Organizational Leadership: MMI 481

Summer 2010

Journal 1: Organizational Culture

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The material in this module focused on organizational culture. After reflection on the material and correlating the theory with life experience, the following quote of James Belasco and Ralph Stayer from *Flight of the Buffalo* (1994) best summarized this module: "Change is hard because people overestimate the value of what they have and underestimate the value of what they may gain by giving that up."

**What were your key learning’s from this module?**

Before beginning with my key learning’s, I believe it is important to understand the components that define culture: assumptions, beliefs, values, language, and behavioral patterns. A basic understanding of components that define culture is a key learning for this module that also provided me with a deeper understanding of artifacts, espoused beliefs, and assumptions. Understanding these basic principles and applying them to various organizations brings to light what cultural norms mean to an organization.

Additional key learning’s gained from this module include the levels of culture, stages of group evolution, and the impact leaders have on culture. My newly found understandings of these are key to the establishment and maintenance of organizational culture. First, in order to clearly recognize and adapt to the culture, one must recognize the various levels of culture. Group evolution being one of them, appears to be a subconscious process but can affect an individual’s willingness to conform or accept the rules. A person whose personality is to question or challenge the unspoken rules, may also need to resolve himself to not being accepted as a member of the group to the same degree as the conformist. Conversely, the conformist may be perceived as less critical to forward progress.

Most critically may be the understanding of the role of the leader on culture and change. Leaders can make or break the culture circle. One such example is found in Schein’s book. His discussion of Steinberg’s success in the supermarket industry was driven by innovation providing a good understanding how a strong leader can enact change. However, there are other aspects within this same success I disagree. I disagree with the management style that seems reflective of micromanaging employees. This may be an assumption on my part. I further believe leadership must be visible to be effective. I mean this from the perspective of being available to employees especially when the focus is incorporating employee’s innovative ideas and providing the support, encouragement, and motivation for the ideas.

**What beliefs and understandings were confirmed?**

The beliefs and understandings that were confirmed go back to the concept of leadership’s role on current culture as well as their influence on changes in culture. As previously discussed, Steinberg’s success in the supermarket industry illustrates through innovation and change an organization will succeed. A contemporary example that comes to mind is the current initiative for automation and acceptance of Electronic Medical Records (EMR) within the health care community. Despite the proven benefits of an EMR, the heath care industry has been slow to acceptance and implementation. Widespread acceptance is only now being embraced due to mandates by the government and a financial penalty attached for non-compliance. In a culture with strong leadership and organization accepting innovation and change one must wonder if it would have taken the government to force the issue. This has been the case in organizations such as Kaiser Permanente and Mayo Health Systems. They have recognized the benefits captured by other industries, which moved to automation years ago including the automotive industry through the automation of assembly of cars and associated parts. Toyota is an example used throughout many business platforms of how strong leadership can affect culture change and improve productivity.

The readings reinforced my belief leaders should serve as role models to their employees. Being a role model includes living the mission and vision of the organization. The mission and vision contain the critical artifacts, espoused beliefs, and assumptions the organization has placed the utmost focus. If a leader does not live the mission and vision, they have broken the culture circle expected within the organization.

**What theories or practices did you disagree with?**

A theory that I have some disagreement with is the idea Schein presents about group evolution and that all groups reach stage four. While the theory around the stages of group evolution provided insight and understanding they ran contrary to a recent situation experienced within a past work environment. While reading through each stage gave the feeling of “being there” and understanding of his model, I believe that there are other theories of group evolution such as the “haystack” model or group selection models that may be more applicable.

The last organization of employment is an example of how I feel Schein’s theory may fail. I had become a “member” of a group with two extremes of employees. One group consisted of employees who had been with the organization their entire career. The other consisted of those brand new to the group and organization. The newer employees were fondly referred to as “newbie’s.” As newbie’s, we did not know the ropes and often follow the lead of the long-term members as an attempt to conform. We strived to belong and become accepted members of the group. With time however, a couple of us had many questions regarding the how’s and why’s of some of the procedures we were expected to abide by.

Even after one year, it seemed stage four was never achieved. Several individuals were challenging authority and struggling to lead including the management. The group never reached an acceptance or conformity. One underlying cause resulted from the team being divided into two groups under different leaders each with a conflicting leadership style. The first made clear her background and preference to working in a union environment placing emphasis on seniority during interactions with the newer team members and frequently demonstrating a lack of respect for new ideas and change. The other manager promoted her team’s actions and ideas allowing for change for the good of the team. This was done equally based on the merit of the idea rather than the tenure of the person submitting the idea.

**What are your personal strengths and challenges in this area?**

Although this may sound cliché, I frequently find that my personal strengths can often be my challenges. I consider myself to be an analytical thinker and choose to consider options to determine a best course based on my analysis. This then can become a challenge when entering a new organization and being forced to conform to “group norms.” I often find myself asking questions and looking for the rationale and logic to ideas, concepts, and processes. This frequently results in suggestion for what I believe to be improvement. As I read and reflected on Schein’s description of group evolution, I could visualize in my mind the roadblocks that I frequently try to navigate. My desire to analyze and understand the concept behind a process is not always received in a positive sense. This is especially true when new to an established group. I view the analytical analysis and questioning as being strength to an organization because I am trying to see the “big picture” and apply what makes sense while eliminating “waste.” To established or “senior” employees this is often viewed as a threat to their credibility. At times, employees that are more senior have perceived this as an attempt to damage their image with management by showing my method is superior to the established process. This concept was evident based on response to suggested change. Referring back to the examples shared during this course, at my last position I had identified and questioned what appeared to be a duplication of process. The only rationale offered was an employee developed the process with more seniority. This explanation was irrational and offered no logical reason. It presented a challenge to be a conformist and I felt the need to press further. This then served to show my strength. I had demonstrated the ability to recognize opportunity for time and cost savings to the organization.

Social norms are also a challenge for me. I have chosen a lifestyle that places an emphasis on health and nutritional eating. At my organization, there is practice of “treats” being provided at meetings. The food is treated as a reward and that everyone should partake and be grateful. Because I chose to be true to myself and not join in the constant eating, I was considered ungrateful and at times, antisocial.

**What key concepts and/or tools will you apply and how?**

Being able to apply theory to real life clarifies understanding of the theory as well aids in reaffirming validity.

As I progress in my career, which includes completion of the MMI program, I hope to take away the knowledge, understanding, and recognition of how a culture is formed within organizations and what role I can play in its evolution whether in the role of an employee or leader.

Furthermore, I believe that understanding the key principles presented to include group evolution and leadership will help me with the challenges I encounter in organizations. When presenting new ideas or a change to a process, I will attempt to frame my questions or suggestions so they sound less critical of current process. The knowledge and insight gained about organizational culture will provide the background to make me a better leader. The ideas presented have equipped me to identify when an employee or peer is struggling to be a member of a group. This module certainly provided a great deal of insight and forces me as a leader to recognize the need for innovation and growth from my group as a whole, not simply for myself. This then results in betterment of the organization. In addition, I understand why my own personal challenges and weaknesses exist giving me the foresight to ask the right questions prior to accepting future positions. As I finish my degree and look to the opportunities of new employment, discussions with hiring managers of the current culture will be important. As indicated in the quote, I will not underestimate the value of what change may bring. Conversely, I will remain cognoscente of what others involved in the process may be forced to give up.