

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE OF FACULTY OF CIVIL ENGINEERING, UNIVERSITY OF ZAGREB

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Abstract

Since 1981, when Peters and Waterman introduced term organizational culture in organizational science, organizational culture has become a very important field of investigation. The reason why organizational culture became so popular is connection between appropriate cultures and efficiency and productivity of organizations. However, there is no universal organizational culture applicable to all type of organizations. Hence, this paper analyzes organizational culture of the Faculty of civil engineering, University of Zagreb, and it tries to investigate whether this culture enables optimal fulfillment of Faculty' goals. According to a survey, presented in this paper, lecturers are moderately satisfied with interpersonal relationship, with selection of new employees, with the opportunity for professional promotion and with the ceremonies at the Faculty. Nevertheless, lecturers are not satisfied with the value system. In addition, a high percentage of members of faculty think that clear rules of behavior for students should be established.

Keywords: Organizational culture, University, Faculty, Civil engineering

INTRODUCTION

Only 30 years ago, term organizational culture was almost unknown in organizational theory. Peters and Waterman, in their seminal book “In search of excellence (1982),” were the first to introduce this term in organizational science, and first scientific works about organizational culture appeared at the beginning of 1980s. Since then organizational culture became a very important field of investigation which is evident by the fact that modern business schools regularly have a course about organizational culture. Today, it is almost impossible to analyze modern organizations without mentioning their organizational cultures.

However, analyses of organizational cultures face many challenges. First, it is not easy to define this term. It is out of the scope of this paper to provide many different definitions of organizational culture. Therefore, this paper will only quote the most frequent type of definition. According to Jones, organizational culture is “the set of shared values and norms that controls organizational members’ interactions with each other and with people outside the organization (Jones, 2004, 195).”¹ There are many different norms that define organizational culture of a firm. According to Shein (2004, 12-3), the following categories are the most important in defining certain organizational cultures: behavioral regularities, group norms, espoused values, rules of the game, linguistic paradigms, symbols, formal rituals and celebrations etc.

The reason why organizational culture became so popular is connection between appropriate cultures and efficiency and productivity of organizations. According to Jones, “organizational culture affects organizational effectiveness because it can (a) provide an organization with a competitive advantage, (b) improve the way an organizational structure works, and (c) increase the motivation of employees to pursue organizational interests (Jones, 2004, 222).” However, there is no universal organizational culture applicable to all type of organization. Different types of organizations demand different cultures. For example, an efficient organizational culture of a firm that produces software for computers can be completely inefficient in a civil engineering firm. Therefore, each organization should try to find a culture that is the most suitable for this firm. However, organizations that produce similar types of products or services usually do have reasons to learn one from each other. For example, for a period of time, organizational culture of Microsoft became a model for other firms in informatics industry. Hence, this paper will analyze organizational culture of the Faculty of civil engineering, University of Zagreb and it will try to investigate whether this cultures enables optimal fulfillment of Faculty’ goals. This is especially important since, according to Kovač (2006, 5-6), “the university organizational culture can be recognized, evaluated and interpreted, but what is even more important is that it can be modified and changed to the desired way of functioning.”

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURES OF UNIVERSITIES

If Jones’ definition of organizational cultures is applied to universities than it can be concluded that university organizational culture is the set of shared values and norms that controls university members’ interactions with each other and with people

¹ Similarly, according to Vecchio, “we can define organizational culture as the shared values and norms that exist in an organization and that are taught to incoming employees (Vecchio, 2000, 342).” For different types of definitions see Shein (2004).

outside the university. In university settings it is especially important to investigate interactions between member of faculty and between faculty and students. There are many different ways how university culture can be assessed. For example, Becher (1989) differentiate four types of culture (collegial, hierarchical, anarchical and political) on the basis of the type of authority. Fjortoft and Smart (1994) differentiate university organizational cultures on the basics of dynamism and externalism. So, certain universities prefer stability more than dynamism and vice versa. Also, universities could prefer either external or internal orientation. However, for this paper, the most important classification is one proposed by Sporn (1996). She differentiates two types of university organizational cultures: strong and weak. Strong university culture is characterized by shared values, strong norms of behavior and willingness of faculty to obey these norms. In contrast, a weak culture is characterized by disagreement about main values, absence of norms, and violation of written and unwritten norms of behavior at university. In addition, weak university culture frequently produces many subcultures inside universities. Following Sporn's classification, the main purpose of this article is to investigate whether organizational culture of the Faculty of Civil engineering, University of Zagreb should be classified as strong or as a weak one. In other words, this article investigates whether Faculty of civil engineering has clearly defined values and norms shared by the members of the faculty.

Description of organizational culture of Faculty of Civil engineering, University of Zagreb

There is not many works that analyze organizational cultures of Croatian Universities. The most comprehensive one is *Understanding University Organizational Culture: The Croatian Example* by Kovač et al. (2006). This book examines organizational culture of all Croatian Universities. The main conclusion of the book is that departments at faculties in Croatia are predominantly collegial types of organization (emphasis on common values and goals, participation, consensus, connection and family atmosphere). In contrast, faculties and universities are principally bureaucratic types of organization (emphasis on rules, regulations and hierarchy) Kovač (2006, 69-70). However, this book is focused on type of governance of Croatian Universities and does not get to details concerning norms, patterns of behavior, rituals, language and other important elements of organizational culture. Therefore, this article will try to investigate these neglected elements in their investigation. In other words, topics of investigation are values, norms, ceremonies, rites, myths, etc. Since both authors of this article are employees of the Faculty, they had an opportunity to analyze the culture as insiders, following Schein's observation (in Vecchio, 2000, 343) that "achieving and understanding of an organization's culture can be aided by locating a motivated insider within the organization, someone who is capable of deciphering the organization's culture and is motivated to discuss it."

In order to do it, it is necessary to define key terms used in this investigation. Values are "general criteria, standards, or guiding principles that people use to determine which types of behaviors, events, situations, and outcomes are desirable or undesirable (Jones, 2004, 195)." Furthermore, norms are "standards or styles of behavior that are considered acceptable for a group of people (Jones, 2004, 197)." Important elements of organizational culture are also customs, ceremonies and rites

being defined as “regular behaviors that stimulate identification of individuals with an organization (Bahtijarević-Šiber, 1993, 596).”

So, what is the main value at the Faculty? It is important to note that many universities in the world face dilemmas concerning values they should focus on. Dill (1995) and Clark (1998 and 2004) concluded that the main trend in American and European universities is commercialization of research results. In other words, the main value has become profit, rather than teaching quality and research excellence (although these three elements are not necessarily in conflict). One of the purposes of this research is to investigate whether the same process has happened at the Faculty of civil engineering. Lecturers at Faculty assessed the hierarchy of values at Faculty (profit, research excellence, teaching excellence).

Concerning norms, Faculty does have a statute with written norms about duties of lecturers, other employees and students. However, the Faculty is a prime example for Jones (2004, 197) assessment that “many of the most powerful and crucial values of an organization are not written down. They exist only in the shared norms, beliefs, assumptions, and ways of thinking and acting that people within an organization use to relate each other...” For example, in Department for Construction Management and Economics there is an unwritten norm that people should celebrate at work not only events connected with their professional promotion but also their personal events (birthday, birth of a child or grandchild, wedding, etc.). Furthermore, members of this department meet each other in their spare time celebrating, for example, Christmas, end of a school year and other events. Such a habit has, for sure, a positive effect on interpersonal relations at the department. These meetings are a way of “team building,” and they are an effective way of improving personal relations. It is important to note that people in the department follow these unwritten norms that constitute a subculture of the department inside an organizational culture of the Faculty.

Like many others organization, Faculty of civil engineering has regular ceremonies. The most important are graduate ceremonies (for students), Christmas party, opening of a new school year, Faculty day, and ceremonies for people that live the Faculty for retirement. These ceremonies promote sense of unity, strength organizational culture and transfer norms and values to new employees. Speeches at these ceremonies stress Faculty’ successes and call for further efforts that should improve Faculty’ effectiveness.

Myths and legends also exist at Faculty. Older professors tell stories about their own professors who were tough, demanded strong discipline but also were experts in their field. Functions of these myths are similar as in other organizations. According to Miller and Form (1964, 271), “some myths function to preserve group values, some ‘explain’ the social system, some maintain moral; other are fabricated consciously by leaders to achieve certain ends.”

Though there an official dress code for the Faculty does not exist, unwritten rules do exist. For example, it is expected that faculty members do wear suits and ties during students’ defense of bachelor, master and doctoral thesis. The same unwritten rules apply for opening ceremony at the beginning of an academic year and during the ceremony on Faculty day. Less strict rules apply for the dressing of lecturers during the regular teaching and research activities. There is also no written rule concerning dressing of students. However, this situation produced smaller incidents when lecturers did not want to meet inappropriately dressed students (according to criteria of this lecturer). Therefore, one of the questions in the survey was whether an official dress code for the Faculty should be established.

Finally, an element of organizational culture is also arrangement of working space. According to Sikavica (1999, 612-3), “open offices lead to more open communication and participative culture. In contrast, closed offices are closer to authoritarian culture... Those organizations that have a round table in the meeting room usually have participative and democratic culture...” Faculty of civil engineering has closed offices. There is an unwritten rule that assistant professors, associate professors and full professors have their own offices but research and teaching assistants usually share closed offices. In this respect the Faculty is closer to an authoritarian type of culture. However, meetings of the Faculty’s Council are organized around a U-shaped table, which suggest a more democratic culture. Indeed, Faculty’s Dean is rather *primus inter pares* than an authoritarian leader, which is a logical type of organization for university settings.

SURVEY

This research will try to investigate organizational culture at the Faculty on the basis of questionnaire submitted to lecturers at the Faculty. Although questions do not address organizational culture directly, they address the most important elements of organizational culture, especially satisfaction of lecturers with organizational climate.²

The survey consists of fourteen questions about organizational culture. Altogether 47 out of 69 senior lecturers filled the questionnaire.³ They are selected because, according to Budd (1996, 156), “the faculty are a key element in the organizational culture of the university.” Since values are “backbones” of organizational cultures, two questions address values at the Faculty. In first of them, lecturers assessed what is the most important value at the Faculty.⁴ According to the survey, teaching quality is the most important value followed by research excellence. Profit is only at the third place. It can be concluded that a process of commercialization is still not prevalent at the Faculty, which has its positive and negative consequences. It is positive that teaching is considered as the most important activity. Probably the most logical explanation is the way The Ministry of science finances higher education, including Faculty of civil engineering. However, obviously, majority of lecturers do not consider that market is the most important criteria for evaluation of their activities. It is important to note that lecturers are rather dissatisfied with existing hierarchy of values. The average level of satisfaction is only 2.89 at the scale of five. It is difficult to assess what is the main reason for their dissatisfaction but one possible explanation is that lecturers actually do want a higher level of commercialization of the Faculty. Nevertheless, such a claim demands further investigation.

One important element of organizational culture is the way how new employees are selected. For example, United Postal Service in USA selects employees almost exclusively among students that work for the company during their studies (Sikavica, 1999, 615). In this respect, the Faculty has similar policy because employees at the Faculty are mainly former students. Consequently, a question in the survey asks respondents whether they are satisfied with the selection of new

² See questionnaire in appendix.

³ Dean and four vice deans also filled the questionnaire.

⁴ Hierarchy of values was assessed on the basis of a semi open question (see appendix, question 10). Two lecturers added professional work into the hierarchy, putting it on the third place. One lecturer added professional prestige as the most important value, and one considered organization of work as the most important one.

employees. The average level of satisfaction is 3.21 at the scale of five, which cannot be considered as a high level of satisfaction with this element of organizational culture. However, respondents are more satisfied with the opportunities for promotion during their careers (3.85).

Four questions in the survey (6-9) deal with ceremonies and rites. Lecturers are the least satisfied with the rites of passage (3.43) and rites of enhancement (3.55). However, they are satisfied with rites of integration (like Christmas party). Here the average grade is 4.00. Furthermore, the highest level of satisfaction - in entire interview - responded expressed about rites of promotion for students (4.21), probably not without reason. Indeed, the entire rite, from the moment when students defend their thesis, to the moment when they receive their diploma, is filled with the sense of dignity. In these moments both lecturers and students follow unwritten rules about behavior, language, cloths, etc.,⁵ which give a sense of "glamour" to the ceremonies.

Concerning norms, as high as 91 % of lecturers think that set or rules about students' behavior should be established. Although existing Statute of the Faculty contains some basic norms concerning students' behavior,⁶ it is obvious that lecturers think that a more precise set of rules should be established. In this respect, it seems that respondents want a "strong" Faculty's culture.⁷ However, less than fifty percent of respondents (41.3 %) think that the Faculty should have dress code for students and even lower percent is in favor of a dress code for lecturers.

Finally, it is important to investigate the level of general satisfaction with the organizational culture of the Faculty of civil engineering. The most logical way to do it would be to ask respondents whether they are satisfied with the organizational culture. However, this is not an easy task. Term organizational culture is not well-known, especially not for the people who belong to technical intelligentsia. Therefore, level of satisfaction was measured through satisfaction of respondents with the interpersonal relations at the Faculty. This is a legitimate approach because, according to Sušanj (2005, 121), "composition of (organizational) climate and culture together explain 35 percent of job satisfaction." Consequently, it can be concluded that the higher the level of satisfaction with interpersonal relations the higher the level of satisfaction with organizational culture. So, are members of the faculty satisfied with interpersonal relations? The most accurate answer is that they are moderately satisfied, being least satisfied with their relationship with colleges at the Faculty level (3.49). They are more satisfied with the relationship with colleges at the department level (3.57),⁸ and they are most satisfied with their relationship with students (3.72).

CONCLUSION

Results of this investigation do not offer much surprise. Lecturers are moderately satisfied with interpersonal relationship, with selection of new employees, with the opportunity for professional promotion and with the ceremonies at the Faculty. However, that what was not expected at the beginning of investigation is a relatively low level of satisfaction with the value system. It seems that lecturers would

⁵ For example, both lecturers and students usually wear suits or costumes, vice dean gives speech after defense of final thesis, students are offered with champagne at the end of the ceremony, etc.

⁶ Article 129 says that students' behavior should be in accordance with the University's ethical code.

⁷ According to Vecchio (2000, 345), "a strong (versus weak) culture is distinguished by whether the organization's values and norms are intensely held and widely endorsed."

⁸ In a similar investigation Kovač (2006, 187) found a relatively low level satisfaction with governance practice on the level of faculty (2.84) but a higher level of satisfaction with governance practice on the level of departments (3.23).

prefer a higher level of commercialization of the Faculty. Furthermore, it was not expected that such a high percentage of members of faculty think that clear rules of behavior for students should be established. Obviously, Faculty's organizational culture cannot be considered as a strong one because it misses some important norms (see page 2, and note 7). Finally, having in mind that this is the first investigation of organizational culture of the Faculty of civil engineering, it is important to specify issues that should be investigated in the future. Authors of this research suggest that it is important to compare the results above with the results for other Faculties at the University of Zagreb and with the results for other Faculties of civil engineering in Croatia and abroad. In addition it would be interesting to compare students' perception of organizational culture with the perception of lecturers at the Faculty. With this type of research it would be possible to have a better assessment of the quality of organizational culture of the Faculty.

Appendix

QUESTIONNAIRE⁹

Interpersonal relations

Please, answer the first nine questions on the basis of your personal assessment (1 – very dissatisfied, 2 – dissatisfied, 3 – neither satisfied, nor dissatisfied, 4 – satisfied, 5 – very satisfied).

- 1) How satisfied are you with interpersonal relations at the Faculty of civil engineering (1-5)?
- 2) How satisfied are you with interpersonal relations at your department (1-5)?
- 3) How satisfied are you with relations between lecturers and students (1-5)?

Human resources management

- 4) How satisfied are you with the way how new employees are selected (1-5)?
- 5) How satisfied are you with the opportunities for promotion at the Faculty (1-5)?

Ceremonies and rites

- 6) How satisfied are you with the rites of passage (1-5)?
- 7) How satisfied are you with the rites of enhancement (1-5)?
- 8) How satisfied are you with the rites of integration (1-5)?
- 9) How satisfied are you with the rites of promotion for students (1-5)?

Values

- 10) Sort values from the most important to the least important ones (teaching quality, scientific excellence, profit, or something else)!
- 11) How satisfied are you with the hierarchy of values at the Faculty (from 1-5)?

⁹ Questions in this survey are composed on the basis of Nachmias (2000, 233-43).

Other elements of organizational culture

- 12) Do you think that the Faculty should have set of rules about students' behavior (Yes or No)?
- 13) Do you think that Faculty should have dress code for students (Yes or No)?
- 14) Do you think that Faculty should have dress code for lecturers (Yes or No)?
- 15) Do you have any comment on questionnaire?

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