

“In the world, but not of the world”?

How culture affects OD with Christian Organisations

Culture pervades everything, including OD. In trying to catalyse change in Christian organisations, many of us come up against the constraints of culture. As one of our members in Kenya lamented, “the orientation of the African culture makes it difficult to appreciate feedback”. While in Europe and North America the constraints of culture may be different, they are just as real and pervasive. But what is culture? Does it really affect Christian organisations and churches – after all we are called to be ‘in the world, but not of the world’? And if it does affect the Christian organisations we work with, what does this mean for OD?

This paper addresses these questions by exploring the intense and complicated relationship between OD and culture. It concludes that we need to explicitly analyse how national culture affects the behaviour of the organisations we work with; we need to look for the elements in that culture that promote positive change; we need to recognise the challenges posed by culture to OD, circumvent some and address others. All this requires close engagement with the leadership, who have the most potential to influence culture within the organisation.

What is culture?

Culture is the norms, values, behavior patterns, rituals, traditions of a group of people. Culture exists on many levels, it could be national, it could be ethnic, it could be community, it could be within an organisation, it could be within a department. Culture is a pattern of learned underlying assumptions about how to behave. But perhaps easier to understand, culture is simply ‘the way we do things round here’. Culture, however, is more deep-rooted than the visible, formal aspects like organisational charts, job descriptions, mission or value statements. The ways in which organisations perform are often more influenced by the informal things which occur ‘below the water-line’ such as the way people relate unofficially, the political manoeuvring, the personalities involved, the ways decisions are made. The analogy of a hippo or an iceberg is often used to illustrate this reality.

In any organisation, including Christian ones, the internal organisational culture is deeply affected by the prevailing culture outside the organisation. Organisations are products of their environments, just as plants will grow differently in different soils. Our churches are also influenced by the cultures within our denominations. For example, the ways we do things in Catholic churches is noticeably different from the ways we do things in Pentecostal churches. Culture is also affected by leadership – the example they set, the things they talk about, what they pay attention to and what they reward or punish. Culture is affected the history of the organisation or society. The age of staff also has an influence

– different generations often promote very different cultures in the same context. While it is impossible to exactly determine what influences culture and by how much, what is clear is that the resulting culture is at the heart of how an organisation behaves.

Organisational culture is notoriously resistant to change, but OD is an approach to change that directly targets addressing what is below the waterline - the organisational culture. Therefore in order to deliver or support high quality OD we first have to understand the culture we are trying to change. This requires proper analysis and serious engagement. We have to understand the external cultural influences well enough to be able to use the good elements as powerful levers for change and to be able to circumvent or address the negative aspects.

African Culture and OD

Members of this learning group have highlighted some of the challenges of OD in Africa – particularly giving and receiving feedback. This echoes one academic writer who said: ‘in high power distance societies it is unlikely that it would be possible to achieve frank and open communication between members of different hierarchical levels operating in the same problem-solving group. Participation by junior members is likely to be more symbolic than real’ (Blunt 1995:10).

Furthermore some academics points out that developing countries generally can be characterized by wanting to avoid situations of uncertainty, implying that staff are ‘unlikely to want to engage in activities which are unstructured or whose outcomes are unpredictable, particularly if conflict or aggression is likely to be involved. People in such cultures have high needs for security and expect their leaders to be assertive’ (Blunt 1995:11). Another said ‘traditional African cultures embody a respect for the person as part of society and value social interaction and interdependence as central to life in the community. There is a less critical attitude to individual performance and a high respect for age and experience’ (Srinivas 1995:207).

There are undoubtedly many elements of African culture, at least as it is traditionally perceived, that appear to constrain the practice of OD. But these cultural challenges are not unique to Africa.

English, Swedish and US Culture and OD

Coming back to England recently after ten years in Malawi revealed to me how much my church at least was a product of its English cultural environment. Its own behaviour and norms closely resembled and fitted into middle-class culture. If you visited my church you would undoubtedly praise it for being so ‘nice, polite, and friendly’. Within and outside the church, we pride ourselves on being ‘balanced and fair’. Although we might not admit it, much of our lives are directed towards achieving comfort and security. We like planning ahead as it gives us more sense of control over our lives – so church services are carefully mapped out for the next three months. Our cultural emphasis on human effort, ‘man at the centre of everything’ is echoed in our churches, and in some

cases even promoted by the church. In England we have what is called a ‘Protestant work ethic’. Few people dare admit to not being ‘busy’ – being too busy is like a badge of honour. Many churches are a hive of relentless activity, sometimes too busy to depend on God. All these cultural elements have a major influence on OD. It might not be as obvious as in Africa, but it is just as pervasive and just as constraining.

If I dare use stereotypes of other cultures, we would see the same significant implications for OD. In Sweden for example, I am told that the culture is highly democratic – on the face of it a good thing for OD, but which may get in the way of actual change. But what this means is that Swedes like involving everyone. Participation and the process is vital. This leads to endless meetings – even meetings about meetings. Everyone voices an opinion and everyone listens. Dispassionate, unemotional analysis is seen as a very good thing. They might appear less keen on decisions, unless it can be a compromise where everyone gets something and nobody wins and nobody loses. I am told that Swedes rarely say ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Instead of saying ‘ja’ or ‘nej’ they say ‘Nja’ which means ‘yes-but-no-but yes-but’. Perhaps not surprisingly then, Nils (in last month’s letter) found himself at the end of an OD process with a Swedish church that had resulted in thorough analysis and involvement, but not much in the way of change. It left him with the troubling questions: *Did I stop short with just the analysis? What else should I have done to move beyond analysis and contribute more to actual change?*

In my OD work with different American Christian agencies over the years, I have often been struck by how profoundly ‘American’ they are. They often exhibit the same stereotypical features that outsiders see in American societies. These Christian agencies tend to be big and brash. They are action-oriented, ‘can-do’ or ‘gung-ho’. They are in a hurry. Deadlines were yesterday. Numbers are vital. Big is beautiful. Success is at least partially defined in terms of income and size. Some have become ‘fiscally mesmerised’. Clearly such cultures have significant implications for organisational change and OD.

So what should we do?

The examples above clearly illustrate the major influence of culture on OD. We underestimate the impact of national culture on Christian Organisations and churches at our peril. If we remain ignorant of the profound influence of culture on OD and do not significantly adjust our OD practice in the light of this influence, we will find our change efforts remain superficial and short-lived.

Be aware of our own cultural baggage

We should also be highly self-aware of how we ourselves are affected by our culture. Every culture thinks they are normal. We think we act rationally. We forget our rationalism is profoundly influenced by our culture. I need to recognise that my personal insistence on punctuality and finishing on time may be more about me and my culture than what is best for the OD process.

Explicitly seek to understand national culture and its impact on the client/church

So first in any OD intervention, we must ensure we look below the water-line. We need to

explore the culture of the organisation and how it is affected by cultural norms in wider society. This does not mean you have to do a thorough anthropological study before every OD intervention, but at least stop, think, ask the right questions and analyse how culture might be affecting current organisational behaviour and resulting opportunities for OD

Look for the pro-OD/pro-change elements in the culture and work with those

We tend to view culture as a negative constraint for OD, but in reality there are also positive elements in every culture that promote and support an OD approach to change. It is important to identify these cultural levers for change. For example in Malawi, proverbs were profoundly important in bringing change to individual behaviour in society, so we used them frequently to promote organisational change (one of our members Chiku Malunga has written a book on this – see Resources section). Some of my favourites included:

Each culture also has its own levers for change – as OD people we have to know them and use them.

Recognise the challenges posed by culture to OD, but pick your battles

We have to be wise about the challenges posed by our cultures. Some cultural elements cannot be changed by OD. Instead of addressing them head-on, we should just go round them. For example, I know with my work in Sweden it is naïve to plan any change activities between June and mid-August. It does not matter what you do, no one is around to change anyway. Even on a more micro level, in planning any meeting or workshop almost anything is possible in Sweden except changing ‘fika’ (mid-morning coffee-break). Fika is as sacred as you get in Swedish secular society (though I have heard it said that if Swedes gave this up they could retire five years earlier!).

Address other cultural influences with sensitivity and strength.

Although feedback may be more difficult in African societies, it still takes places. It might not be the direct, open feedback we expect in Europe or North America, but that does not mean that it does not happen. It is just that it is more indirect, private and nuanced. Similarly in Europe, although our secular society emphasises the centrality of human effort, as OD practitioners with churches we have to integrate the spiritual dimension too. We have to stand against the secular culture that tends to make us separate the professional from the spiritual. In the USA and Europe, we might need to remind Christian agencies of Jesus’ calling to be ‘faithful and obedient servants’, not successful servants growing ever richer and bigger.

Work with leaders on culture

Culture is not only determined by the external environment. Leaders do have a major influence on the culture that is practiced within an organisation (even though leaders sometimes feel they only have very limited influence). This is why working with leaders is such a key element of any OD process. In our engagement with leaders it is worth remembering Edgar Schein’s six primary ways in which leaders influence the culture within the organisation:

What leaders pay attention to, measure, and control

Leader reactions to critical incidents and organizational crises
Observed criteria for resource allocation
Deliberate role modeling, teaching, and coaching
Observed criteria for allocation of rewards and status
Observed criteria for recruitment, selection, promotion, retirement, and excommunication

***What are your experiences of the positives and negatives of culture and OD?
What do you avoid? What do you challenge?***

Leadership is so key to any culture change and therefore to OD, we will be developing this topic further next month. Watch this space!

This is a gross simplification – Africa does not have a culture, it has a myriad of different cultures that are themselves changing.

High power distance refers to societies where people feel more comfortable with a significant 'distance' between leaders and staff in an organization

'Chuluke, chuluke ngwa njuchi kumanena yomwe yakuluma' – there are many bees, but talk about the one that stings.

Pakadafunda padajiwitsa galu - a dog sitting on a warm place does not move despite warnings of approaching lion

'Chala chimodzi sichiswa nsabwe' – one finger does not squash a tick (you need to work together);

'Chetechete sautsa nyama koma suyosuyo' – if you are going hunting you have to make noise (if you keep silent nothing will change).