

## Reflection 6: Introduction to Culture.

The first in a series.



“If we do not know the causes and relations of things and events, the world seems a very mixed-up, chaotic place, where anything and everything is happening”

(Pyle, W. (1917, p 8)  
The Science of Human Nature;  
A psychology for beginners.  
Boston: Silver, Burdett & Company.)

It has become a cliché to say that, “change is the only constant”.

Unfortunately, business leaders are facing an industrialised world that is changing so fast that “crisis management” seems to have become the norm rather than the exception. Everyday decision-making, community problem solving, and developing strategies and plans for the organisational future becomes almost too much to handle.

Historically, managers tried to attain stability and control of both their organisations and its environment by setting clearly defined and specified tasks, non-negotiable standard operating procedures, fixed responsibilities and clear chains of command. The objective was to obtain an environment that is more manageable by creating workplace order. In most industries, one of the ideals is to be able to develop standardised products or processes and then to apply economies of scale. This is illustrated by the well-known quote of Henry Ford, that you could have any colour Model T Ford, as long as it was black. Unfortunately, recent developments in the environment increased competitiveness and customer demands do not allow businesses to have rigid control or only one option. Every additional option adds more factors to consider and another layer of complexity to the management process.

From a people perspective, organisations must develop two core competencies to help them be effective in today’s world.

- Effective change management skills. In the 2007 video “Shift Happens” by Karl Fisch and Scott McLeod, it is noted that “We must

### vanrooyen.info

is a husband and wife team that supports Individuals, organisations and communities in their development.

Jan and Lyn bring together more than 70 years of experience. They share a passion for helping people, teams and organisations optimise their potential.

Although they work together at times, they each have their own unique strengths and consult individually under their own names.

Lyn supports organisations and individuals to bring social wellbeing and change through advocacy, mentoring, training and communication, while Jan works primarily to enhance understanding and support improvement through development/training and systems thinking.

**For more information, visit  
[www.vanrooyen.info](http://www.vanrooyen.info)**

prepare students for jobs that don't yet exist . . . using technologies that haven't been invented . . . in order to solve problems we don't even know are problems yet". (We will consider this and the management implications thereof in a future reflection.) and

- The ability to build a collective understanding of what Joad (Joad C.E.M., Guide to Philosophy, 1957) referred to as; "... *the tendencies operating in a society [organisation] at any given moment [which] depends upon knowledge of the processes which have brought [that] society into being.*"<sup>1</sup>

## Background:

Around the mid-1980s, the term Organization Culture started becoming a topic of academic interest<sup>1</sup>. The majority of authors and scholars agree that an influence or concept referred to as culture, cultural influence or a cultural force exist in an organisation<sup>2</sup>. Numerous articles and books are published annually on this topic and how culture can be identified. Significant time and energy is spent on research, discussions, and practical understanding of any impact it may have on functional efficiency and effectiveness. Even with -or perhaps as result of - all the research there, seems to be diverging and at times almost contradictory views of what organisational culture is, its basis, its creation, what maintains it, and how it can be changed/managed (if at all).

The complexity and struggle to identify what culture is, is in some way a reminder of a similar struggle in psychology around the 1900s. In the late 19th and early 20th Century, psychologists and philosophers started to define, analyse and understand individual functioning from the perspective of an intangible concept called personality or character. Given the variety of established and new theories and models of personality, it seems as if this process is ongoing.

Since the late 1900s organization behaviour (OB)-, organisation development (OD) practitioners and management scholars have been asking similar questions about organisation culture, its structure, origins, and influence. Two big differences between the these two processes are that;

- Personality focusses primarily on the individual functioning, their mental processes, beliefs, values, and behaviours.
- Culture focusses on a group or societal functioning with specific emphasis on understanding collective and shared processes, beliefs, knowledge, and values.

## The result is not the driver.

It is important to note that culture cannot be defined by describing business outcomes such as high levels of performance, just as personality cannot be defined by individual behaviour such as academic performance . At best it can be said that there is something in a culture or personality that drives some degree of functioning but the outcome can never be equated to the driver. Culture, just like personality, influences outcomes or behaviours but both culture and personality are complex concepts that cannot be defined in terms of their outcomes.

Spending time on the distinction between culture and personality may sound superfluous, or just semantics, but groups and societies comprise of individuals. Given the involvement and roles of individuals in culture, it would be dangerous to ignore fundamentals of personality when studying culture. Considering culture from the perspective of individual involvement, it could easily become a study of individual “accommodation” and “adaptation” or more extremely, “subservience” of individual personality to group functioning.

Referring to individual subservience to the group is not new in management literature. The idea, as it relates to culture, does however open philosophical questions regarding strong and weak cultures, nature and nurture of personality and even of people as part of a single interrelated entity. It is also not a big leap for some to consider culture as a form of “group personality”.

## Culture and Climate

A study by Jung, Scot, Davies, Whalley, McNally and Mannion (2007), identifies culture as one of the many metaphors used to explore and understand organisations. The same study identified seventy instruments and approaches used to investigate and measure organisational culture. They also identified more than 60 dimensions of culture which includes thoughts people have about leaving their jobs. A cursory glance at the internet seems to indicate that the number of questionnaires and constructs have escalated since then.

Given this variety, it is important to note that two terms found, and often confused, in organisations are ‘climate’ and ‘culture’. According to Wijnbeek, Visagie, & Scholtz, (p. 7), *“Organizational culture is the pattern of beliefs and values, rituals and sentiments that are shared by the members of an organization.”* while organizational climate is *“the perceptions of employees about the actions of management, ... communication patterns, dominant motivational styles, policies,*

*procedures and practices which motivate or demotivate individuals ...*". It is generally accepted that culture and climate are two sides of a coin but they remain two distinctly different perspectives of individual functioning within a group. In terms of these explanations of culture and climate, it is clear that a number of the assessments and dimensions identified in the aforementioned study as culture assessments, apply more to climate than culture.

## Vague and idiosyncratic

An aspect that is more disconcerting than the confusion between culture and climate, is a negative perception of culture. Already in 1993, Geertz (p. 89) noted, *"the term "culture" has by now acquired a certain aura of ill-repute in social anthropological circles because of the multiplicity of its referents and the studied vagueness with which it has all too often been invoked"*. In 2009 Tharp (p. 2) stated that the term culture *"means very little... [and that] ... highly specific, idiosyncratic definitions also abound where the term is used in various contexts"*.

In addition to, or perhaps as result of, the variety of definitions and constructs, numerous views exist regarding techniques, methods, and procedures available to harness the possible value of culture. Despite his view that culture means little, Tharp states that; *"evaluating and understanding organizational culture holds perhaps the best promise for corporate leadership being able to influence ... business performance"*. Practitioners and other authors generally support this view and seem to agree that understanding the factors driving culture is important. Scholars and practitioners further agree that cultural factors influence organizational dynamics, reactions to change processes, and performance in various environments.

It is clear that given the importance assigned to it, and the variety of perspectives and constructs, there is a need for a systems approach to understanding or evaluating culture. We will continue to explore this in further reflections.

Footnotes from page 2:

1 See e.g. (Bowditch & Buono, 1985), (Handy C., 1991), (Schein, 1992), (Bohannon, 1995) and many more

2. See e.g. (Schein E. H., 2009), (Hofstede G., 1994), (Ackoff R. L., 1999) (Cummings & Worley, 2005) and many more

---

*For more information contact us, or subscribe to our newsletter, by visiting [www.vanrooyen.info](http://www.vanrooyen.info)*

---