Reflection 7: Thought Frameworks 1.

Points pondered whilst studying culture.

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This reflection highlights some key concepts that influenced our understanding of culture

"To think about anything requires an image or concept of it"

Gharajedaghi, 1999.

If models do not "reflect the dynamic behaviour within organisations we have to question their credibility in enabling us to manage the organization effectively."

Hoyle 2009

Background

We use various terms when referring to the mental models people develop and use to organise information. A few of the terms are paradigms, schemas, diagrams, frameworks, and patterns of thought. These mental models are used to help understand the relationships between units of information.

Terms such as "paradigm blindness" or "perceptual blindness" are used to describe situations when individuals fail to perceive clearly visible but unexpected results or options. Cognitive psychology uses related terms such as functional fixedness and the Einstellung effect, where people have predisposed approaches to problem-solving. The models or paradigms that people develop influence their perceptions, information gathering and behaviour.

Psychology theory and the quotes at the top of the page emphasise the need for models when studying a concept. We must, however, emphasise that as information becomes available, models may – or should – change.

"The simplest thing cannot be made clear to the most intelligent man if he is firmly persuaded that he knows already, without a shadow of a doubt, what is laid before him." Tolstoy 1897

One of the biggest problems with models can be seen in the quote by Tolstoy. For a model to remain accurate, people must keep on questioning the accuracy of their perceptions and, as new information becomes available, be willing to adapt their mental model.

Given the enormity of culture as concept, a person researching it is continually confronted by more ideas and perspectives that affect the outcome. This results in a different problem, namely not being able to reach

a point of knowing. (Or perhaps this is just a challenge for someone with a Jungian introverted iNtuitive function.)

Focus

Anyone that has developed an assessment instrument will confirm that it starts with developing a model. What started as a "simple" idea to develop an assessment instrument quickly highlighted the difficulty of developing an integrated model of organisation culture and cultural dynamics. On the next few pages, we start considering some key concepts/considerations – starting with macro perspectives - that shaped 25 years of research and helped in developing some understanding in compiling our model of culture.

Since the early 1990s, there has been a notable increase in opinions, views, explanations, and models, of the vague concept, referred to as culture. Practitioners from various disciplines contributed constructs, descriptors and even alternate terms to describe it. In addition to the alternative definitions and constructs, multiple views exist of possible techniques, methods, and systems, and procedures of how to harness any value it might have for organisations and groups.

One area of agreement among practitioners is that culture is vital in all areas of business, including operations, strategies, performance, and organisational change and development. Practitioners that have attempted to understand, and work with, culture will, however, confirm the frustration of not achieving results and at times even finding unexpected results. One example of unforeseen results we found – based on a pre and post intervention assessment – was where an employee-empowerment program resulted in what one could perhaps refer to as a "cultural balancing". Although there was a perceived change in employee involvement/participation, it was accompanied by a perceived increase in hierarchical order, a focs area not addressed in any way by the intervention. This increase in order effectively cancelled out any benefit obtained from the interventions.

Chaos and Non-linearity.

White[i] indicates that "Classical science is rooted in determinism … [which is] … too rigid to reflect reality except when reality behaves in a smooth linear and therefore predictable way." It is clear, from working with people and looking at the multiple and varied views of culture, that people and culture are not straight forward – do A and get result B – concepts. Culture is a complex concept that cannot be fully understood if the elements and dynamics between the components are not understood and kept in mind.

Culture does not behave in predictable or linear patterns. In an attempt to understand this unpredictability, Hanson[ii] states that only "when we begin to see in terms of wholes rather than parts, patterns appear that a classic model of simple linear cause and effect cannot capture". The reality is however, that, when applying the perspective of wholes to culture, it seems to become even more confusing and vague. It is also important to accept that[iii] "phenomena in the natural and human-made universe do not come in neat

disciplinary packages labelled scientific, humanistic and transcendental: they invariably involve complex combinations of fields". Added to this is the view that in terms of complexity, "biological and social systems are the most highly ordered most complex phenomena that we know"[iv]. One glimmer of hope in understanding culture is that although "large numbers of simple components acting together can produce behaviour of great complexity … the basic components of many systems are quite simple"[v].

Working with patterns, relationships and wholes is the basis of systems thinking. Systems thinking is in itself an eclectic approach requiring some understanding of a broad array of other perspectives, theories and disciplines. One concept regularly seen when reading about systems is non-linearity. This also forms part of chaos theory which is commonly explained by the comment that a butterfly flaps its wings in the Amazon and causes a tornado in Texas[vi]. Chaos theory incorporates the reality that something which seems insignificant can happen somewhere and have an enormous impact in a seemingly unrelated area. There are numerous examples where this occurs, albeit on a smaller scale, in business and culture. One question about a possible "cultural butterfly effect" is; if - according to the definition of culture by Schein - culture is taught to members, what possible consequences could outsourcing a training department, or even just management and executive training, have on organisational culture.

Without delving too deeply into chaos theory, it is good to know that despite its name and in addition to the simplicity of components, "there is … [at a deeper level] … an order to [this] chaos"[vii]. The tricky part lies in searching for, recognising, and identifying the usually hidden aspects of order while managing personal paradigms and beliefs. It is here that systems thinking and the principles of systems theory becomes invaluable.

Systems

At its most basic, one can describe a system as a group of components, concepts, or elements that interact and influence each other in various ways and varying degrees. The key in their identification is that the components of a system are interdependent. The identification of system components requires the identification of component interdependencies. From a practical research perspective, it is crucial to start with identifying a few key elements within the system and, at least initially, "removing" unrelated aspects from the analysis. As the investigation progresses, more and more components can be added – or removed - for inclusion and review. Again the key is to remain open to finding some possible, seemingly unrelated, "butterflies" either within or outside the system.

The second aspect of systems is that it needs a boundary which defines the "field of study". These boundaries are not always clear and are often drawn arbitrarily. The boundary, which may be permeable or impermeable, should at least initially include the key elements being studied. It is a fact that businesses cannot function in isolation, and its boundaries are usually permeable. The key when drawing a cultural

system boundary is to acknowledge factors that are core and not-core to the internal functioning of the organisation. Through the process of continual research, core and non-core elements will emerge, and the system boundaries can be re-drawn.

Wholes, Parts, and Entropy

There is debate as to the exact phrasing, but Aristotle (384 – 322 BC) is referenced as saying that "many things have a plurality of parts and are not merely a complete aggregate but instead some kind of a whole beyond its parts"[viii]. This is generally quoted as 'the whole is more than the sum of its parts'. In science, however, one reads of entropy and the second law of thermodynamics. Stated in layman's terms, the second law of thermodynamics means that things continuously strive towards a state of equilibrium or balance. In even more basic terms, this means that if left alone – within an impermeable boundary - a system will move to a state that requires the least amount of energy to maintain.

More scientifically stated, the system will move into a state of maximum entropy – or disorganisation - and even potential death. As example, one can consider the impact of economic sanctions on a country, or the effect of a hunger strike on a body. As the amount of available energy – for maintenance and growth - in a system declines, the degree of disorganisation (entropy) or uncertainty increases. We can also refer to this uncertainty as 'increased chaos'.

Aristotle is also credited with the view that the whole is of greater importance than the parts. The whole, however, requires that the parts must work together to enhance, grow or maintain it. When the parts conflict, they use energy for the conflict, resulting in less energy being available for maintaining the whole. When working with culture as a system, it is important to not only identify the elements and the boundary but to constantly look for patterns that may explain cultural entropy. One example of cultural entropy we identified was where cultural assessment results indicated opposing sub-cultures within one department.

Having set out the macro perspective used in studying culture, the next reflection will consider some related concepts such as culture as a self-organising system and the need for tension to function.

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[i] White, R. (Composer). 1994. Complexity and Chaos. [E. Newman, Performer] Charmichael & Charmichael
[ii] Hanson B. G. 1995. General Systems Theory Beginning with Wholes. Toronto: Taylor & Francis.
[iii] Laszlo & Krippner, 1998, p.4
[iv] White, R. (Composer). 1994. Complexity and Chaos. [E. Newman, Performer] Charmichael & Charmichael.
[v] https://www.stephenwolfram.com/publications/academic/complex-systems-theory.pdf
[vi] accredited to Lorentz the father of Chaos theory (1917 –2008)
[vii] Gharajedaghi, J. 2004, March 9. Systems Methodology: A Holisitc Language of Interaction and Design - Seeing Through Chaos and Understanding complexities. Retrieved May 8, 2013, from Ackoff Center weblog: http://ackoffcenter.blogs.com/ackoff_center_weblog/2004/03/systems_methodo_1.html
[viii] https://sententiaeantiquae.com/2018/07/06/no-aristotle-didnt-write-a-whole-is-greater-than-the-sum-of-its-parts/