonomy and teamwork).

Table 1.1 Common Organizational Values

accomplishment	friendliness
accountability	fun
accuracy	generosity
ambition	harmony
challenge	honesty
collaboration	improvement
compassion	independence
competency	individuality
coordination	influence
courage	innovativeness
creativity	integrity
credibility	learning
customer orientation	loyalty
dedication	optimism
dependability	persistence
dignity	quality
discipline/order	recognition
diversity	respect
efficiency	responsibility
empathy	security
empowerment	service
equality	stewardship
excellence	teamwork
flexibility	wisdom

Despite their importance to understanding an organization's culture, values are invisible and difficult to discern until they are manifested in behavior (Hofstede, 2001) and shared by organizational members in a social experience (Schein, 2004). Some values are subconsciously held and become assumptions that we use in choosing our behavior and communication without consciously considering the choices we are making. Thus, the values of an organization are often visible in the actions of its employees, and the values influence how organizational members facilitate and practice communication.

Values are almost always phrased in a positive way, making it difficult for someone to disagree (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008). For

example, who would want to disagree with his or her boss that *credibility* or *respect* were important organizational values? It's easy for people to agree on values that are believed to be important, but it is far more difficult to really understand what behavior or communication is associated with a particular value. To promote a value, organizational employees must also make meaning of it.

For example, Josh, a new marketing employee, would probably have difficulty discovering why accounting processes are discussed at every meeting, especially those meetings that ostensibly have little to do with accounting. The discussions of accounting are so frequent and central to the flow of the meetings that Josh believes he is missing a critical piece of information. His observations of the work environment do not provide any clues, and he is hesitant to ask because, to him, it looks like he is asking about the obvious. In a lunch conversation, a colleague casually says the following to him while talking about his potential promotion:

You do know that our CEO was an accountant? That's why he likes all of the vice presidents to be accountants, or at least have considerable accounting knowledge. Even Lurinda, our VP of Human Resources, has an accounting background. So, I took some accounting courses so I could feel more confident making contributions in the meeting. What kind of accounting background do you have?

In this organization, accounting skills are obviously highly valued, and this value creates assumptions about what people should know, what is important to discuss, and who should be promoted. This example illustrates another characteristic about values. Values that are shared inevitably become transformed into assumptions that seldom are overtly discussed in conversation.

❖ ASSUMPTIONS

Assumptions are beliefs that are taken for granted, so deeply entrenched that organizational members no longer discuss them. Although deeply held, these tacit assumptions are subtle, abstract, and implicit. Organizational members can hold assumptions about themselves (e.g., as professionals, employees); about their relationships to other organizational members, clients, customers, vendors, and other external stakeholders; about the organization itself; or about the work that they

perform. For example, one assumption held by printing press operators of a plant that produces and prints magazines is that any errors that make it into print are the responsibility of the editorial side of the operation located in another city. Even if a press operator notices an error as she checks the initial copies for the quality of printing, she dismisses it without notifying anyone. The “we just print what they give us” attitude allows the press operators to produce the magazine “on schedule ‘cause that’s our job.” The assumption about the division of work is so deeply held that press operators, and even their supervisors, do not recognize printing thousands of copies of magazines with errors as a problem.

As this example demonstrates, basic assumptions are acted on with such little variation that any other action is inconceivable. In this way, assumptions guide behavior by directing how organizational members should perceive, think, feel, and act. Because assumptions do not rise to the level of conversation, they are extremely difficult to change. In fact, assumptions are so ingrained that the organizational members who hold the assumptions are often unable to articulate them until they are confronted with a different set of assumptions that they might encounter when changing jobs or when an organization undergoes radical change.

As an integrated set, basic assumptions provide a map by which we engage our organizational lives. Assumptions are so powerful that we run the risk of not understanding or misinterpreting the actions of others who behave according to a different set of assumptions (Schein, 2004). Interviews with employees who work for a company that designs and produces packaged holiday-themed gifts revealed that they are so accustomed to doing whatever it takes to get the product out that they are stumped when someone asks, “Who do you report to?” Stephanie, a gift designer, explained it this way:

Sometimes I report to my boss. But other times I don’t report to anyone. Our business demands that we work quickly to take advantage of purchasing deals and to accommodate our retail customers’ objectives, and to create gifts within specific price points. So, my reporting structure isn’t necessarily hierarchical—I get an okay if there’s someone who can approve what I’m doing. But really, the reporting structure is based on what aspect of gift design is a problem at the moment. You know—sometimes, my VP doesn’t even know what I’m doing.

Thus, for this organization, the assumption of “do whatever is necessary to make the customer happy” is the foundation of the approval process, quite different from an organization in which employees

work within a strict hierarchical structure with different levels of approval. Stephanie explained further,

Vendors and customers sometimes ask me, “Who needs to approve this concept?” Frankly, that’s me—I’m the one who designs it and has to bring it to market within a certain margin of the retail price. That’s just how we operate. I’m not sure I could even draw an organization chart out. When we hire someone new, this is really hard to explain. They [the newcomer] expect that we have some type of chart that tells them who does what. The bottom line: If you have to have approval to feel confident about your work, this probably isn’t the place for you.

The profit-centered assumption, or focus on the bottom line, is so embedded in this organization and accepted by Stephanie and other employees that making decisions in any other manner would not make sense to them. Watching Stephanie create a gift product reinforces her deep acceptance of the profit-centered assumption. Rather than starting with a design concept or stylized drawing, Stephanie starts the design process for each gift product with a price point—that is, how much a retail customer will pay measured against how much the retailer will pay the gift design company relative to the profit the design company will make selling 10,000 copies of the gift. With these numbers, or margins, in mind, Stephanie phones her suppliers to ask, for example, “What ceramic mug or bowl do you have that I can buy for 16 cents? I need 10,000.” If her price is accepted, she gives the supplier a purchase order number, without consulting the vice president she reports to, and starts to identify and negotiate for the elements of the gift that can fit into the mug or bowl. In this company, a gift is designed based primarily on profit-centered assumptions and purchasing opportunities rather than on creative or artistic features.

❖ INTEGRATION OF ARTIFACTS, VALUES, AND ASSUMPTIONS

Although an organization’s culture is composed of artifacts, values, and assumptions, organizational members seldom talk directly about any of these. More typically, organizational members *reveal* their assumptions and values through their communication—communicating about the organization and what happened in the organization. Thus, organizational culture is revealed through the day-to-day conversations that

organizational members have with other insiders and outsiders. Moreover, much of that communication revolves around the artifact manifestations of culture. How is organizational culture revealed? It is revealed as organizational members create and enact rites, rituals, and ceremonies; practice norms or procedures; use specialized language; and tell stories or use metaphors. Organizational culture is in the communicating.

It is important to recognize that no single artifact, value, or assumption is, or can create, an organization's culture. Rather, culture emerges from the complex interplay of these elements in the organizational communication of all of the organization's members, at all levels, in all job functions. As a result, culture is an extremely subtle phenomenon (Isaac & Pitt, 2001) that is not entirely obvious to those in or outside of the organization. Because all organizational members help to create and sustain it, culture permeates all levels and functions of an organization, making it nearly impossible to see its totality in one set of interactions.

Organizational Culture Defined

From these commonalities, this book uses the following definition of organizational culture: *Organizational culture is the set(s) of artifacts, values, and assumptions that emerges from the interactions of organizational members.* An organization's culture becomes the framework against which organizational communication is evaluated and is the avenue for creating ongoing collective and individual action. This definition embraces the notion that organizations are "evolving, dynamic, complex cultural systems with inconsistencies and paradoxes, and several cultural groupings or meaning systems" (Sackmann, 1990, p. 138). An organization does not have a culture; it is culture (Smircich, 1983).

❖ ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND YOU

Why should you be interested in the study of organizational culture? Inevitably you will be a member of many organizational cultures: the culture of the for-profit, nonprofit, or government organization for which you work; the civic and social organizations in which you volunteer your time; and the community and religious organizations in which you celebrate and create social ties. You will contribute to the creation, maintenance, and development of these organizational cultures.

As a member of these organizations, your communication with other organizational members will influence the cultures that are created. Studying the intersection of organizational communication and organizational culture is central to your role as an organizational member. In organizations, communication functions both as the instrument that operationalizes it and as a means of interpreting it (Mills, Boylstein, & Lorean, 2001). Thus, your communicative role as an organizational member is central to both the emergent nature of the organization and its culture. Understanding organizational culture and your role in its creation and maintenance could help you cope with issues at work and, potentially, help you succeed in or manage that environment.

The link between organizational culture and communication becomes salient when employees or managers want to change something about the organization. Indeed, employees across many levels frequently report that communication *is* an issue in their organization (e.g., Sobo & Sadler, 2002). Despite this awareness, communication is often taken for granted and simultaneously lauded as being responsible for achieving organizational goals or blamed as the root of organizational problems. Given the role of organizational communication in developing and sustaining organizational culture, developing an understanding of organizational culture will help you achieve your personal and professional goals and influence organizational goals.

Additionally, even if you did not care about your work environment, it is shaping your interactions within it. At your workplace, you are likely engaging in organizational rituals or practices that you have not yet identified as representing the organization's culture (Flores-Pereira, Davel, & Cavedon, 2008). In other words, you are learning about, participating in, and accepting the influence of an organization's culture as you experience it. Anything with that much influence on your communication is worthy of your attention. And finally, organizational members frequently point to an organization's culture as what distinguishes their organization from others. For example, Southwest Airlines is synonymous with *fun*. From its beginning, the company promoted a "fun-LUving attitude," which is still evident today.

An organization's culture is what sets one organization apart from similar others. Churches of the same denomination, fast-food restaurants of the same chain, home improvement retailers with similar product lines, manufacturers of desktop and laptop computers, universities of similar sizes and student populations, county governments in the same state—all distinguish themselves from one another by the organizational culture that emerges from the interactions of its organizational members. You are a part of that process.

DOES ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE REALLY MATTER?

This is a difficult question to answer because qualitative scholarly studies of organizational culture tend to examine the way in which organizational members create and enact their organizational culture with particular emphasis on (a) members' influence on the culture and (b) the culture's influences on them. Despite the richness and detail of the data and the contextualization of the findings, these types of studies generally do not assess organizational cultural relative to organizational outcomes. This is primarily because the link between culture and performance is believed to be indirect or too multiply linked to be coherent. There are some quantitative studies that attempt to compare types of organizational cultures and examine the influences of cultural types on outcomes, but often the type of data collected only allow for a surface or partial view of culture, as it is quite difficult to get to the deep meanings of cultural assumptions and values in questionnaire items. Thus, answering *if* organizational culture matters and *how* it differs based upon these methodological and ideological choices is a difficult endeavor.

If you look at the organizational cultural studies as a whole across disciplines, however, it is easier to conclude that organizational culture really does matter. Of course, individuals who have work experience in several organizations can confirm this. Despite similarities in occupations and professions, different organizations *are* different—sometimes subtly; other times to a great degree. However, because our focus as an organizational member is on our personal view of the culture, it can be difficult to see the full extent to which these differences matter. Sometimes we will not see the influence on ourselves until we leave that environment, until another person brings it to our attention, or until a situation occurs in which there is a prominent clash of personal and organizational values.

Does organizational culture really matter?

Yes, it does.

A study using ethnographic and survey data of social control mechanisms on workplace drinking norms demonstrated the way in which organizational culture can affect both organizational (e.g., absenteeism, safety, quality) and individual (e.g., aggression, health) outcomes (Ames, Grube, & Moore, 2000). The study was conducted in two large U.S. manufacturing plants—both manufactured the same product in the same industry; workers were represented by the same union. One plant in the western U.S. employed approximately 4,000 employees; the

plant in the Midwest employed approximately 6,000 employees. In both settings, 90 percent of the workers were employed in hourly positions; most worked on assembly lines, as skilled tradespeople, or in support services.

Despite these similarities, there were significant structural differences between the two plants. The western plant was jointly owned by Japanese and U.S. corporations and, as a result, used some aspects of Japanese management principles. Employees, including management, were organized into teams and had greater responsibility for delivering quality products, finding solutions to problems, and improving production. Consensual decision making was encouraged, and union-management relationships were cooperative. The Midwest plant was owned by a U.S. corporation and reflected a more traditional bureaucratic structure and principles. This plant had a hierarchical organizational structure and a rigid division of job tasks. Managers, not employees, were responsible for decision making and performance issues, and there was an adversarial relationship between union and management.

The objective of this study was to examine how workplace drinking norms compared in the two cultures. In the survey portion of the study, the research team found that 72 percent and 81 percent of male and female employees at the midwestern plant drank, whereas 80 percent and 77 percent of male and female employees at the western plant drank. Thus, overall, employees did not differ in their alcohol consumption. However, employees did differ considerably in *where* they drank. At the midwestern plant, men (23%) and women (26%) were far more likely to report drinking while on the job than employees at the western plant (3% for both men and women).

What could account for this difference?

Organizational culture.

Norms about workplace drinking differed dramatically between the sets of employees. Overwhelmingly, employees at the midwestern plant were more likely than employees at the western plant to get alcohol from others at work, bring alcohol into the plant, drink while at their work stations, or drink at breaks. At the same time, employees at the western plant reported with greater frequency than employees at the midwestern plant that their co-workers, team members, and supervisors disapproved of drinking at work. Employees at the western plant also differed dramatically in their reporting that it was very likely that they would get caught if they drank at work or in the parking lot at work, and they would be disciplined for doing so.

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Because individuals' drinking patterns outside of work did not transfer uniformly to drinking at work, the research team investigated cultural elements that could encourage or inhibit work-related drinking. Both plants had a formal alcohol policy in place (including statements about bringing alcohol into the workplace, drinking during work hours, and being at work in an impaired condition, and both policies contained procedures for disciplinary action), but the policies were differently regarded and enforced. At the midwestern plant, supervisors did not enforce the policy because it was incompatible with other organizational policies, and this incompatibility was a low priority for union officials and management. Other work environment problems were more pressing. At the western plant, the alcohol policy complemented other policies (e.g., drug-use policy, attendance policy), and, despite the team environment, other aspects of the western plant appeared rigid and controlling; yet, employees seemed comfortable with these structures. For example, employees could take their lunch break on the premises to earn an additional hour's pay. This, of course, kept employees from leaving the premises to buy or drink alcohol.

Informal social controls were more prominent at the western plant due to the team structure because team concepts were evident at all levels of the organization. Employees in this plant experienced greater cohesion and solidarity with their team and other organizational members, as teams, not individuals, were responsible for productivity and quality. Thus, peer accountability for worker performance and safety was significantly more pronounced at the western plant. Conversely, at the midwestern plant, peer accountability was weakened due to the autonomous work structure, which did not encourage cohesiveness to develop among organizational members.

In this study, the formal and informal social control mechanisms about drinking differed considerably. Moreover, the social control mechanisms acted as norms in either facilitating or inhibiting workplace drinking.

Does organizational culture matter?

Yes.

❖ SUMMARY

This section introduces the concepts of *organization*, *organizational communication*, *culture*, and *organizational culture*. An organization is a dynamic system of organizational members, influenced by external stakeholders,

who communicate within and across organizational structures in a purposeful and ordered way to achieve a superordinate goal. Without communication, an organization could not exist. Thus, organizational communication is the complex and continuous process through which organizational members create, maintain, and change the organization. This definition presumes that all organizational members participate in this process, and organizational members can create shared meanings of messages, but not all meanings will be shared.

Culture is defined as both a process and product—the complex set of messages and meanings by which people choose their subsequent behaviors and messages and against which behaviors and messages are interpreted. Culture distinguishes people in one group or collective from people in another group or collective. Artifacts, values, and assumptions are the three broad categories of cultural elements that comprise the pattern of symbols interpreted as organizational culture.

Artifacts are visible—anything that one can see, hear, or feel in the organizational experience—and often the first things we notice about an organization when we enter it. Norms, standards, and customs are artifacts just like the more physical attributes of organizational life. Values are broad tendencies to prefer certain states of affairs over others and have both intensity and direction. Despite their importance to understanding an organization's culture, values are invisible and difficult to discern until they are manifested in behavior and shared by organizational members. Assumptions guide behavior by directing how organizational members should perceive, think, feel, and act. Because they do not rise to the level of conversation, they are extremely difficult to change. Artifacts, values, and assumptions are symbolic representations of an organization's culture. Together, they reflect organizational culture, influence behavior by triggering internalized values and norms, facilitate organizational members' communication about their organizational experiences, and integrate organizational systems of meaning.

Inevitably, you will be a member of many organizational cultures. You will contribute to the creation, maintenance, and development of these organizational cultures through your communication with other organizational members. Your communicative role as an organizational member is central to both the emergent nature of the organization and its culture.

Because organizations are central to our society and organizational cultures are complex, scholars use multiple theoretical and methodological lenses to illuminate the complexity of organizational culture—revealing it for what it is rather than for what managers

want or expect it to be. Scholars focus on the ways in which culture is developed, maintained, or changed in order to identify frames or scripts that managers can credibly use to bridge the different assumptions held by organizational members. Scholars from a variety of fields—anthropology, communication, education, management, psychology, and sociology—have contributed to the conversation. Common to all contemporary views on organizational culture is acknowledgement of the role of communication in its creation. Thus, this book focuses on the communicative and performative aspects of organizational culture.