Multicultural image of contemporary educational organizations – chaos or coherence?

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Synopsis: Contemporary organizations have to function in a rapidly changing and complex world. There are some theories of organisational culture that seem to be the most appropriate for understanding organisational processes in such an environment and that are helpful in order to make them more effective. Among those theories one can find numerous attempts to describe different types of organisational cultures. They distinguish differences and try to show that different types of organization need different types of culture. The main aim of this paper is to show the limitations of such an approach. The author argues that contemporary organization needs to be ‘multicultural’ in order to respond to the challenges of today’s world. Building such a ‘multicultural’ organization needs a special type of leadership. Using the data from the research on school organizational culture the author gives evidence that organizational culture is a complex phenomenon that incorporates features of different types of culture. Finally, discussing the results, he describes two possible types of such ‘multicultural’ cultures that can take two forms - a chaotic and a coherent one.

Introduction

The main challenge for the contemporary management theory is without doubt an attempt to describe and understand organizational processes in a rapidly changing and complex environment context. Many authors in both Polish and international literature claim, that the notion and the theory of organizational culture can be best used to deal with that difficult challenge [Zbiegień-Maciąg, 1999; Schein, 2010]. The concept of organizational culture is very useful to help understand the functioning of every organization in the public sector, but it is especially adequate when schools and other educational organizations are concerned. That is because organizational culture is about ways of thinking, values, norms and traditions that are crucial to every organization but in the context of education it is the main, core element of organizational processes focused on learning. Competencies of supporting such a process of building cultural dimensions of school as an organization is a crucial aspect of educational leadership, that has to be adequate to the specificity of schools as organizations [Sergiovanni, 1984]. The specificity of educational organizations is best described by looking at the main values they serve such as individual development [Łuczyński, 2011]. That brings us to the notion of organizational culture as the best concept from the field of general management to be applied to educational management and leadership theory and practice [Bottery, 1992]. Going further, one can say that it is the best concept to develop specifically educational management adequate to understanding the nature of managerial processes in educational organizations [Dorczak, 2009]. It is then quite obvious, that many authors have tried to transfer the theories of organizational culture from the general management theory to educational management or that they have tried to develop original theories of school organizational culture [Handy, Aitken, 1986; Deal, Peterson, 1999]. In both general and educational management, among the most popular theories, the typological ones seem to be the most popular.

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Types of organizational culture

Most authors developing their theories of organizational culture inevitably notice that even similar organizations differ when we try to describe their organizational culture. That has led to attempts to describe types of culture. Some typological theories mention two opposing types of culture, some describe several different types [Zbiegień-Maciag, 1999]. Three of those theories that appear to be the most popular in the area of the general management theory, are Deal’s and Kennedy’s theory, Cameron’s and Quinn’s theory and the Hofstede’s theory, each of them describing four types of organizational cultures that can be found in different types of organisations [Cameron, Quinn, 2003; Deal, Kennedy, 2000; Hofstede, 1991].

The third theory, on which this paper particularly focuses, was developed by Charles Handy (based on Harrison work) within the area of general management but was then applied specifically to educational organizations. Handy, developing the typology of Harrison, described four organizational cultures giving them the names of four different Greek gods [Handy, 1985].

First, he describes the so called Zeus club culture, that is shaped by a strong and charismatic personality of a classical leader and through the strength and the speed of the decision making process and the total control of the organization it can prove to be effective in rapidly changing and crisis situations. According to Handy, that type of culture is best for organizations from the area of safety and order such as the police and the army or at least, this type usually prevails in such organizations. A similar situation was also described in a Polish research carried out in the police headquarters [Kurkiewicz, Stuss, 2000].

The second organizational culture called by Handy the Apollo role culture is shaped by detailed law regulations of a different source, describing bureaucratically every little aspect of the organizational life. This type of culture characterised by precisely set up roles of every member of the organisation, according to Handy, is usually found in organizations from the area of public administration. Polish research carried out in the Local Authority Job Centres (Powiatowe Urzędów Pracy) shows quite similar results [Kurkiewicz, Stuss, 2007].

The third type of culture described in Handy’s typology is the Athenian task culture. It is based on teamwork and shaped by the potential and the competencies of every member of the organization engaged in common, co-operative activities. It helps to develop organizational potential and stimulates organizationally useful creativity. Handy argues that it is the best type of culture for educational organizations that need such creativity. The research on school culture carried out recently in Polish schools shows that, indeed, it is typical for some educational organisations [Dorczak, 2011].

Finally Handy describes the Dionysian freedom culture that is built on the value of personal freedom and independence of every member of the organization. It gives freedom but not framework for individual activity. It stimulates individual creativity that makes it difficult to achieve coherence in the work of different members of the organization. Handy claims that such a type of culture can be found in organizations from the area of culture such as theatres, etc. It is also the least frequent type of culture to be found [Handy, Aitken, 1986].

Limitations of organizational culture typologies

Theories proposing typologies of organizational cultures help to describe the richness of organizational life. They are also useful when the sharpness and precision of description of certain organisational characteristics are needed [Schein, 2010]. On the other hand, many authors underline limitations of typologies such as proposed by Hofstede or Handy [Chan-chani, Theivanathampillai, 2002; McSweeney, 2002]. What typologies lack is mainly the ability to observe a real, living organization that is, to use the metaphor of an organism, never static, changing and developing all the time such as a live organism. At the same time, it is so complex in its different parts, that they cannot be described properly when we use the
simplified language of one type of culture to describe that complexity. That fact was perceived by the authors of most typologies. Handy and others using this framework have noticed that organizations are not pure examples of one of the types of culture. The results of different research show that even if the features of one culture are dominant, other cultures can also be recognised [Handy, Aitken, 1986; Kurkiewicz, Stuss, 2006, 2007; Dorczak, 2011]. Nevertheless, it is worth noticing the fact that such a complex nature of organizational culture was not fully recognised by the typological theories that still prevail in the domain of organizational culture studies [Zbiegień-Maciąg, 1999].

It seems that especially in a contemporary world that brings challenges of constant change and demands flexibility it is no longer possible to claim that an organization can be run effectively having the features of one certain type of organizational culture only. It is clear that in today’s world all organizations, especially educational ones that should create conditions for personal and social development, have to be organizations that are able to incorporate into their cultures features that are characteristic for different types of cultures. For the purposes of this paper we will call such an organizational culture a ‘multicultural’ culture (using the term usually used to describe groups or organizations that consist of members of multinational origin).

The two faces of ‘multicultural’ organizational culture

The ‘multicultural’ organisational culture has to incorporate the features of all the different cultures described in a certain typology. Using Handy’s typology it may be said that the ‘multicultural’ culture has to be able to act like the Zeus culture, quickly and ready to take personal decisions in situations (a crisis situation for example) when strong leadership is needed. It has to be able to act according to the precisely described rules of the Apollo culture, especially in stable circumstances and in areas when the application of well-developed (bureaucratic) procedures saves organizational time and energy. It also has to possess the Athenian ability to work cooperatively and use the competencies of all members of the organization for the common organizational good. Eventually, sometimes it needs the freedom and creativity of free individuals that are not limited by team-work constraints, it might even get close to anarchy if that helps to find good ideas to solve difficult organizational problems. The Dionysian moments in organizational life can also be valuable when it is time to relax after stressful periods that can contribute to burnout syndrome and limit human potential within the organization.

It seems that such ‘multicultural’ organizational culture can take two completely different forms.

Firstly, it can be a sort of chaotic culture that incorporates different features accidentally and without a conscious organizational decision making process. Lack of awareness of how to build organizational culture among managers or leaders and lack of control are the main characteristics of this type of culture. Such an organization acts in a spontaneous but not a very coherent way, reacting when the situation demands certain reactions. It happens that this method is effective but in most cases it rather creates, rather than solves, organizational problems. Sometimes it happens that different parts of such an organization have different features. When looking at such an organizational culture, one has the impression that it was constructed from accidentally chosen pieces that were stuck together without proper attention. An organizational culture of such type can be called the *Frankenstein culture*. Such a metaphor best describes the negative character of such culture that leads an organization to serious problems and limits its possibility to reach organizational aims properly. It is usually not a very good place to work in and, in most cases, it is counterproductive. Most of its features are similar to those described by Deal and Peterson as a toxic culture [Deal, Peterson, 1999]. It is worth noticing that, unfortunately, many organizations take such a form.

The second version of ‘multicultural’ organisational culture is probably more difficult to be found. Its main characteristic is that it is developed consciously in a long process of orga-
nizational culture building. Such a process needs awareness that organization requires different potentials and resources to be precisely used in different situations and areas of organizational functioning. The leaders with such awareness know that in order to reach organizational goals in the best possible way, it is necessary to slowly build such ‘multicultural’ organizational culture. Different organizational features have to be organically built into such culture and this diversity has to be planned and controlled. Such a process needs specific leadership that can be called organic leadership. It enables all organizational and human potentials to be recognised, developed and adequately used during the process of organic growth throughout an organization as a whole. An interesting fact is that such leadership is different from distributed leadership that gives a special role to the leader who distributes powers and possibilities. In an organic leadership all people in the organization become potentially the leaders developing better organizational culture and contributing to organizational growth [Avery, 2004]. Organizational culture that arises in such a way can be called, using the metaphor of the Slavonic god of four faces, the Swiatowyd culture. The metaphor of Swiatowyd, corresponds with four gods from Handy’s typology that were separate cultures, even when present in one organization. In contrast to the previously described Franken-stein culture, it is coherent, and developed according to a plan that is consciously realised with the participation of all important partners within the organization.

Are schools ‘multicultural’ cultures? – research on school organizational culture

During the period between January 2010 and December 2011 research was carried out with the participation of 1530 teachers and headteachers from different types of schools. They were asked to assess their school organizational culture using the questionnaire designed by Charles Handy [Handy, Aitken, 1986; Elsner, Ekiert-Grabowska, Kożusznik, 1997]. The results of the global assessment of school culture in that research show that the Athenian culture is dominant in schools that took part in the study (more than 45%), the Dionysus culture is second (23%) with a result very similar to that of the Apollo culture (21%) and the Zeus culture is the least frequent (only 7%). Details of that are shown in Table 1.

Tab. 1. Organizational culture of Polish schools according to teacher’s assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of organizational culture</th>
<th>Number of subjects assessing culture as such</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zeus club culture</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>7,06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apollo role culture</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>21,50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athena task culture</td>
<td>691</td>
<td>45,17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dionysus freedom culture</td>
<td>359</td>
<td>23,46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not determined/Answer not complete</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>2,81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1530</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: own research.*

More interesting results emerge when detailed answers for specific questions in the questionnaire are examined. The questionnaire constructed by Handy consists of 14 questions that deal with different aspects of organizational life. They concern the roles of the school head and ordinary teachers, the division of work and responsibilities, the expectations and the rules that the members of the organization have to follow, the forms of work and the ways of work division, the cooperation and the competition within the organisation, the decision making, relations with the outer world and the ways of solving problems in the organization. Assessing their school culture, the subjects took different perspectives when looking at different areas of school culture. Although the Athenian perspective is still dominant, in
some areas the subjects see the features of Apollo, Dionysus and even Zeus culture. The detailed results are shown below in Table 2.

**Tab. 2.** Detailed answers from the heads of schools and the teachers assessing school culture using Ch. Handy’s questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Zeus culture</th>
<th>Apollo culture</th>
<th>Athenian culture</th>
<th>Dionysian culture</th>
<th>No answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A good boss</td>
<td>273 (17.84%)</td>
<td>87 (5.69%)</td>
<td>599 (39.15%)</td>
<td>566 (36.99%)</td>
<td>5 (0.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>A good subordinate</td>
<td>33 (2.16%)</td>
<td>274 (17.91%)</td>
<td>722 (47.18%)</td>
<td>498 (32.55%)</td>
<td>3 (0.20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>A good member of the organization gives first priority to</td>
<td>18 (1.18%) 1061 (69.35%) 301 (19.67%) 140 (9.15%) 10 (0.65%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The organization demands from a member</td>
<td>29 (1.90%)</td>
<td>261 (17.06%)</td>
<td>1177 (76.92%)</td>
<td>63 (4.12%)</td>
<td>0 (0.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The organization influences the individual</td>
<td>64 (4.18%)</td>
<td>14 (0.92%)</td>
<td>1054 (68.88%)</td>
<td>328 (21.44%)</td>
<td>70 (4.58%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>It is legitimate for one person to control another's activities</td>
<td>237 (15.49%) 380 (24.84%) 425 (27.77%) 488 (31.90%) 0 (0.00%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>The basis of task assignment is</td>
<td>39 (2.55%)</td>
<td>682 (44.58%)</td>
<td>746 (48.76%)</td>
<td>30 (1.95%)</td>
<td>33 (2.16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Work is performed out of</td>
<td>13 (0.85%)</td>
<td>271 (17.71%)</td>
<td>737 (48.17%)</td>
<td>509 (33.27%)</td>
<td>0 (0.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>People work together</td>
<td>59 (3.86%)</td>
<td>86 (5.62%)</td>
<td>1144 (74.76%)</td>
<td>240 (15.69%)</td>
<td>1 (0.07%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Competition (within organization)</td>
<td>60 (3.92%)</td>
<td>92 (6.01%)</td>
<td>1137 (74.32%)</td>
<td>241 (15.75%)</td>
<td>0 (0.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Decisions (within organization)</td>
<td>541 (35.36%)</td>
<td>557 (36.41%)</td>
<td>229 (14.97%)</td>
<td>184 (12.03%)</td>
<td>19 (1.23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>The appropriate control and communication structure</td>
<td>196 (12.81%) 127 (8.30%) 883 (57.71%) 313 (20.46%) 11 (0.72%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>The environment is responded to as though it were</td>
<td>9 (0.59%) 492 (32.16%) 119 (7.78%) 842 (55.03%) 68 (4.44%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Conflict (within organization)</td>
<td>15 (0.98%)</td>
<td>89 (5.82%)</td>
<td>708 (46.27%)</td>
<td>718 (46.93%)</td>
<td>0 (0.00%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own research.

As it can be seen, when subjects think about decision making (question 11) they see it mostly from the perspective of the Zeus and Apollo culture, accepting the fact that most decision making processes in an organization had to be done according to the precisely set up rules and by certain people with power in the organization.

When thinking about the source of work assignment of an individual (questions 3 and 7), the majority of subjects said that it had to be decided according to the rules, which is typical for the Apollo bureaucratic culture.

The behaviours typical for the Dionysus culture, giving independence and freedom, are, according to the subjects’ assessment, typical for their schools in the individual assessment of the members of the organization, in conflict situations and contacts with school environment.
Most other aspects of organizational life, such as the relation between an individual and the organization (questions 4 and 5), motivation (question 8), team work (questions 9 and 10) or communication and control (question 12) are seen from the perspective of the Athena culture which highlights team work as a value.

Results correspond with the thoughts of many authors who underline, that typologies are limited and do not describe complexity of organizational cultures properly [Schein, 2010; Zbiegień-Maciag, 1999]. It is clearly visible, that in different areas of organizational life, organizational culture is different. Looking at such results of research on school culture as presented above, one may say without a doubt, that school organisational culture is a ‘multicultural’ one, but looking at these results, it is difficult to say precisely which type of ‘multicultural’ culture it is. Surely it has to be the inspiration for further research in that area [Dorczak, 2011].

Conclusions

To sum up, it is important to stress once more that the results presented above show that real schools are ‘multicultural’ cultures, it does not, therefore, give an answer to the question if they are coherent cultures of the Swiatowyd type or chaotic cultures of the Frankenstein type.

Some information suggests that it might rather be the chaotic type of culture. The results suggesting that statement are the answers indicating the Dionysian type of culture in the last two questions about conflict and cooperation within an environment which shows an independent and incoherent functioning of isolated individuals in facing the problems that should be dealt with collectively for better results. The Dionysian culture should be the ‘face’ of the organization in the areas of development or creativity rather than in problematic areas of conflict solving and cooperation with the outer world. The results described above suggest incoherence and chaos typical for cultures developed spontaneously and accidentally without consciousness and plans of development that would be typical for a coherent ‘multicultural’ organisational culture.

Regardless of that observation, one must say that the answer to that question of chaos or coherence needs deeper research that can unveil the nature of those different aspects of organizational culture which would help us to describe and understand better the ‘multicultural’ nature of organizational culture of contemporary organizations.

References

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Wielokulturowe oblicze współczesnych organizacji – chaos czy porządek?

Streszczenie

Współczesne organizacje muszą działać w bardzo szybko zmieniającym się i niesłychanie złożonym kontekście. Koncepcje kultury organizacyjnej uznawane są przez wielu autorów za najwłaściwsze dla dobrego opisania i zrozumienia procesów zachodzących w tych organizacjach, jak również lepszego zorganizowania ich działań pozwalającego osiągnięcie wyższej efektywności działań.

Wśród tych koncepcji i teorii bardzo często znaleźć można koncepcje typologiczne próbujące różnorodność kultur organizacyjnych opisać poprzez wyróżnienie ich różnych od siebie typów. Opisują one różne kultury pokazując ich charakterystyczne cechy, jak również opisując różne pomiędzy nimi. Badacze reprezentujący podejście typologiczne podkreślają też często, że różne typy kultury związane są z organizacjami różnego typu, w różnym stopniu pasują też do poszczególnych organizacji.

Głównym celem prezentowanego artykułu jest próba pokazania ograniczeń zastosowania podejść typologicznych do opisu i zrozumienia funkcjonowania współczesnych organizacji. Autor stawia tezę, że współczesne organizacje powinny mieć kulturę organizacyjną o charakterze ‘wielokulturowym’ (termin zazwyczaj używany na określenie sytuacji w której grupa lub organizacja składa się z członków pochodzących z różnych grup narodowych), czyli taką, którą łączy w sobie cechy charakterystyczne dla kultur organizacyjnych rożnego typu, tylko to bowiem zapewnić może szanse na efektywność działań w szybko zmieniającym się i coraz bardziej wymagającym współczesnym świecie.

Następnie przedstawia autor dwa możliwe typy ‘wielokulturowej’ kultury organizacyjnej. Pierwszą z nich opisuje jako spójną i ukształtowaną w sposób świadom i nazywa kulturą Świątowida (odwołanie do metafora słowiańskiego boga o wielu obliczach). Drugą opisuje jako chaotyczną i przypadkowo kształtowaną kulturę, która jest niespójna i niezorganizowana, nazywając ją przy użycie prowokacyjnej metaforą kulturą Frankensteinia.

Wykorzystując wyniki badań nad kulturą organizacyjną szkół próbuje wreszcie autor pokazać ‘wielokulturowość’ kultury organizacyjnej instytucji edukacyjnych. Posługuje się przy tym szczegółowymi rezultatami badania różnych obszarów kultury organizacyjnej przy użyciu metody Charles’a Handy’ego, pokazując, jak w różnych obszarach pracy badanych organizacji pojawiają się elementy charakterystyczne dla różnego typu kultur organizacyjnych.