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Organizational Culture and COVID-19

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COVID-19 and the large scale social and economic shock which it brought has already profoundly transformed organisational cultures. Well known symbols of organisational life such as open plan workplaces filled with people wearing suits have been replaced by Perspex screens and personal protective equipment. Rituals such as water cooler chat have been replaced with zoom calls. The underlying values and assumptions of many organisations seem to have shifted from exploration and creativity towards safety and resilience. This profound change represents a major challenge for managers (Kniffin et al., 2020). They are asking themselves how they can build a company culture when everyone is working from home (Howard-Greenville, 2020). But it also represents a significant opportunity for researchers to investigate how such a large scale transition in society unsettles organisational culture and how those cultures might adapt.

Organizational cultures are the signs and symbols, shared practices and underlying assumptions of an organisations (Meyerson and Martin, 1987). We know that significant jolts in the environment such as an economic crisis require an organisation to re-adjust its culture to fit with new environmental realities (Meyer, 1982). However, changes in macro-level cultures can create the problem of hysteresis where an organisation's culture remains out of step with wider societal level cultures (Strand and Lizardo, 2017).

ENVIRONMENTAL JOLTS AND CULTURAL CHANGE: IMPACTS AND RESPONSES

Although environmental jolts create pressure for cultural change, they also prompt various reactions. Jolts can make organizations defensive when organizational members find

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change deeply troubling and threatening and simply deny or avoid transformations that may be needed (Elliott and Smith, 2006). For instance, when Nokia was faced with a fundamental shift in the mobile phone market in 2007, a culture of anger and fear pervaded the firm (Vouri and Huy, 2016). Senior managers ignored information about the changing market and remained rigidly aligned to a failing course of action. Jolts can also make organisations hypocritical (Brunsson, 1989). This happens when external pressure leads organisations to change highly visible aspects of their culture but leave deeper aspects untouched. Following the financial crisis, many large banks changed the most highly visible aspects such as their values statements, but they did not change deeper assumptions or rituals (Spicer et al., 2015). Jolts can also make organisations overreact in a thoughtless way. For instance, faced with budgetary pressure a school principal rigidly push through a new culture of accountability which alienated teachers and eventually undermined performance (Hallett, 2010). Finally, jolts can radicalise cultures. This happens when taken for granted practices and assumptions are thrown out the window and people give to experiment with radical alternatives. This is what happen during the Occupy Wall Street protests where people abandoned established corporate cultures and began experimenting with more radically democratic alternatives (Reinecke, 2018).

These reactions often lead to botched cultural change processes. However, research has identified more productive ways of engaging with cultural change. These involve cyclical processes of reflection, experimentation and action (Elsbach and Stigliani, 2018). To do this, organisations should begin by ensuring their members have some degree of psychological safety (Edmonson, 1999). This means they feel secure enough so they will not act in defensive or reckless ways. Second, it important to trigger some form of reflexivity (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). This entails encouraging organisational members to critically reflect on pre-existing culture and assumptions. Changing culture requires experimentation. Organizational members should be encouraged to use pre-existing 'cultural toolkits' to put together a new culture which is more aligned with new environmental challenges (Howard-Grenville, 2020). These experiments need to be embodied in novel every-day practices within the organisation (Canato et al., 2013). Managers should ensure these new practices become routine aspects of organisational life. Finally, these new practices should be reinforced through resonant framing (Giorgi, 2017). This means new practices should be discussed in ways which appeal to existing ideas and emotions which organizational members hold onto. The upshot is that new practices become seen as a way of supporting and preserving deeply held cultural values.

DISRUPTION AND CORPORATE CULTURE: RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

While the profound dislocation introduced by COVID-19 presents some significant challenges for managers, it also offers some significant opportunities for researchers. The first involves asking just how resilient organisational cultures actually are. Do organisational cultures actually change when there is a wide scale societal jolt or do they remain stubbornly similar? Which components of a culture are transformed and which are kept? Are there wider field-level transformations of culture and how do those interaction with

changes in organisational culture? And what is the difference between highly institutionalised organisations with very well established cultures and those with younger or more brittle cultures? Researchers could study these questions by tracing the transformation in signs and symbols, rituals and underlying assumption before, during and after the COVID shock.

A second set of questions would involve exploring exactly how these cultures changed. To do this would involve following the processes through which cultures and transformed and recombined to fit into this new wider society level culture. An equally worthy question would be how cultures were maintained in the face of such significant pressure to change. Further, it would be fascinating to understand what happens when an organisational culture dies: what are the processes of mourning and remembrance which take place. Asking each of these questions would require a longitudinal approach which follows the transformation (and demise) of a particular culture over time.

A third fascinating set of questions is how the changes in the symbolic work affect organisational culture. Can you transport a culture out of a physical space such as an office and into the immaterial world of virtual working? Does the move online lead to a rise or decline of much of the empty symbolic rituals of corporate life? When people are physically separated from each other, how is it possible to build up and maintain a collective culture? Finally, if people are required to work alongside of each other how does this rub-up against the macro-cultures of social distancing? Answering these questions requires close studies of the transformation work place cultures: something which can be done through workplace or virtual ethnographies.

A fourth question worth exploring is whether there will be some overarching transformations in organisational culture. Research on macro-level cultures suggests that following economic shocks, societal level cultures tend to become more conservative (Winkler, 2020). Are we likely to see the same thing on an organisational level? Evolutionary psychologists have found that when people are highly aware of the presence of diseases, we tend to react by becoming more fearful of outsiders, more hierarchical and more discriminatory (Schaller, 2011). This poses questions about whether something similar might happen within organisations faced with increase threats of illness. Cross-cultural psychologists have found that societies with 'tight' cultures which respect rules, regulation and authority tend to cope better during profound societal threats like pandemics (Van Bavel et al, 2020). Could it be that organizations based in countries with 'tight' cultures have been better at responding to the pandemic? Asking these kinds of questions could be answered with longitudinal studies of single organisations before and after the COVID shock. These questions could also be explored using studies of changes in the cultures of multiple organisations.

The final question involves exploring the actual impact of these changes on culture. Researchers could explore the impact of culture change on individuals. This would entail asking how rapid shifts in culture impact people's identity, their emotions and their well-being. They could ask about the impact of shifts in organisational cultures on teams. For instance, a researcher might ask whether strong team cultures become a buffer against a crumbling organisational culture. Researcher could explore how changes in organisational cultures affect the performance of organisations (however, that might be defined). For instance, a researcher could ask whether efforts to maintain a culture

detract from the work required to produce results. A further set of questions could focus on how changes in organisational culture can transform wider field level cultures. This is a particularly interesting question to ask for iconic organisations such as highly visible public agencies and celebrity firms which often actively shape societal level cultures.

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