

IDENTIFYING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

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Abstract

It is generally acknowledged that the organizational culture affects how knowledge processes, such as knowledge sharing, evolve. Despite the growing attention for aspects of organizational culture and the knowledge management concept has not get systematic attention to the diagnosis of a knowledge culture. The central question of the paper is how such a diagnosis can be conceived. An answer to this question is mainly based on a literature review, consisting of four elements: an identification of organizational cultural elements ordered in knowledge sharing terms, a specification of facets of knowledge sharing as organizational cultural behavior, the specification of different types of relationships between organizational culture and knowledge sharing and a sequence of diagnosis steps connecting the first three elements. The paper is literature based diagnostic framework of the relationship between organizational culture and knowledge sharing.

Keywords: Knowledge culture, knowledge sharing, diagnostic framework.

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1. Introduction

The importance of organizational culture in the knowledge management domain is widely recognized in this era (De Long, 1997; Gold, Malhotra, & Segars, 2001; Kayworth & Leidner, 2003). In discussions of knowledge management, knowledge economy, and the knowledge based view of the organizational culture is prominently present. Organizational Culture is particularly seen as a potential source of barriers for processes such as knowledge sharing and development (De Long & Fahey, 2000; McDermott & O'Dell, 2001). Many authors argue that an organizational culture can be more or less ideal for valuing knowledge and managing it, as shows in such terms as the knowledge sharing culture (Banks, 1999; Bonaventura, 1997; Smith, 2003), the 'sharing culture' (Comeau-Kirchner, 2000; Damodaran & Olphert, 2000; Davenport, De Long, & Beers, 1998; Neef, 1999), the knowledge centered culture' (Janz & Prasarnphanich, 2003) or the knowledge friendly culture (Davenport et al., 1998). Such concepts refer to a culture of openness and trust, a culture in which learning is appreciated and in which experience, expertise and knowledge are considered more important than hierarchy.

In spite of the increased attention for the relationship between organizational culture and knowledge sharing the central question of the research presented in this paper is: How can elements of organizational culture and knowledge sharing be identified and linked in a framework that is suitable for diagnosing the role of organization culture in knowledge sharing? Identifying and linking such elements can take place in two ways. In the first place an empirical method can be followed building a model that based on definitions of organizational culture and knowledge sharing identifies the relevant elements and their connections.

In the second place an inductive method is possible that develops a framework by integrating elements and relationships identified in the literature. Both methods have advantages and disadvantages. An advantage of the first method, which starts from an explicit theoretical position, is that the logic of its argument may be the best guarantee of a complete framework. An advantage of the second method is that it postpones the choice of a theoretical perspective and that it may therefore hope to combine more diverse insights. In the research this second manner has been chosen. The main consideration leading to this choice was that the literature has developed various ideas around the concept of an organizational culture and knowledge sharing.

The choice of an inductive method then appears as the best possibility to build on the collected insights of connecting organizational culture and knowledge sharing. Development of the central question then leads to the following four research questions:

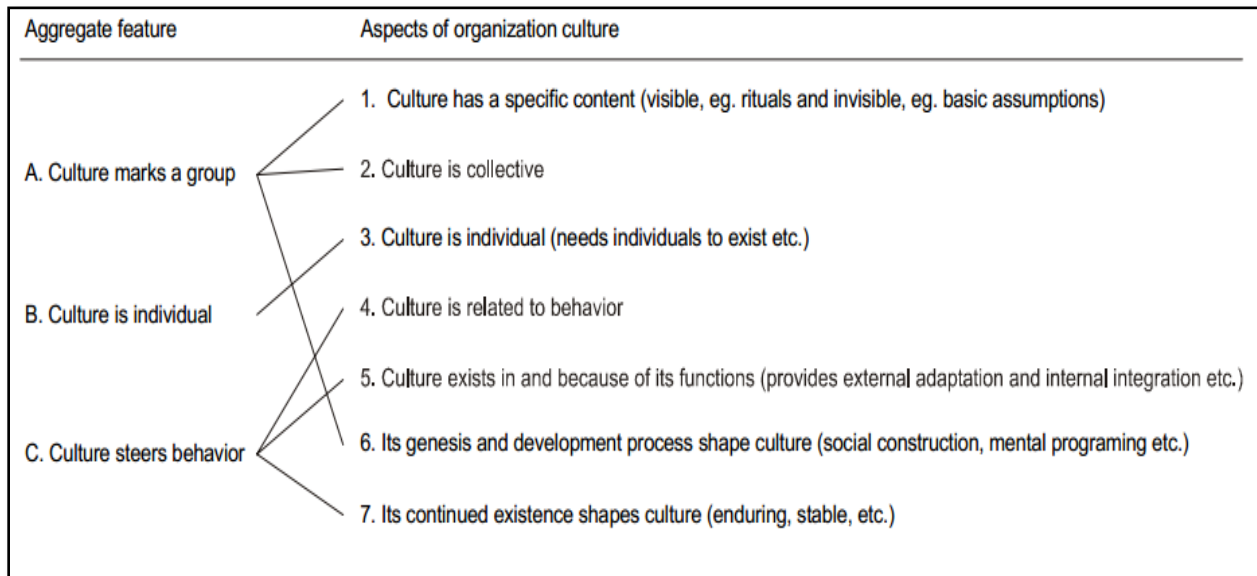
- A. Which elements characterize an organizational culture, and how can those elements be used in a diagnosis of that organizational culture?
- B. Which elements characterize knowledge sharing, and how can those elements be used a diagnosis of a knowledge sharing culture?
- C. Which relationships exist between an organizational culture and knowledge sharing, and how can these relationships be used in a diagnosis of a knowledge sharing culture?

The purpose of this paper is identified knowledge sharing is an essential and the organizational culture as the key determinant both of the knowledge sharing process and the possibilities of managing knowledge sharing. The framework may guide a diagnosis of the current organizational culture as the environment against which knowledge processes actually run or may be expected to run.

2. Organizational Culture

The Organizational culture is the transmitted patterns of the values, ideas and other symbolic systems that shape behavior of an organization (Kroeber & Kluckhohn 1952). The concept of culture has become increasingly significant in education during the 1990s and till now in the 21st century. Culture relates to the informal aspects of organizations rather than their official elements. They focus on the values, beliefs and norms of individuals in the organization and how these individual perceptions merge into shared meanings. Culture is manifested by symbols and rituals rather than through the formal structure of the organization. The organizational culture as the way things get done around here. He created a model of culture that is based on four different types of organizations. They each focus on how quickly the organization receives feedback, the way members are rewarded, and the level of risks taken (Deal and Kennedy (1982).

Sackmann (1991) indicates that at least part of the lack of congruence originates from the fact that organization culture has the traits of an umbrella term and that several authors emphasize different aspects. The defining and descriptive elements of that umbrella term can be summarized in seven aspects:

Figure 1 (Grouped aspects of culture)

I. Organization culture is characterized by certain content: basis assumptions, values and standards, rules, etc. (e.g. Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Hofstede, 1991; Schein, 1985).

II. Organization culture is always something collective, something common, shared by a group, etc. (e.g. Sackmann, 1991; Schein, 1985).

III. Organization culture relates to individuals, organization culture is carried by people, individuals must put effort into appropriating culture, organization culture can be seen as a psychological contract between individuals and the organization (Sackmann, 1991).

IV. Organization culture is related to behavior: organization culture provides a system of behavioral patterns, it involves ways of cooperation, organization culture gives direction and meaning to action, it is the basis of acquired behavior, etc. (Schein, 1985).

V. Organization culture has an impact and serves several functions, it offers organizational stability, individual security, it provides an instrument of control, gives identity to individual organization members and groups within the organization as well as to the whole organization, it leads to the reduction of uncertainty and fear, it ensures external adaptation and internal integration (Schein, 1985; Schneider, Gunnarson, & Nilesjolly, 1994).

VI. The process of its production forms organization culture, organization culture is a social construction, the product of mental programming, has been learned, and historically determined (Hofstede, 1991; Schein, 1985).

VII. Its existence shapes organization culture: organization culture has a durable, stable character; consequently, it changes only with difficulty (Hope& Hendry, 1995; Schein, 1985).

VIII. The organizational culture can be described by four general dimensions – Mission, Adaptability, Involvement and Consistency (Daniel Denison’s model 1990).

IX. The OCTAPACE Culture is relevant and critical for business performance and success and brings higher efficiency. The OCTAPACE culture is represented by occurrence of values / ethos of Openness, Confrontation, Trust, Authenticity, Pro-action, Autonomy, Collaboration and Experimentation (PareekUdai2002).

X. The four types of organizational culture as Clan, Adhocracy, Market and Hierarchy, respectively. The clan culture - Full of shared values and common goals, an atmosphere of collectivity and mutual help, and an emphasis on empowerment and employee involvement. The adhocracy culture - Like a temporary institution, which is dismissed whenever the organizational tasks are ended, and reloaded rapidly whenever new tasks emerge. The market culture: - Focuses on the transactions with the environment outside the organization instead of on the internal management. The hierarchy culture- clear organizational structure, standardized rules and procedures, strict control, and well defined responsibilities (Cameron and Quinn 2006).

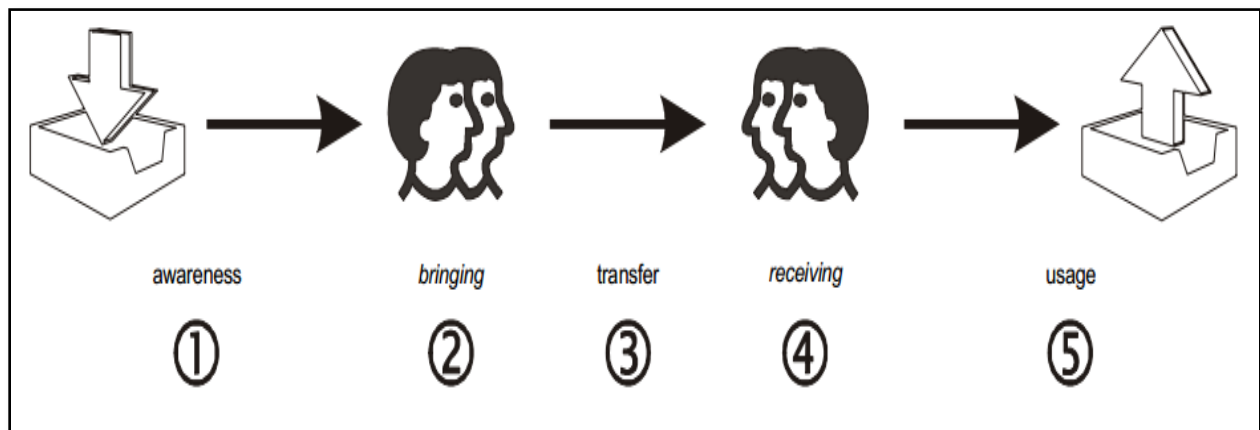
To be able to link to knowledge sharing we have to reorder these seven aspects in the light of aspects of knowledge sharing. Using terms that appear in the culture discussions, knowledge sharing involves behavior that individuals show as members of a group of two or more people. Based on this provisional characterization of knowledge sharing the seven aspects of culture can be assigned to three groups (see Figure 1): the historically determined group character of culture (aspects 1, 2 and 6), the fact that culture only exists if individuals recognize and adapt culture and keep it viable (aspect 3) and the relationship between culture and behavior (aspects 4, 5 and 7).

3. Knowledge and Knowledge Sharing

The second research question concerns identifying elements of knowledge sharing and arranging these in the light of culture. Knowledge sharing is an important mechanism that will turn individual knowledge into group organizational knowledge. A closer interpretation of the third aspect of knowledge sharing, the fact that it concerns sharing knowledge, calls for an exploration

of the terms knowledge and organizational knowledge. These terms are, as are culture and organization culture, container terms rather than sharply outlined concepts. As Alvesson and Karreman (2001: 997-1000) complain, the term ‘knowledge’ is used in an inconsistent, vague, broad, two-faced and unreliable sense in the knowledge management and broader organization literature. A useful and much quoted portrait of organizational knowledge shows in the five ‘images of knowledge’ Blackler (1995) found in his survey of the organization literature. Blackler warns us that these images in themselves do not clarify what the concept of knowledge is that hides behind the images. Blackler recognizes the images of ‘embrained knowledge’ (knowledge in models and theories), ‘embodied knowledge’ (knowledge as inextricably linked to physical skills), ‘encultured knowledge’ (knowledge as shared sense-making), ‘encoded knowledge’ (knowledge stored in documents and such) and ‘embedded knowledge’ (integrated knowledge in procedures connecting people, machines, problem solving methods etc.). The third image of ‘encultured knowledge’ that Blackler lends from Collins (1993), deserves extra attention here, because of its reference to culture.

Figure 2 (Facets of knowledge sharing)



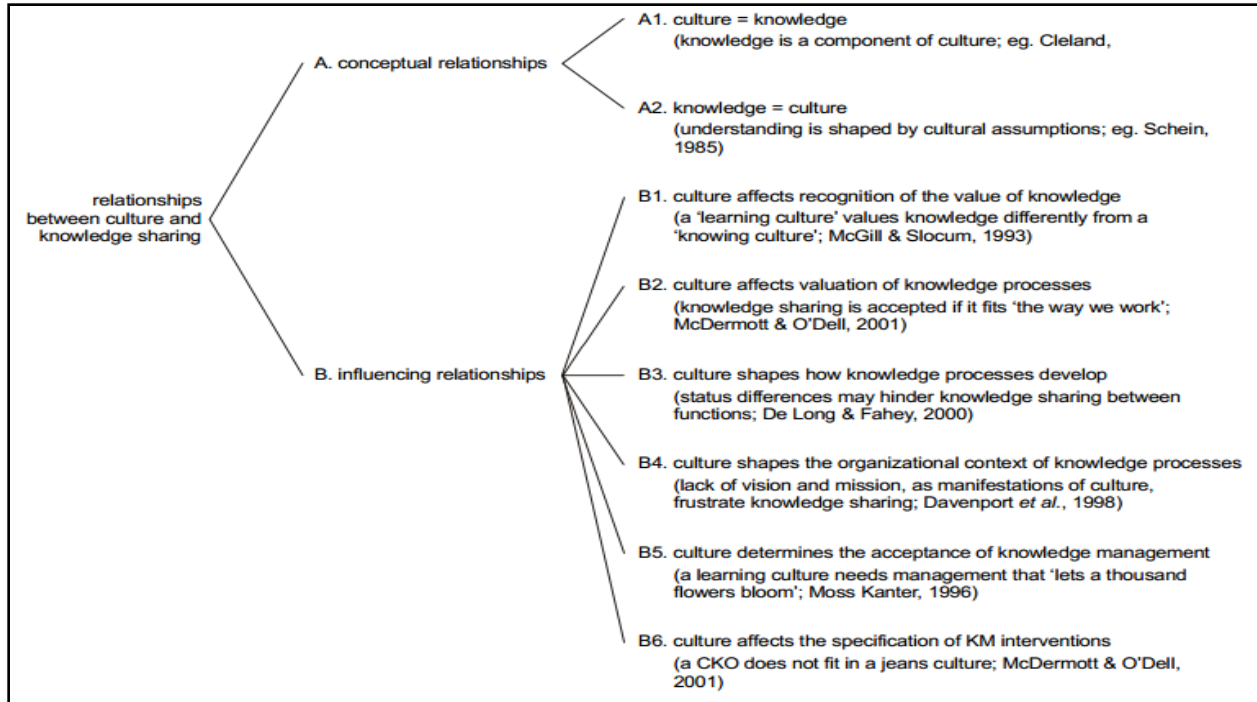
The model is based on the intuitive premise that knowledge sharing presumes two roles: that of one who has knowledge (facet 2) and that of one who gets knowledge (facet 4). Knowledge sharing is different from transfer in the sense that in knowledge sharing situations individuals and groups are bound to change roles frequently. Connecting knowledge owners (bringers) and getters presumes a choice of canal (facet 3). Knowledge sharing will only come about when involved parties recognize its importance or possible value (facet 1). The effectiveness of knowledge sharing will become apparent if on the basis of shared knowledge other products are

made or processes run differently (facet 5). Combining the model in Figure 2 with the knowledge types distinguished above answers the second research question. The five facets of knowledge sharing offer awareness usage bringing receiving transfer starting points to specify the influence of culture, which calls for a specification per facet of the contents of the process (cf. the characteristics of the shared knowledge).

4. Relationship between Culture and Knowledge Sharing

This brings us to the third research question, which concerns the relationship between culture and knowledge sharing. An analysis of the literature that addresses this relationship leads to the identification of a large number of different relationships. These can be divided into conceptual (or internal) and influencing (external or causal) relationships (see Figure 3 for an overview). In the conceptual area the relationship is characterized by interchange: knowledge defines culture and culture defines knowledge. Many authors consider knowledge as an indispensable element when defining of culture (relationship A1 in Figure 3) and, the other way around, many authors indicate that without a reference to culture a definition of knowledge would be incomplete (relationship A2 in Figure 3). As examples of the A1-group consider well enough (1957) who states that "A culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believes in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members." The knowledge as one of the components of culture: "An organizational culture is the environment of beliefs, customs, knowledge, practices, and conventionalized behavior of a particular social group." The definition of 'enculturedknowledge' by Blackler (1995) that was given above, gives an example of A2-group. The second class of relationships between knowledge sharing and culture, labeled as causal relationships, can be detailed into six types. Firstly, the degree and form in which organization values knowledge is culture related. This also applies to the appreciation of individual aspects and forms of knowledge (Chia, 2003; De Long & Fahey, 2000).

Figure 3 (Classes of relationships between culture and knowledge sharing)



Secondly, culture influences the appreciation of processes such as knowledge sharing, development or retention. This type of relationship between culture and knowledge gets most attention in the knowledge management literature. Particularly, authors stress the influence of culture on knowledge development (Davenport et al., 1998; De Long & Fahey, 2000), on knowledge sharing (Davenport et al., 1998; McDermott & O'Dell, 2001) and on the link between knowledge sharing and knowledge development (Glisby & Holden, 2003). For instance, authors point out that culture must create the right conditions for knowledge development: essential are a commitment to learn, nourishing openness and faith, making mistakes that is inextricably linked to learning should not lead to punishment of any kind, etc.

As to the connection between sharing and developing knowledge Glisby (2003) stresses that culture guides the appreciation of the four learning processes in Nonaka's SECI model (socialization, externalization, combination and internalization), based on the culturally laden acceptance of certain forms of knowledge sharing (via social contact or by via externalization of knowledge).

Thirdly, culture influences the way knowledge processes develop in the organization. This third relationship is different from the second in that it concerns which forms how knowledge

processes take, and not whether or not they come about. Culture guides the interaction between people (De Long & Fahey, 2000). The degree of knowledge sharing depends on culture (in masculine, individualistic cultures the importance of knowledge sharing is less automatically recognized. Culture influences the contents of the knowledge sharing process (in an informal network organization knowledge sharing develops substantively different than in an organization with a formal, closed culture (McDermott & O'Dell, 2001).

In the fourth place culture is an element of the organizational context in which knowledge sharing takes place (Snyder & Wilson, 2002). This context stipulates how and when knowledge is shared. This fourth relationship concerns an indirect relation between culture and the knowledge sharing process.

In the fifth place culture plays an important role in the management model an organization embraces. In other words, culture affects the acceptance of actively managing knowledge processes by other stakeholders than the knowledge workers themselves. This concern the question what the possible and desirable sphere of influence of management will be with respect to knowledge (Alvesson & Karreman, 2001). A directive management style is not appropriate in a culture where learning is appreciated: “Let a thousand flowers bloom!”

In the sixth place culture guides the way an organization implements its management given an existing management model. In other words, culture stipulates the focus and style of management as well as actual selection and interpretation of interventions aimed at influencing how individuals and groups deal with issues of knowledge. It also stipulates the chances of success of actually specifying and taking management measures. Also culture plays for example an important role in what is seen as a reward or as an expression of appreciation. Moreover, culture co-decides how much faith and trust those people will meet who plan to introduce knowledge management interventions (Lam, 1996).

5. Conclusion

The possibilities of exposing the relationships between organizational culture and knowledge sharing are limited, for a researcher. An important condition for successfully carrying out such

an assessment is to recognize that the relationship between culture and knowledge sharing is fundamental: culture is linked in organizational knowledge itself, in knowledge processes and in interventions of organizations aimed at influencing the knowledge processes. Studying the relationships between culture and knowledge sharing first and foremost involves exploring and reconstructing the close connections between the two concepts. For an organization this means that awareness and recognition of the complexities involved in the relationship are necessary explanations to step to knowledge management in the sense of designing and introducing interventions in the management arena. The principles and procedures for connecting culture and knowledge sharing as described in this paper offer a contribution to the discussion as to how organizations can produce this awareness and recognition by way of critical Self-reflection.

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