

Pathogenic Fit

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Abstract

People-organization fit benefits the individual and the organization. It allows a synergistic relationship through which personal and organisational goals are met. Much of the literature to date attends to evidencing that fit. This paper, however, has approached the subject from a different perspective, one which considers the mechanics of achieving that synergistic relationship. In this paper I will propose that person-organization fit is not simply an outcome of the attraction–selection–attrition process, (Schneider et al, 1995) rather that individuals use “cognitive tactics” (Elsbach and Kramer, 1996: 443) to socially reconstruct a harmonious view of their relationship with the organisation. I will propose that where P-O fit does not exist, there is an alternative to exit, (Schneider et al, 1995) a pathogenesis of fit.

Paper

Within the extant literature, typologies of fit are described as being complementary or supplementary. (Muchinsky and Monahan, 1987; Kristof, 1996; Kristof et al, 2005) The intellectual tradition of the former is premised on surfacing the needs-wants relationship (Cable and Edwards, 2004) between the organization and those employed within. It is the emergence of this “mutually off-setting pattern of relevant characteristics” (Muchinsky and Monahan, 1987: 272) which creates the symbiotic relationship between the two. Although traditionally the needs-wants framework has been seen as distinct from supplementary fit, this paper suggests that the instrumental nature of the needs-wants relationship reflects the power dynamic between people and the organization. Thus positioned, the needs-wants relationship runs in parallel to the search for value congruence.

Traditionally value congruence has been associated with supplementary fit. (Cable and Edwards, 2004) Value congruence is desirable. (Meglino et al, 1989) People desire a genuine affinity with the values of the organisation. Inside the organisation, such an affinity is influential in increasing job satisfaction and raising commitment to the organization. (Kristof et al, 2005; Meglino et al, 1989) Moreover, as people within the organisation are imputed with the values of the organization, (Dutton, and Dukerich, 1991, Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994, Corley, 2004) this affinity has implications for a person’s sense of self (Leary and Tangney, 2003). As such, where the organizational values are perceived as negative by the external stakeholders, and inconsistent with the subjective values of those within the organization, people may choose to exit the organization to ameliorate the likely pejorative affiliations.

The attainment of either complementary fit or supplementary fit implies that the output of a comparison between personal and organizational characteristics will result in a judgement of either ‘fit’ or ‘misfit’. The former inclines people to stay within the

organizational and optimise their performance, the latter inclines people to exit the organization and/or sub-optimize performance.

Based on empirical data, this paper will explore how substantial discrepancies between personal and organizational values are rationalised away by people within an organization. The resultant people-organizational fit is a consequence of a pathogenesis of fit, rather than a consequence of a managerial steering or serendipity.

Context

Food Co. is a large food manufacturing company based in the UK. Very much the local business made good, it remains a key part of the local community despite it now being a subsidiary of a large multi-national corporation. It employs 3000 people in positions ranging from senior management, through to shop floor operatives. Food Co. is the market leader in its field and retains that position by rigid controls on efficiency, cost and quality. This paper uses data from a wider investigation undertaken as part of a doctoral thesis.

Research

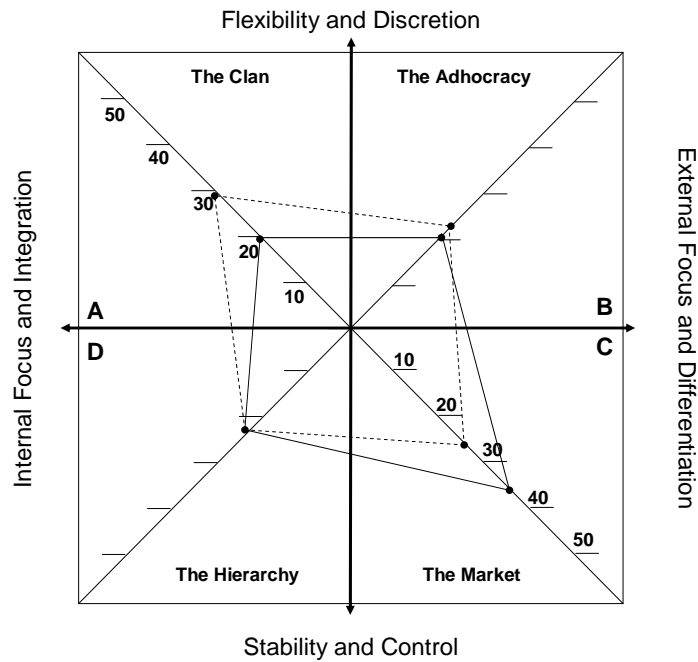
Analysis of the organizational culture at Food Co was undertaken using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative analysis used the Organizational Culture Analysis Instrument (OCAI)¹, a culture assessment tool premised on the Competing Values Framework (CVF)². The framework uses an empirically derived range of values through which to assess the actual culture of an organization, and the culture deemed to be ideal by the same respondents. Qualitative data was gathered through a series of semi-structured focus group interviews. The interview format reflected the value foci represented in the OCAI. Analysis was undertaken using a structured discourse analysis framework. The results presented here relate to those people located in the junior to middle management ranks of the company.

Results

In considering the actual culture of the organization, emphasis on the market dominates. The company is driven by the desire to retain and improve on its position as market leader. The values of the market and of competition permeate everything this company does. Moreover, the secondary emphasis within the actual culture was that of the hierarchy. People recognise that there are clear formal and informal systems which value control. The results of the OCAI analysis on the actual culture showed the domination of external and stability aspects of control. The ideal culture, however, determined that a shift in emphasis was required. Respondents wanted a culture premised on valuing people more. A massive shift away from the market emphasis and on to the notion of a clan culture implied that a more person centred approach to the work context was required. However, recognising that the need to continue to perform was at the heart of this company, the need to hold on to the values of the market was seen in a secondary role. (Figure 1)

¹ Cameron and Quinn, 1999.

² cf. Quinn and Rohrbaugh, 1983.



Key: Actual culture ————— Ideal culture - - - - -

Responses	Actual Culture	Ideal Culture	Difference
Clan	20.5	28.7	+8.2
Adhocracy	19.7	22.6	+2.9
Market	36.0	25.1	-10.9
Hierarchy	23.2	23.4	+0.2

Figure 1

A difference between actual and ideal cultures is to be expected. (Cameron and Quinn, 1999) Data gathered via the Focus Groups was used to try to explain this difference. However, this analysis revealed a tension not immediately apparent from the quantitative analysis. The people interviewed were unanimously uncritical of Food Co. They spoke of how they shared the values of the market. They want to be competitive as this creates success. But the dialogue also revealed that the way in which the company achieves this success is through the commoditisation of the workforce. In the quantitative analysis this was implicit in the articulated need to shift away from a focus on the market to a focus on the people. People described the company as hard driving and ruthless in pursuit of success. A clear indication of the ways in which the Company values people only as a means to achieving a corporate end. Yet people have chosen to stay rather than exit this company and are thus desirous of a good person-organization fit. Achieving that fit requires compatibility between the values of the organisation and the values of the person, (Cable and Edwards, 2004) and thereby lies the tension. To stay within the company requires commitment to the values of the organisation. Yet such a commitment implies that the individual is personally accepting of commoditisation and is prepared to be imputed with the pejorative impact of those values by the wider stakeholder group. (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994; Corley, 2004) Whilst the positive values of success and of competition are readily accepted, the concomitant

values of disregard for the individual and the commoditisation of the workforce are deemed negative. Affiliation to these values stands the potential to undermine rather than bolster social identities (Ashforth and Mael, 1989) and self-esteem. In reconciling this tension the group conspire to re-construct their view of reality to one in which their value set is in-concert with the values of the organization. Fit is created by manipulating meaning and by misrepresenting the motives of the organization. As such, people are commoditised for their own benefit, and the excessive monitoring and the measuring of performance is done simply so people can decide for themselves whether or not they fit in. (Price, 2006)

By reconstructing and mis-construing meaning, commoditisation is a good thing. As such the tension between the pejorative implications of commoditisation and the need to buy in to the organisations values is reconciled. What emerges is a synergistic people–organisation relationship worthy of being called fit.

Discussion

In considering the value congruence between people and organisation, a discrepancy emerged. Within the quantitative data this was articulated as the desire to move from the cultural domination of the market to a cultural domination of the clan. The qualitative data revealed the complexity of that discrepancy. People-organization fit requires “a person and an organization possess similar or matching characteristics.” (Cable and Edwards, 2004: 822) In the case of Food Co. those characteristics (positioned as values) were both complimentary and conflicting. Complimentary in their respect for success and competition, conflicting in their failure to recognise the value of people within the organisation. This paradox presented people with a choice. They could either exit the organisation, or they could stay. People within Food Co chose to stay. They feel that they are privileged to be employed here³. Yet to fit within this organisation requires you to buy in to the values of the company. Buying in to the values of the company, more specifically those deemed pejorative, has implications. First, how does one reconcile ones own conscience with the notion of commoditisation? Second is the potential for the individual to be imputed with those values by external stakeholders.

In addressing the first issue I suggest that recognition of such a discrepancy invokes the instrumental calculation of needs-wants. The judgement for people is not simple do I stay or do I go, rather is one of ‘do I need to fit and if so what do I have to do in order to fit?’ It is the output of this instrumental calculation that provokes the use of a pathogenesis of fit.

In the case of Food Co, the cognitive tactics (Elsbach and Kramer, 1996) used needed to reconcile the paradox of having complimentary and conflicting values. Such reconciliation was crucial to preserving a positive sense of self (Leary and Tangney, 2003) and to ameliorating the potential of being associated with such negative values by external stakeholders. (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994; Corley, 2004) People chose to do this by using language to re-construct their views on the way in which the organisation treats people. Re-interpreting the motive

³ The company offers zero hour contracts through their employment agency. To enter the company at the lower end people need to go from zero hours, to temporary contracts and then to a permanent contract. Very few get to a permanent contract as, once inside, very few people leave.

behind commoditisation, people determine that this is a necessary means of control, not just for the benefit of the organisation, but for the benefit of those being controlled. Without the careful steering of the company, people would not know what to do, therefore they wouldn't be able to achieve. Ultimately people would be de-motivated and demoralised because they would be aware that they were doing a bad job.

The organisation emerges as both benefactor and beneficiary.

Having re-framed the notion of commoditisation as a positive value, the paradox is resolved. People feel that they fit within the organisation because of the congruence of values. (Kristof et al, 2005) Albeit that congruence was manufactured.

Conclusion

In this paper I have presented the idea of a pathogenesis of fit, a process by which people reconstruct their view of reality in order to achieve fit within an organisation. I argue that people-organisational fit is not a definitive measure. That in many circumstances judgements are clouded by complexity and paradox. Likewise I argue that there is no clear cut distinction between fit achieved via needs-wants (associated with complementary fit), and fit achieved via the congruence of characteristics (associated with supplementary fit). Whilst these present useful taxonomies for thinking about fit, I have characterised their relationship as one of interplay, rather than exclusivity.

Within Food Co., the simultaneous existence of values which were complimentary and contradictory made the notion of person-organisation fit ambiguous. To concede to these values as they stood had implications for self-worth from two perspectives. First ones own ability to accept complicity in commoditisation. Second the potential to be imputed with those negative values by external stakeholders. Where the decision is to stay rather than exit, the collective conspire to create fit. Invoking a pathogenic process allows reality to be reframed and values become congruent. People – Organization fit is achieved, albeit by self-deception.

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