2

THE STRUCTURE OF CULTURE

Culture in general can be analyzed at several different levels, with the term "level" meaning the degree to which the cultural phenomenon is visible to you as participant or observer. These levels range from the very tangible, overt manifestations that you can see and feel to the deeply embedded, unconscious, basic assumptions that we are defining as the essence of culture or its DNA. In between these layers are various espoused beliefs, values, norms, and rules of behavior that members of the culture use as a way of depicting the culture to themselves and others. The three major levels of cultural analysis are shown in Figure 2.1.

Three Levels of Analysis

Artifacts—Visible and Feelable Phenomena

We think of artifacts as the phenomena that you would see, hear, and feel when you encounter a new group with an unfamiliar culture. Artifacts include the visible products of the group, such as the architecture of its physical environment; its language; its technology and products; its artistic creations; its style, as embodied in clothing, manners of address, and emotional displays; its myths and stories told about the organization; its published lists of values; and its observable rituals and ceremonies.

Among these artifacts is the "climate" of the group. Some culture analysts see climate as the equivalent to culture, but it is better thought of as the product of some of the underlying assumptions and is, therefore, a manifestation of the culture. Observed behavior routines and rituals are also artifacts, as are the organizational processes by which such behavior is made routine. Structural elements such as charters, formal descriptions of how the organization works, and organization charts also belong to the artifact level.

Figure 2.1   The Three Levels of Culture

1. **Artifacts**
   - Visible and feelable structures and processes
   - Observed behavior
     - Difficult to decipher

2. **Espoused Beliefs and Values**
   - Ideals, goals, values, aspirations
   - Ideologies
   - Rationalizations
     - May or may not be congruent with behavior and other artifacts

3. **Basic Underlying Assumptions**
   - Unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs and values
     - Determine behavior, perception, thought, and feeling

The most important point to be made about this level of the culture is that it is both easy to observe and very difficult to decipher. The Egyptians and the Mayans both built highly visible pyramids, but the meaning of pyramids in each culture was very different—tombs in one, temples as well as tombs in the other. In other words, observers can describe what they see and feel but cannot reconstruct from that alone what those things mean to the given group. If you are entering a new culture, you will observe lots of things that may or may not make sense to you, and you will not have the insight to figure them out without asking insiders some questions.

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

If you live in the group long enough, the meanings of artifacts gradually become clear and people explain to you "why we do it that way." If, however, you want to achieve this level of understanding more quickly, you

must ask insiders why they do what they do? You will then get what we are calling the espoused beliefs and values.

Espoused Beliefs and Values

All group learning ultimately reflects someone's original beliefs and values—his or her sense of what ought to be, as distinct from what is. When a group is first created or when it faces a new task, issue, or problem, the first solution proposed to deal with it reflects some individual's own assumptions about what is right or wrong, what will work or will not work. Those individuals who prevail, who can influence the group to adopt a certain approach to the problem, will later be identified as leaders or founders, but the group does not yet have any shared knowledge as a group because it has not yet taken a common action in reference to whatever it is supposed to do. Whatever is proposed will be perceived only as what the leader wants. Until the group has taken some joint action and together observed the outcome of that action, there is not as yet a shared basis for determining whether what the leader wants will turn out to be valid.

For example, if sales begin to decline in a young business, a manager may say, "We must increase advertising" because of her belief that advertising always increases sales. The group, never having experienced this situation before, will hear that assertion as a statement of that manager's beliefs and values: "She believes that when one is in sales trouble it is a good thing to increase advertising." What the leader initially proposes, therefore, cannot have any status other than a value to be questioned, debated, challenged, and tested. If the manager convinces the group to act on her belief and the solution works, then the perceived value that "advertising is good" gradually becomes transformed, first into a shared value or belief and ultimately into a shared assumption (if actions based on it continue to be successful). If this transformation process occurs, group members will usually forget that originally they were not sure and that the proposed course of action was, at an earlier time, just a proposal to be debated and confronted.

Not all beliefs and values undergo such transformation. First of all, the solution based on a given value may not work reliably. Only those beliefs and values that can be empirically tested and that continue to work reliably in solving the group's problems will become transformed into assumptions.

Second, certain value domains—those dealing with the less controllable elements of the environment or with aesthetic or moral matters—may not be testable at all. In such cases, consensus through social validation is still possible, but it is not automatic. Third, the strategy and goals of the organization may fall into this category of espoused beliefs in that there may be no way of testing them except through consensus, because the link between performance and strategy may be hard to prove.

Social validation means that certain beliefs and values are confirmed only by the shared social experience of a group. For example, any given culture cannot prove that its religion and moral system are superior to another culture's religion and moral system, but if the members reinforce each others' beliefs and values, they come to be taken for granted. Those who fail to accept such beliefs and values run the risk of "excommunication," of being thrown out of the group. The test of whether they work or not is how comfortable and anxiety-free members are when they abide by them. In these realms, the group learns that certain beliefs and values, as initially promulgated by prophets, founders, and leaders, "work" in the sense of reducing uncertainty in critical areas of the group's functioning. Moreover, as they continue to provide meaning and comfort to group members, they also become transformed into non-discussible assumptions even though they may not be correlated with actual performance.

The espoused beliefs and moral or ethical rules remain conscious and are explicitly articulated because they serve the normative or moral function of guiding members of the group as to how to deal with certain key situations as well as in training new members how to behave. Such beliefs and values often become embodied in an ideology or organizational philosophy, which then serves as a guide to dealing with the uncertainty of intrinsically uncontrollable or difficult events.

If the beliefs and values that provide meaning and comfort to the group are not congruent with the beliefs and values that correlate with effective performance, we will observe in many organizations espoused values that reflect the desired behavior but are not reflected in observed behavior (Argyris & Schon, 1978, 1996). For example, a company's ideology may say that it values people and that it has high quality standards for its products, but its actual record in that regard may contradict what it says. In U.S. organizations, it is common to espouse teamwork while actually rewarding

individual competitiveness. Hewlett-Packard's highly touted "The HP way" (Packard, 1995) espoused consensus management and teamwork, but in its computer division, engineers discovered that to get ahead they had to be competitive and political.

So in analyzing espoused beliefs and values, you must discriminate carefully among those that are congruent with the underlying assumptions that guide performance, those that are part of the ideology or philosophy of the organization, and those that are rationalizations or only aspirations for the future. Often espoused beliefs and values are so abstract that they can be mutually contradictory, as when a company claims to be equally concerned about stockholders, employees, and customers, or when it claims both highest quality and lowest cost. Espoused beliefs and values often leave large areas of behavior unexplained, leaving us with a feeling that we understand a piece of the culture but still do not have the entire culture in hand. To get at that deeper level of understanding, to decipher the pattern, and to predict future behavior correctly, we have to understand more fully the category of basic assumptions.

Taken-for-Granted Underlying Basic Assumptions

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

Basic assumptions, in the sense defined here, have become so taken for granted that you find little variation within a social unit. This degree of consensus results from repeated success in implementing certain beliefs and values, as previously described. In fact, if a basic assumption comes to be strongly held in a group, members will find behavior based on any other

premise inconceivable. For example, in a group whose basic assumption is that the individual's rights supersede those of the group, members find it inconceivable to commit suicide or in some other way to sacrifice themselves to the group even if they had dishonored the group. In a capitalist country, it is inconceivable that someone might design a business organization to operate consistently at a financial loss or that it does not matter whether or not a product works.

In an occupation such as engineering, it is inconceivable to deliberately design something that is unsafe; it is a taken-for-granted assumption that things should be safe. Basic assumptions, in this sense, are similar to what Argyris and Schon (1996) identified as "theories-in-use"—the implicit assumptions that actually guide behavior, that tell group members how to perceive, think about, and feel about things. Basic assumptions, like theories-in-use, are generally non-confrontable and non-debatable and hence are extremely difficult to change. To learn something new in this realm requires us to resurrect, reexamine, and possibly change some of the more stable portions of our cognitive structure, a process that Argyris and others have called "double-loop learning," or "frame breaking" (Argyris & Schon, 1974, 1996).

Such learning is intrinsically difficult because the reexamination of basic assumptions temporarily destabilizes our cognitive and interpersonal world, releasing large quantities of basic anxiety. Rather than tolerating such anxiety levels, we tend to want to perceive the events around us as congruent with our assumptions, even if that means distorting, denying, projecting, or in other ways falsifying to ourselves what may be going on around us. It is in this psychological process that culture has its ultimate power.

Culture as a set of basic assumptions defines for us what to pay attention to, what things mean, how to react emotionally to what is going on, and what actions to take in various kinds of situations. After we have developed and integrated a set of such assumptions, we will have created a "thought world" or "mental map." We will then be most comfortable with others who share the same set of assumptions and very uncomfortable and vulnerable in situations where different assumptions operate because either we will not understand what is going on, or, worse, we will misperceive and misinterpret the actions of others (Douglas, 1986; Bushe, 2009).

Culture at this level provides its members with a basic sense of identity and defines the values that provide self-esteem (Hatch & Schultz, 2004). Cultures tell their members who they are, how to behave toward each other, and how to feel good about themselves. Recognizing these critical functions makes us aware why "changing" culture is so anxiety provoking.

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

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

In contrast, if we assume that everyone is highly motivated and competent, we will act in accordance with that assumption by encouraging people to work at their own pace and in their own way. If we see people sitting quietly at their desks, we will assume that they are thinking or planning. If someone is discovered to be unproductive in such an organization, we will make the assumption that there is a mismatch between the person and the job assignment, not that the person is lazy or incompetent. If employees want to work at home, we will perceive that as evidence of their wanting to be productive.

In both cases, there is the potential for distortion, in that the cynical manager will not perceive how highly motivated some of the subordinates really are, and the idealistic manager will not perceive that there are subordinates who are lazy and are taking advantage of the situation. As McGregor (1960) noted many decades ago, such assumptions about "human nature"

become the basis of management and control systems that perpetuate themselves because if people are treated consistently in terms of certain basic assumptions, they come eventually to behave according to those assumptions to make their world stable and predictable.

Unconscious assumptions sometimes lead to ridiculously tragic situations, as illustrated by a common problem experienced by U.S. supervisors in some Asian countries. A manager who comes from a U.S. pragmatic tradition assumes and takes it for granted that solving a problem always has the highest priority. When that manager encounters a subordinate who comes from a cultural tradition in which good relationships and protecting the superior's "face" are assumed to have top priority, the following scenario has often resulted.

The manager proposes a solution to a given problem. The subordinate knows that the solution will not work, but his unconscious assumption requires that he remain silent because to tell the boss that the proposed solution is wrong is a threat to the boss's face. It would not even occur to the subordinate to do anything other than remain silent or, if the boss were to inquire what the subordinate thought, he might even reassure the boss to go ahead and take the action rather than challenge the boss.

The action is taken, the results are negative, and the boss, somewhat surprised and puzzled, asks the subordinate what he would have done or would he have done something different. This question puts the subordinate into an impossible double bind because the answer itself is a threat to the boss's face. He cannot possibly explain his behavior without committing the very sin he was trying to avoid in the first place—namely, embarrassing the boss. He may even lie at this point and argue that what the boss did was right and only "bad luck" or uncontrollable circumstances prevented it from succeeding.

From the point of view of the subordinate, the boss's behavior is incomprehensible because to ask the subordinate what he would have done shows lack of self-pride, possibly causing the subordinate to lose respect for that boss. To the boss, the subordinate's behavior is equally incomprehensible. He cannot develop any sensible explanation of his subordinate's behavior that is not cynically colored by the assumption that the subordinate at some level just does not care about effective performance and therefore must be gotten rid of. It never occurs to the boss that another assumption—such as "you never embarrass a superior"—is operating, and that, to the

subordinate, that assumption is even more powerful than "you have to get the job done."

If assumptions such as these operate only in an individual and represent his or her idiosyncratic experience, they can be corrected more easily because the person will detect that he or she is alone in holding a given assumption. The power of culture comes about through the fact that the assumptions are shared and, therefore, mutually reinforced. In these instances, probably only a third party or some cross-cultural experiences could help to find common ground whereby both parties could bring their implicit assumptions to the surface. Even after they have surfaced, such assumptions would still operate, forcing the boss and the subordinate to invent a whole new communication mechanism that would permit each to remain congruent with his or her culture—for example, agreeing that, before any decision is made and before the boss has stuck his or her neck out, the subordinate will be asked for suggestions and for factual data that would not be face threatening. Note that the solution has to keep each cultural assumption intact. We cannot, in these instances, simply declare one or the other cultural assumption "wrong." We have to find a third assumption to allow them both to retain their integrity.

We have dwelled on this long example to illustrate the potency of implicit, unconscious assumptions and to show that such assumptions often deal with fundamental aspects of life—the nature of time and space; human nature and human activities; the nature of truth and how we discover it; the correct way for the individual and the group to relate to each other; the relative importance of work, family, and self-development; the proper role of men and women; and the nature of the family.

Broader assumptions about human nature often derive from the larger culture in which the organization is embedded or from occupational units that cut across organizations. In the United States, the assumption that meetings are a waste of time derives very much from our pragmatic rugged individualism,which works both against group and team work and immediately types meetings as something to be avoided, even as complex tasks become more interdependent and require more meetings.

The Metaphor of the Lily Pond

We can summarize this three-level model with a metaphoric lily pond. The blossoms and the leaves on the surface of the pond are the "artifacts"

that we can see and evaluate. The farmer who has created the pond (the leadership) announces what he expected and hoped for in the way of leaves and blossoms and will provide publicly accepted beliefs and values to justify the outcome. The farmer may or may not be consciously aware that the outcome is really a result of how the seeds, the root system, the quality of the water in the pond, and the fertilizers he put in combined to create the blossoms and leaves. This lack of awareness of what actually produces the results may not matter if the announced beliefs and values are congruent with how the leaves and blossoms turned out.

Figure 2.2   The Lily Pond as a Metaphor for Levels of Culture
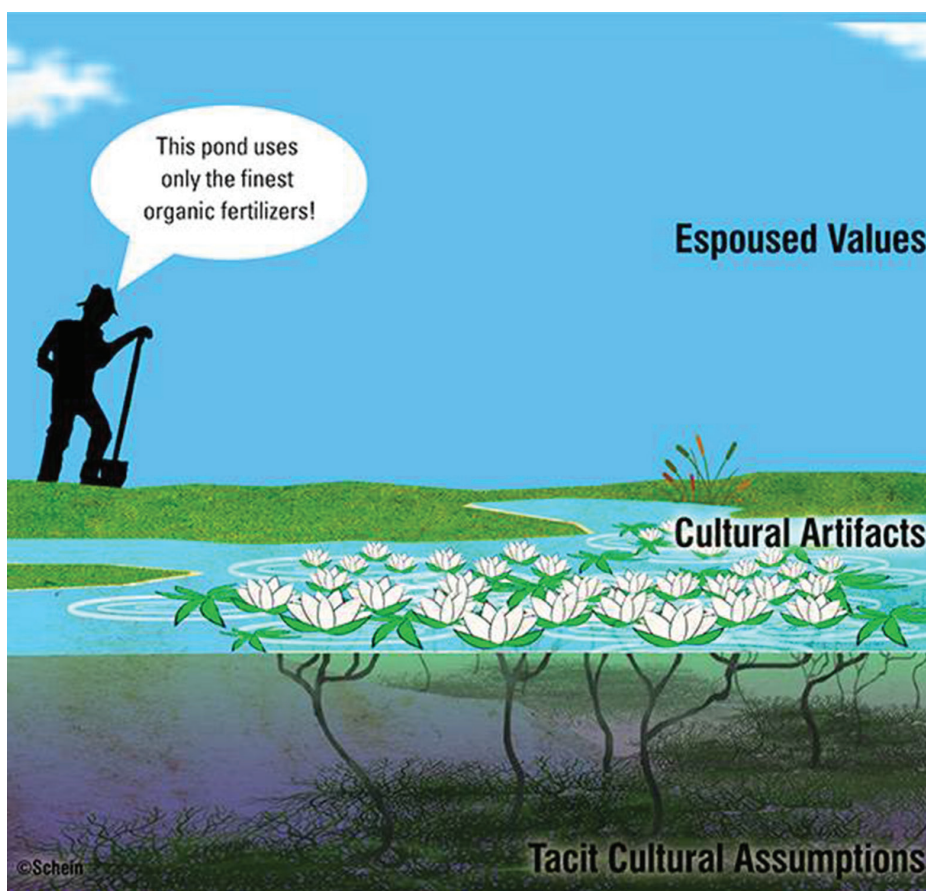
Source: Artwork by Jason Bowes - Human Synergistics

However, if the observer notes a discrepancy between what the farmer claims and what actually comes up as blossoms, they will both have to examine what is present in the water and in the root system. And if they want different color blossoms, painting them a different color will not work; they will have to examine how to change the seeds, the water quality, the fertilizer—that is, the invisible DNA of the pond. Leaders who want to change culture cannot do so by painting the blossoms or pruning the leaves. They have to locate the cultural DNA and change some of that.

Given this structural model one can analyze any culture, or, for that matter, any individual's cultural identity. Let's look briefly at how this would apply at the individual or group micro-system level and then in subsequent chapters apply it to organizations and larger cultural units.

The Individual from a Cultural Perspective

The individual as a cultural entity can be analyzed in terms of artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and underlying basic assumption. We all carry within us assumptions about the state of the world and about the correct ways to engage in relationships. Some of those assumptions about relationship have come to be taken for granted and fall into the realm of the unconscious because we learned early some of the basic rules of how to get along in different kinds of situations. These assumptions and rules derive from the macro culture in that every society has learned from its own history what level of communication and openness is workable for people to get along.

All societies (i.e., macro cultures) evolve rules of etiquette, good manners, and tact that specify what is or is not appropriate to say in any given situation. Most of us are, therefore, walking repositories of rules that were taught to us when young and that represent early layers of cultural socialization. We learn as part of our acculturation into the family that in the interests of getting along with each other, it is important to withhold some of our perceptions and feelings because to say them out loud might hurt or offend others. And if we hurt others, that permits them to hurt us back, which makes social life generally too dangerous. We learn that some of these things can be said to friends and even more can be said to intimates.

However, the basic assumptions about *why* you cannot say certain things remain below consciousness, and the process by which you learned them is probably totally forgotten.

When we enter into a therapeutic or personal-development program, the leader and the setting usually create a "cultural island" in which some of the societal rules can be suspended and people are encouraged to be more open about what they normally would withhold. When the tasks we are asked to perform in a group require a high degree of collaboration, the team learning process or "teaming" (Edmondson, 2012) similarly creates conditions where some of our basic assumptions have to be surfaced. The best example would be to give team members feedback on how we react to their participation and to own up to our own doubts and fears in relation to task accomplishment. I have called this "here-and-now humility" to indicate that in such team situations formal status and rank become less important than patterns of who is dependent on whom at a given moment in accomplishing a task (Schein, 2016).

In summary, as individuals we can all be observed at the artifact level, we all have our espoused beliefs and values that may or may not be consistent with our behavior, and we all have deeper-level assumptions about why we do what we do. It is the degree of alignment or congruity between the three levels that determine how an individual's "sincerity," or "integrity" is judged by others.

The Group or Micro System from a Cultural Perspective

Groups also evolve "hidden agendas," "have elephants in the room," and, in various ways, espouse beliefs and principles to justify their overt behavior. If we apply the three-level model to group behavior by analyzing whether or not the observed behavior matches the espoused beliefs and values, we discover discrepancies that reveal the basic assumptions level (Bion, 1959; Marshak, 2006; Kantor, 2012).

A simple but telling example occurred in a company manufacturing team that was dedicated to good team work and espoused a climate of relevant participation by all members. Over several meetings I observed that one member was consistently ignored after he tried to say something, was never called on, and seemed to be very much on the margin. I pointed this

out at one of the meetings and was met with a stony silence, a pause, and then a continuation of the discussion as if nothing had happened.

After the meeting, the chair pointed out to me that this member had been one of the important inventors of several of the company's products, was still too young to be early retired, and was still potentially useful to have around for consultation, but there was no place to "park" him except in this particular group. In early meetings they had welcomed him and jointly agreed that he was welcome to participate but that he would probably find that most of his ideas were now obsolete. He understood and accepted this.

My intervention in calling attention to this embarrassed everyone by surfacing the basic assumption "we accept you as a member but we all understand that you will not be a real contributing member of the group." Any discussion of this assumption would lead to further embarrassment for all concerned. It had become part of the group's culture to accept this person as a member without, however, feeling obligated to take his ideas seriously. The group had evolved the behavioral rule of "you must be polite and pay attention to him but you don't have to use his ideas."

Do all groups have cultures? It depends on the degree to which a given group has a shared history of learning together. A group that has constant change of membership and has not had to learn to do anything together will not have a culture. But any group that has a shared task, more or less constant membership, and some common history of learning together will have its own subculture as well as being nested in the culture of the organizational unit it is in and in the macro cultures of the occupations of its members, the organization, and the nation.

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter presents a three-level model of culture as the way to describe and analyze any cultural phenomenon, whether we are talking about an individual, a micro system, a subculture, an organization, or a macro culture. It is important to differentiate the observed and experienced "artifacts" from the "espoused values" and from the "basic underlying assumptions" that ultimately drive the observed behavior.

Suggestions for Readers

- If you are a scholar or researcher, try to classify all that you observe and know about the group that you are a member of into the basic categories of artifacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions. What additional questions do you need to ask of your colleagues to decipher the basic assumptions?

- If you are a student or potential employee, take a potential organization you are interested in, visit it to gather impressions and feelings, and then see whether what the organization claims fits what you have observed and felt. If you see discrepancies, ask questions to get at the basic assumptions.

- If you are a change leader, bring together a representative group of members of the organization you are trying to change and ask them to identify as many behavioral artifacts of the organization as they can. List these on flip charts. Then ask the group to identify the major espoused values of the organization and compare those values with the artifacts on the charts. Are they consistent? If you find discrepancies, ask the group to identify what the deeper assumption might be that would explain the artifacts, especially observed routine behavior.

- If you are a consultant or helper and are sure you know what specific changes the change leaders have in mind, invite them to bring together a group from their organization and take it through the preceding exercise to determine where identified beliefs, values, and assumptions might aid or hinder the proposed change program.