

BEYOND “DILBERT”:
THE CULTURAL
CONSTRUCTION OF
WORK ORGANIZATIONS
IN THE UNITED STATES

MARIETTA L. BABA

PROBLEM 8 *Why do such large-scale organizations as corporations and government agencies develop their own distinctive cultures, and how do these cultures affect human behavior and organizational performance?*

INTRODUCTION

Organizational Culture—Does It Matter?

The United States is one of the last frontiers for American anthropologists. Because cultural insiders have difficulty detecting subtle patterns of behavior and thought that are familiar and taken for granted, there was a widespread belief that anthropologists born and raised in the United States should seek foreign field sites from which they could view culture more clearly as outsiders. In recent years, however, this conventional wisdom has been called into question. Political and economic constraints have made foreign field sites more difficult to access, and the choice for many researchers has become either doing anthropology at home or not doing it at all. As scarcity forces more American anthropologists to repatriate their craft, some have been surprised to discover that many seemingly ordinary American venues are every bit as exotic as those situated overseas. Some of the most puzzling cultural practices in the United States can be found inside large-scale work organizations.

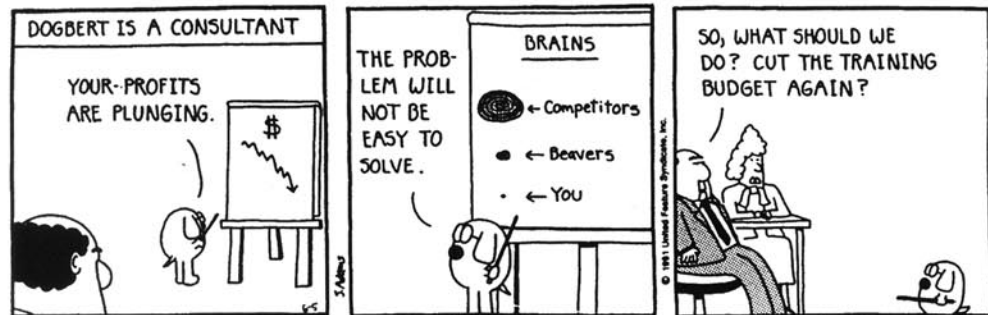
As anthropologists have discovered their own backyards, they have also “rediscovered” that many problems in modern corporations can be approached through the same basic conceptual and methodological means used to study traditional societies. This means that anthropology is beginning to find a place inside the world of corporations and other large-scale work organizations, and may be able to play a key role in reshaping organizations during the 21st century.

The hugely popular comic strip “Dilbert” exaggerates the observer’s sense of witnessing something absurd in order to satirize common organizational practices. Readers encounter bosses who fly in and out of departments too quickly to learn anything about them, canine and feline consultants who earn large sums of money for dispensing advice that is obvious, or obviously flawed, and members of warring employee subcultures who terrorize and torture one another. A funny thing about “Dilbert” is that these absurd scenarios do not seem that improbable to people who have experienced life inside large-scale organizations. According to Scott Adams, the creator of “Dilbert”:

Most of the themes in my comic strip “Dilbert” involve workplace situations. I routinely include bizarre and unworldly elements such as sadistic talking animals, troll-like accountants, and employees turning into dishrags after the life-force has been drained from their bodies. And yet the comment I hear most often is: “That’s just like my company.” No matter how absurd I try to make the comic strip I can’t stay ahead of what people are experiencing in their own workplaces. . . . Thousands of people have told me workplace stories (mostly through e-mail) that are even more absurd than the examples given above. [1996:1–2]

How is it that corporations and other types of large-scale work organizations encourage what appears to be managerial incompetence, rely on self-serving advisors, and tolerate open internal warfare, especially since they claim to use rational methods of planning and control to achieve serious economic and social objectives?

The scenarios portrayed in “Dilbert” represent recognizable cultural patterns—that is, shared ways of organizational life that are distinctly American and can be understood in terms of concepts and methods that anthropologists employ in more traditional settings. Anthropologists do not claim to have all of the answers to the mysteries of organizational life, but they bring a fresh perspective that takes seriously the apparently illogical or nonsensical practices that “Dilbert” lampoons. To an anthropologist, the practices found in



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“Dilbert,” while funny, also invite social analysis, for they represent human social traditions that have as much cultural authenticity as the pyramids and the potlatch, and can also have troubling consequences for millions of people in this country and around the world.

Organizations are a significant feature of life in the United States. Large private and public organizations touch virtually everything we do—the newspapers we read in the morning, the food we eat, the clothing we wear, our jobs, our schooling, our forms of entertainment. Corporations decide which products and services will be available for purchase, and governmental agencies monitor their production and marketing. Private corporations and public agencies provide millions of jobs and thus influence the way many people spend the better part of their waking day.

The influence of large-scale corporations and government is so pervasive that most of us take it for granted; big organizations are the “way we do things around here.” While we cannot help but recognize the effect of corporate policy and practice in the marketplace, we may not be fully conscious of the ways in which companies and agencies invade our private lives. Yet our novels, movies, television programs, cartoons, and jokes are permeated by such mundane yet stressful matters as landing a job, managing the boss, schmoozing with coworkers, making sense of workplace politics, juggling work and family obligations, and trying to “get a life” despite all of the interference. Just as the lives of people in traditional societies are shaped by family and kinship patterns, our lives are profoundly structured and patterned by the ways of big corporations and other types of bureaucratic organizations. In the United States, traditional cultural forms such as the family have relatively less influence over people’s lives than they do anyplace else in the world. Ours is a culture of organizations.

We may define specific things that originate from organizational sources, such as environmental pollution, downsizing, and job stress, as problems, but we typically do not define the general fact of organizational influence in our lives as a problem. We accept the influence as the price of economic growth. Nevertheless, the problems of big organizations create problems for all of us. When large corporations and public bureaucracies encourage or tolerate practices that waste scarce resources and human potential, we are all impoverished.

Disciplines such as economics, engineering, and industrial and organizational psychology attempt to explain what is going on (or what should go on) inside large-scale organizations in order to improve industrial efficiency and effectiveness. Such functional and rationalist perspectives provide guidance to managers, but they often fail to capture underlying patterns of organizational life that are nonfunctional and nonrational in nature. Many of the seemingly irrational or inexplicable Dilbertesque practices of managers and employees, including those that detract from an organization’s capacity to meet its larger social and economic goals, make sense only when viewed through a cultural lens. The anthropological perspective can help find the roots of these practices and can identify their implications for organizational performance.

To understand the cultural nature of organizations and their influence in American life, this chapter explores the concept of organizational **culture** and the ways in which it shapes human behavior and performance in the workplace, drawing on organizational ethnography to illustrate key points. It also

examines the origins and developmental processes of organizational cultures, the multicultural complexity that exists within large-scale organizations, and the concepts and methods anthropologists use to study the cultures of organizations. Throughout this discussion, the term organization refers to the formal organization, which is an organization created for a specific purpose.

QUESTIONS

- 8.1. What is organizational culture, and how does it affect human behavior in the workplace?
 - 8.2. How does culture develop in an organization?
 - 8.3. What roles do occupational and professional cultures play within the overall culture of a large-scale organization?
 - 8.4. How does organizational culture affect human performance and social control?
 - 8.5. How do anthropologists study culture in organizations, and what ethical issues are involved?
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QUESTION 8.1

What Is Organizational Culture, and How Does It Affect Human Behavior in the Workplace?

Prior to the 1930s, the behavior of people working in large organizations was thought to be determined largely by the technology and physical environment of the workplace and by the purposes and commands of management. In the early decades of the 20th century, an industrial engineer named Frederick Winslow Taylor helped to develop the first theory of management by explaining how managers and other employees should behave to ensure high productivity.¹ According to Taylor, it was management's responsibility to conceptualize and command the work system, and workers were to execute managers' commands. This is fundamentally a military model. The term *management* is derived in part from the French *manège*, which means "to put a horse through its paces"; in other words, management means command and control of the workhorses. In keeping with this analogy, Taylor believed that management could precisely specify the body motions of each worker to achieve greatest productivity. Based on time-and-motion studies conducted by industrial engineers, each worker would be told how to walk, bend, lift, and manipulate tools. The behavior of the workforce thus would grow out of managerial intent and technological requirements.

Despite their time-and-motion studies, managers failed to improve the productivity of American industry, especially during the 1930s and 1940s when productivity improvements were urgently needed to help the nation recover from the Great Depression and to support participation in World War II. Productivity growth was sluggish, even though managers in many indus-

¹Productivity is the amount of goods produced divided by the labor hours required for production.

tries utilized incentive pay systems to encourage employees to work faster. In the incentive system, each employee receives a standard base pay in exchange for a standard amount of work, plus a bonus determined by the amount produced above and beyond the standard. In many companies, this incentive system failed to induce employees to produce more than the standard, even though industrial engineers demonstrated that it would be relatively easy to do the extra work and earn a bonus. Managers believed that people behave in accordance with economic self-interest,² and they could not understand why individual employees would fail to respond to the incentive system. Some assumed that employees—many of whom were recent immigrants and could not speak English well (or at all)—lacked the education or intelligence to comprehend the workings of an incentive system. Such negative stereotypes prevented some managers from questioning whether there might be other reasons for the ineffectiveness of incentives.

In the late 1920s, at the same time Taylor's approach to management was being implemented, an important experiment conducted under the auspices of Harvard University and the Western Electric Company³ shed new light on human behavior in organizations. The study was initially designed to identify factors that contributed to productivity, and it was conducted using actual workers doing real work at Western Electric's Hawthorne Plant in Chicago. Elton Mayo, a Harvard psychologist, believed that the physical conditions of work were causing worker fatigue, thereby preventing employees from delivering higher rates of production. He systematically tested his hypothesis by modifying physical features of the workplace to reduce fatigue and by measuring the output of various work groups.

In one of the most famous experiments, Mayo and his colleagues provided a number of different amenities to a group of women employees while measuring the number of components they assembled. These amenities, which included extra rest breaks, special snacks, recognition of birthdays, and health checkups, were intended to reduce fatigue. Throughout the experiment, production increased each time new amenities were provided. This was not unexpected. What puzzled Mayo was that productivity continued to increase as he withdrew the amenities. In fact, productivity climbed throughout the experiment, regardless of whether amenities were provided or taken away.

Today we recognize this result as an artifact of the experimental situation; it is called the **Hawthorne effect**, and it occurs when special attention is focused on a group of employees, regardless of experimental conditions. At this point, however, Mayo assumed that the continual increase in production resulted from some unknown human relations factor. The work group had been taken off the production floor and placed in an observation room with observers who doubled as supervisors. Perhaps, he reasoned, the group had developed improved relationships with supervisors, informal group leadership, higher group cohesion, and/or higher morale.

To investigate the mysterious human relations factor, Mayo called on Harvard anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner, who had just completed fieldwork in Australia. Mayo told Warner that he wanted to observe employees under actual conditions of work, with minimal intrusion by the scientists, so that he

²This is an "economic man" theory of behavior.

³Western Electric later became part of AT&T and then of Lucent Technologies.

could understand how the relationships among the employees might contribute to their rate of production. Warner designed the next phase of the research based on anthropological concepts and methods. A replica of the shop floor was set up in a special observation room, and an intact group of employees was instructed to work as usual inside this room. Observers were trained to record details of the employees' behavior while remaining as unobtrusive as possible. This experiment was run during 1931 and 1932.

What was discovered in this first ethnography of American work organizations forever changed our understanding of human behavior in such settings. Observers found that employees were indeed able to speed up their rate of production at will, and often did so at the beginning of a shift when everyone was more likely to be rested and fresh. Later in the shift, however, production would be slowed considerably, so that an overall average rate per day was maintained with only minor variation. The average rate of production was just enough to justify the standard base pay provided by the company. Employees rarely exceeded this average, even though they could easily produce more and obtain higher pay.

Fatigue was not the source of the employees' reluctance to produce more. Rather, it was based on employees' distrust of management. Employees believed that once they established a higher rate of production, management would increase the standard amount of work required to earn the base pay, and they would have to work faster for the same pay. There was an informal understanding among employees that a "fair day's work" should be given for a "fair day's pay"—doing more could harm the group and was therefore severely discouraged. An employee who violated this understanding by working at a faster pace was disciplined by coworkers. Discipline included "pinging" the offender (placing the thumb over the middle finger and snapping the middle finger against the victim's arm), threatening worse, and finally completely ostracizing an overachiever who still failed to conform to the group's norms.

The Hawthorne researchers also discovered that shared work practices were supported by an **informal social system** on the shop floor (an *informal organization*, as it was called at the time). This miniature social system had its own informal leaders and was organized around friendship networks, or cliques, that were defined by patterns of association and interaction among the workers. Each clique had a distinctive work style, and some produced more work on average, although no more than "a fair day's work." Workers who did not comply with work groups' norms were isolated outside the friendship circles. To protect this social system from the prying eyes of managers and industrial engineers, the workers had established signals to alert coworkers to the arrival of those who might discover their manipulation of production rates. Supervisors on the shop floor were aware of these practices and basically cooperated in their maintenance and continuation.

The Hawthorne study revealed the basic nature of **organizational culture** and the reason it is considered an important influence on human behavior in organizations. Groups of coworkers who share common work tasks and methods create shared patterns of meaning and practice that emerge over time from specific conditions inside and outside the organization. Today, these patterns are recognized as manifestations of work-group culture, or occupation-

al culture. They are not consciously planned or formally controlled but arise spontaneously as a work group attempts to do the work and also achieve its own goals. In some cases, the shared understandings and practices of work groups run counter to the goals of management, and they may prove resistant to business strategies and tactics that managers believe are necessary for a firm's survival and growth, especially if workers view such strategies as harmful to themselves.

There are many different work groups in a large-scale organization, and each has unique patterns of thought and action. In the Hawthorne study, for example, the greatest differences were found to exist between management groups and workers' groups. Each type has a distinctive work-group culture. Conflicting worldviews and practices among work groups are key reasons for the organizational conflict depicted in the "Dilbert" cartoons. The interaction among all of the work-group cultures in an organization gives rise to an organizational culture. At the Hawthorne plant, the interaction between management and the work group in the observation room was characterized by distrust and a lack of mutual understanding, which in turn prevented the company from achieving its productivity goals. Organizational cultures do not always work against company goals. There are a number of empirically documented cases in which the culture of an organization has been found to enhance corporate performance.

There are important differences between **classical cultures** such as national and ethnic cultures and organizational cultures. One significant difference is the influence of formal mission and structure in an organization. A large-scale work organization has a formal or official purpose or an end (it is rational), while classical cultures generally have no formal mission per se but simply exist (they are nonrational, or natural). Organizations vary greatly in terms of how seriously and effectively managers and employees pursue the formally stated goals, and this variation has a profound effect on thinking and behavior inside the organization. The formal aspect of the organization may have a stronger influence on work-group culture in an organization where dedication to the formally stated mission is taken very seriously, such as a Fortune 500 company, than in an organization where employees are encouraged to pursue individual goals, such as a large research-oriented university. Regardless, there will be a state of tension between the formal and the informal parts of the organization. The informal and formal can never be fully separated, as seen in the Hawthorne case, which creates a huge challenge for anyone who wants to study or manage an organization. Both the formal and the informal sides, as well as the complex interactions between the two, must be understood and accounted for, and the informal side will never be completely under management's control.

Another important difference between organizational culture and classical culture is the nature of members' involvement. In a classical culture, people are born into membership and typically have little choice in the matter, although they may choose to become expatriates later on. **Primary enculturation**, the process by which an individual learns his or her culture, takes place inside a classical culture, meaning that its members are influenced by the culture during infancy and early childhood, when such influences are most effective. In an organizational culture, on the other hand, people enter

as adults and can choose whether to join and remain. Often, the choice is made on the basis of the “fit” between the culture of the organization and the individual’s personality and primary enculturation. Organizations tend to hire only small numbers of people who are different in some way from their more typical employees, so their memberships may be less heterogeneous than one would expect from examining the larger external population. Also, an organization’s **socialization** process creates beliefs that are not as deeply rooted as the primary enculturation experienced as an infant or small child, meaning that people in the organization may be better able to resist the influence of an organizational culture. These paradoxical tendencies—one that creates a certain “fit” between the individual and the organizational culture, and the other that enables a degree of cultural resistance—are present simultaneously, creating a sense of ambivalence or ambiguity in members’ alignment with stated formal goals.

QUESTION 8.2

How Does Culture Develop in an Organization?

Americans became interested in the idea that an organization can be understood as a culture when Western corporations were assaulted by competition from their counterparts in the East during the 1980s. Companies based in Asia, most notably in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, were strikingly different from those based in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. Eastern firms were well coordinated and highly focused, and they captured market share in many industries. However, they did not acknowledge, much less adhere to, many of the assumed “truths” of Western management science and economic theory. For example, they did not pursue the maximization of short-term profits; they did not rely primarily on major capital investment as a foundation for productivity improvement; and they did not promote people on the basis of individual achievement.

Instead, Eastern firms operate under rules derived in part from the cultural environments in which they are grounded and from historical processes that shaped their cultures. The Japanese concept of the family as an *ie*, a household, rather than as a blood lineage, for instance, allows the incorporation of members who are not kin into the family unit, and ultimately permits the family to serve as a model for extended economic enterprise. Many centuries of irrigation agriculture in Japan required cooperation among families in farming villages, promoting the notion of trust-based collaboration beyond the basic family unit. Another major cultural influence in the East is Confucianism, which conceives of society as an organic whole composed of mutually supportive parts that exists continuously through time. This cultural concept emphasizes duty to ancestors and descendants as a key moral principle; people owe their own lives and culture to their ancestors and are responsible for handing down their heritage to their children. These forces helped shape societies that were group-oriented, cohesive, and connected by bonds of mutual responsibility and obligation. The firms that grew from such ancient collectivist roots measured time in centuries rather than years, based productivity improvements on workers’ ideas for continuous incremental improvement,

and developed reward systems that idealized the ability to preserve group cohesion and harmony.

The success of the Eastern firms drove home the point that companies can have different cultures and different habitual practices. It led to a permanent shift in Western thinking about all business enterprises, not just those in the East. From the 1980s on, enterprises were not viewed only as technical mechanisms crafted to achieve rational business goals, but also as places where different kinds of cultures can be expressed and, more importantly, can critically affect business results.

One of the most salient influences on organizational culture and behavior is the national or regional culture in which an organization develops and is headquartered. Ethnographic research has demonstrated that many of an organization's key features, such as formal strategy and structure, decision-making style, and communication processes, are shaped by the **ambient national culture**. For example, in an American firm, employees are encouraged to bring new ideas and proposals to the boss and to try to "sell" the boss on the ideas. This pattern reflects the egalitarianism and relatively informal nature of authority relations in the United States, as well as the high value placed on individual initiative and creativity. Employees may even disagree or argue with the boss, and it is not unheard of for an employee to win the debate. In French companies, however, employees may be quite uncomfortable with the idea of trying to "lead" the boss, and instead expect to wait patiently for the boss to provide instructions. Authority roles and relationships in France are more formal and distant than they are in the United States, reflecting the French history of centralized government and clearly defined, generally exclusive social classes. Many major corporations in France are government-owned, and formally defined bureaucratic processes are the norm in business. Employees are trained to follow the rules and the formal chain of command. Japanese companies display yet a third decision-making pattern. The chief of a unit is vested with authority to make any and all decisions, but employees expect the chief to submit some decisions to the group for discussion and possible disagreement. Likewise, a middle manager who develops a proposal generally must circulate it broadly and obtain input from managers of a wide variety of other groups throughout the company. A consensual style of decision-making is the norm, reflecting the networks of mutual trust, obligation, and reciprocity that bind individuals into social collectives within Japanese society.

Ethnographic studies of foreign firms, such as Thomas Rohlen's (1974) classic ethnography of a medium-sized Japanese bank, illustrate the complex and subtle influence of national culture on organizations. Rohlen conducted participant observation, entering the company as a new recruit and attending the bank's training institute with a cohort of new employees. At the institute, Rohlen observed many ritual practices that mirrored aspects of Japanese culture. One unique ritual found in many Japanese firms but not in their Western counterparts is spiritual education. This involves structured exercises aimed at shaping the character of new employees in ways that create more complete respect for the social requirements of the institution. In an exercise called *roto*, new recruits dressed in white uniforms were sent to a nearby market town where they were required to go door-to-door asking residents to assign sim-

ple household chores that they could do without pay. Each employee had to do this alone, not as part of a group, and employees could not return to the institute until they had succeeded in working for someone free of charge. This was especially embarrassing and awkward because Japanese people tend to be uncomfortable asking strangers for favors or bestowing favors on them; getting or granting a favor establishes an obligation that a stranger finds difficult or impossible to fulfill, so strangers generally ignore one another. After being rejected by town residents once or twice, most trainees were relieved and happy to find someone who would allow them to do the most menial labor; even cleaning an outhouse was welcome work. Rohlen explained the point of this spiritual education as follows:

When the group had all returned, a general discussion was held. Each squad was told to discuss the relevance of the roto experience to the question, "What is the meaning of work?" As usual, a variety of opinions emerged. Some had such an interesting and pleasant time that it had not occurred to them to think of their tasks as work. When this was noticed, it was generally observed that enjoyment of work had less to do with the kind of work performed than with the attitude the person has toward it. The bank's reasons for utilizing roto centered on establishing precisely this lesson. . . . Because it must assign rather dull and methodical tasks to many, management finds this lesson of obvious value. [1974:204–205]

Roto and other forms of spiritual education are rituals that build individual acceptance of conformity to group requirements and help align individual values and attitudes with group norms and practices. In exchange for conformity, male employees in larger Japanese organizations typically had employment security, and a corporate welfare system took care of everything from housing to vacations. While global competition is creating pressure for change in this system, the job-mobility rate across firms in Japan is still among the lowest in the world, reflecting high levels of loyalty between an organization and its employees. Such loyalty allowed Japanese companies to invest heavily in employee education (since employees are not likely to take their training and go to elsewhere), creating one of the world's best-trained workforces.

Businesses operate differently in other parts of the world. In the 1990s in Silicon Valley, for example, individuals typically gained new knowledge by switching employers every two years, on average. The fast pace of change in the computer industry forced people to keep up-to-date or risk losing their competitive edge. Because of the high concentration of technology-based firms in the Valley, an individual who was not learning quickly enough at one firm could easily switch to another firm in the same locale. People frequently jumped ship to work on new technical projects at other firms or to help start new companies. They also shared technical and business information across firms, even with competitors. All of this helped everyone learn more and learn faster, thereby fueling the pace of change.

So many people flowed so quickly across so many different companies in Silicon Valley that the region was characterized as one vast organizational network with a pooled labor supply. The rapid flow of people and information gave Silicon Valley very high rates of job mobility and new business generation. In this environment, shared values and norms gave high priority to entrepreneurship and technological innovation, both of which were encouraged by placing the needs of individual entrepreneurs, inventors, and venture capital-

ists over those of existing businesses. American society as a whole is characterized by high rates of technical invention and economic entrepreneurship, both of which are promoted by strongly individualistic inventors and entrepreneurs. Our society encourages such individuals and allows them to be well rewarded for their success, in part through legal structures that protect private property (including intellectual property) and in part through tax rates that are among the lowest in the industrialized world. These larger American patterns had a unique regional twist in Silicon Valley, where the computer industry both created and responded to a breakneck pace of technological change. The culture of Silicon Valley was unmistakably American, but it was also unique.

Whether an organization is based in Japan, Silicon Valley, or elsewhere, its culture is in part a reflection of the society in which it is located. However, there are cultural variations across firms in the same nation or region that derive from the unique historical learning experiences of each company. For example, General Motors and Ford are both large automobile manufacturers based in the Detroit area. Both firms are heavily invested in engineering activity, and both employ thousands of workers who belong to the United Automobile Workers (UAW). It might seem on the surface that the two firms are much the same and that their organizational cultures must be similar as well. A closer look reveals a different picture.

General Motors was formed in the early years of the 20th century when an entrepreneur named Billy Durant raised funds from a group of investors to purchase a number of independent engineering and manufacturing firms around the Detroit area. His idea was to create a powerful automobile manufacturing confederation. Durant was not a strong manager, and when the new company foundered, the investment group hired Alfred Sloan. Sloan was a brilliant executive who invented a new way to manage what became the world's first multidivisional company. Each division of General Motors had formerly been a separate firm, and each was allowed to run itself as a quasi-autonomous entity. Divisions with stronger financial performance were supplied with an increasing amount of investment dollars and thus were able to do more and grow. Internal competition for investment among GM's divisions stimulated improvements in operations and financial returns, making GM one of the most successful companies in history and, at one point, the largest company in the world, with approximately a million employees.

The multidivisional structure of General Motors had profound cultural consequences. Since the divisions were rewarded for their independent performance, each learned to create strategy and make decisions that would maximize its own success, even if it meant that one division's actions would harm another division. It was no secret that the Chevrolet, Pontiac, Buick, Oldsmobile, and Cadillac divisions competed with each other, perhaps even more than they competed with external rivals such as Ford. Divisional autonomy and an internal competitive focus became hallmarks of GM's culture during its growth years in the middle of the 20th century. Unable to assess clearly or take seriously any competition beyond its own boundaries, GM failed to recognize the threat from Asian automakers, and this blind spot eventually cost GM half of its domestic market share. Even worse, the different divisions of GM appeared to find it difficult to cooperate with one another to reduce

costs and improve quality, steps that were prerequisites to economic survival in the 1980s and 1990s. Executives in different divisions continued to make decisions based on divisional interests, rather than on GM's interests overall, still believing that what was good for their division was in the best interest of the company.

The situation at Ford, American's number-two automaker, was different. Ford was founded and managed for many years by a single entrepreneur, Henry Ford, who invented the moving assembly line. Henry Ford was known to be a strong-willed and autocratic leader who ruled his company with an iron fist, even going so far as to use physical force against employees who defied him, such as those who attempted to organize a labor union. After he retired, the company continued to be led by members of the family, as it is today. Even though Ford stock is now publicly traded, family members have been in top leadership positions for more than 70 years. A unity of command issuing from the top of the company countered tendencies toward divisional autonomy, while Ford's relatively smaller size (about one-third that of GM) also enabled stronger management discipline across the firm. The alignment of units within Ford was reinforced in the early 1980s when the company faced the very real possibility of bankruptcy. This chilling experience, made all the more real by the actual bankruptcy and government bailout of America's third automaker, Chrysler, struck a note of fear in the hearts of executives and employees alike and encouraged them to find new ways to work together, especially in the manufacturing plants. As a result, Ford's labor-management relationships improved significantly and are acknowledged to be among the best in the American automobile industry. Meanwhile, labor relations at GM have become increasingly antagonistic, leading to bitter strikes with ruinous financial consequences. Significantly, GM never faced bankruptcy, largely because its huge size and vast financial reserves provided an ample cushion that carried it through the worst years.

Historical differences between GM and Ford mean that each company has had different learning experiences, so they have developed different cultural patterns. Today, one company continues to struggle with management discipline and labor-management conflict, while the other is able to devote its energy to an enormous restructuring effort aimed at improving the efficiency of global design and manufacturing processes and the effectiveness of brand recognition. The conditions under which a company is founded and its situation during early growth years are highly influential in shaping deeply ingrained patterns of understanding and practice that persist over long periods of time. This is particularly the case when an organization has been successful for many decades, as was GM through the 1960s. In such cases, new employees are enculturated by their peers and managers to accept and adopt longstanding ways of thinking and behaving, and the culture thus is passed on to new generations even as the environment around the company is changing. When an organization stands on the brink of disaster, on the other hand, there is an opportunity for new learning that can lead to change.

Organizational anthropologists debate whether national or regional culture is more important than historically grounded local culture in explaining the behavior of people in an organization. An organization becomes imprinted with ambient cultural patterns because most of the people who found and grow it have been enculturated during childhood to accept and adopt the cul-

tural patterns of the society in which they were born. When an organization is founded, its leaders unconsciously draw on these ambient cultural patterns to create the organizational culture, much as Sloan designed GM around the concept of internal competition among individual divisions. As the organization grows, it brings in managers from the surrounding society who also are marked by the same ambient culture as the founders. Thus, in its early years, an organization is imprinted with the mark of its founding society, and it continuously reinforces this imprinting by importing people of influence who also carry the same cultural patterns.

While an organization's workforce may be diverse and multicultural, the influential management cultures often are much less so, in part because of educational systems that align managers around a common set of business principles, and in part because managers born and raised in many different nations often are educated in the United States or Europe. In understanding organizational culture, it is therefore always necessary to begin by understanding the ambient cultures of the geographical area in which the firm is based and the major cultures from which the firm derives its managers and employees. The way these influences are expressed depends on the firm's historical learning experience. Other critical cultural influences, as seen in the Silicon Valley and automobile examples, are the nature of the industry and markets in which the firm competes, the technologies that dominate the organization's products, and the historical time period during which the organization was founded.

QUESTION 8.3

What Roles Do Occupational and Professional Cultures Play Within the Overall Culture of a Large-scale Organization?

Large-scale organizations do not have a single monolithic culture. Instead, they reflect the dynamic interactions of multiple cultures or subcultures that cut across the company and link it to various external constituencies. Especially important are the interactions of various occupational and professional cultures, such as the cultures of management, scientists, skilled craftspeople, and assembly-line workers. Each of these cultures or **subcultures** has its own distinctive way of understanding and acting within the larger organization. The cultures cooperate, collaborate, compete, and conflict with each other in complex ways, creating an overall pattern of culture that is different in each organization. Occupational and professional cultures also cut across different organizations and tie them together through occupational and professional networks.

According to Van Maanen and Barley (1984), occupational and professional groups can be considered cultural communities when four characteristics are present. First, individuals identify themselves as members of a special occupational or professional group whose boundaries are defined by agreed-upon criteria, such as a particular educational background and a certain type of work. Second, members of the group derive their valued identity or self-image from their occupational or professional role. For example, when asked, "Who are you?" or "What do you do?" they are likely to answer by naming their

profession or occupation. A third feature of such communities is that their members serve as one another's point of reference for beliefs, values, norms, and interpretations associated with the workplace. This tendency leads to the creation of shared patterns of thinking and behaving. Electrical engineers, for example, share a keen interest in keeping their technical skills honed, and they form networks of colleagues who help each other find jobs that maximize their opportunity for learning. Finally, there is often a blurring of the distinction between work and leisure in these occupational communities; members not only work together, they often socialize and play together as well.

At times, an occupational or professional group may evolve to become a **community of practice**—an occupational or professional network that shares a worldview and a group identity, engages in interpretive sense-making, and develops shared adaptive responses to environmental challenges. Such communities typically work together on common tasks and collaborate in solving task-related problems. Information needed to solve problems is communicated openly within the network. Knowledge is readily available to insiders, particularly to newcomers who assume the role of apprentices. Individual learning in the network is contingent on group learning; the individual learns as the group learns, and vice versa.

Xerox Corporation's Palo Alto Research Center (Xerox PARC) is a well-known community of practice. Xerox Corporation employs a large cadre of repair technicians who perform client services in the field to keep the company's photocopier machines in good working order. The repair technicians receive formal technical training focused on the mechanical aspects of the equipment, and they also learn diagnostic procedures that allow them to troubleshoot and repair machines. It is generally acknowledged that their training is not sufficient to allow them any substantial knowledge of how a photocopier actually works.

Although the technicians competently handled the vast majority of repair calls, Xerox management was worried, and the company created an information system of "directive documentation" that supposedly would enable faster resolution of problems in the field. The documentation includes set-up and repair procedures, simplified schematic diagrams, and diagnostic methods with a decision tree that describes a series of actions in considerable detail. This diagnostic methodology was cumbersome to use, and it did not enhance the technician's learning because it did not provide a rationale for the actions described in the decision tree. Technicians were uncomfortable with it, primarily because it did not allow them to provide customers with a clear explanation of how a problem was solved. Thus, while technicians might refer to the documentation during the course of a repair call, they often put it aside and proceeded with diagnosis on their own.

◀ Wondering how the technicians managed to be so successful in machine repair despite ignoring the documentation, Xerox deployed anthropologist Julian Orr (1990) to travel with them. Orr soon discovered their secret. When technicians ran into machine failures that could not be resolved with standard diagnostic procedures, they relied on tools that the company knew nothing about. The most potent was a form of storytelling in which technicians shared "war stories" about past machine failures and heroic saves. They swapped these war stories at lunch, on coffee breaks, in training sessions, and during off-duty socializing. They liked to tell stories about their problem-solving

heroics because they gained status on the basis of technical prowess. The more difficult the problem, the more status gained by telling a story about solving it. The stories also helped other technicians learn how the machines operate, thus enhancing the technicians' knowledge base. The tendency to share problem-solving information freely within the group is a key characteristic of a community of practice. It is an important way in which communities of practice contribute to an organization's knowledge assets.

Once Xerox found out how technicians solved difficult machine problems, they decided to facilitate and enhance this grassroots approach by equipping technicians with mobile radio phones that would enable them to call each other in the field and contact a roving "tiger team" of highly skilled troubleshooters. Technicians willingly adopted the radio phones, not only because they were compatible with their preferred practices, but also because the phones provided greater opportunity to connect personally with other people while on the job, frequently on job-related matters. This example illustrates one of the primary reasons an occupational culture adopts or rejects a new technology.

By their very nature, occupational and professional cultures tend to orient their members inward, toward the shared understandings and practices of the group. These understandings and practices are defined by the type of work the members do and the developmental processes within the occupation or profession. The understandings and practices of different occupations and professions are often very different, and they may conflict with one another. Frank Dubinskas (1988) used the term **Janus organizations** to describe genetic engineering companies with two conflicting professional faces. Laboratory scientists with backgrounds in academic research and entrepreneurial executives with backgrounds in management and finance had to collaborate closely in order to make their companies successful despite their lack of knowledge about one another's profession. Specifically, they needed to work together to plan and deliver marketable products that would make good on large venture capital investments before their investors and creditors pulled the rug out from under them.

The laboratory scientists and the executives often did not see eye-to-eye on matters critical to effective project planning. Differences in the two professions' conceptions of time were especially problematic. Executives were driven by relatively short-term time horizons, especially their need to provide quarterly financial reports to investors. Investors wanted to know what the stages of the work were and when each stage was expected to be completed. They also wanted explanations when a goal was not met, and they needed to be convinced that future goals were realistic. The executives said they had no time for long-range planning. Scientists, on the other hand, said they could see distant and indistinct goals. They believed that an open-ended temporal frame was appropriate for science, which cannot unravel the puzzles of nature in a planned time sequence. From their point of view, there was no fixed end in view; science is an endless horizon. The scientists devalued the quest for commercial success and monetary gain, and they believed that the managers were shortsighted. As a result of these differences, the executives and scientists had difficulty understanding one another and experienced conflict when trying to develop business plans. Such conflicts are often at the root of failure in start-up firms.

Not all occupations and professions conflict with one another because they have different points of view. Occupational and professional communities sometimes develop cooperative relationships that contribute to mutual goals. For example, managers in large automobile manufacturing corporations may develop close **exchange relationships** with design engineers who work for smaller companies that supply materials or parts. In such cases, each professional group has something that the other needs; the managers have work contracts that provide income to the smaller firm, while the smaller companies' engineers have technical expertise that the managers need to obtain high-quality components. Relationships like these involve high levels of trust that enable professionals in the two firms to cooperate beyond the exact letter of the contract that binds their companies. For example, engineers in the small firm may provide free consultation about equipment or other material purchases. In some cases, the firms may even exchange people; when managers retire from the larger company, the smaller company can hire them to help maintain the ongoing relationship. Just as in traditional societies, economic exchange in organizations is embedded in social relationships of cooperation and trust, and it is difficult to determine where the social ends and the economic begins.

Individual members of an occupational or professional community often switch their orientation from one culture to another and back again, thereby providing a mechanism for integration across the organization. For example, a Japanese American engineering manager named Hiro holds membership in two professional communities (engineering and management) and one ethnic community (Japanese American), and he can orient his behavior toward any one culture at specific times and places based on contextual factors and individual choice. Thus, he may behave more as a manager in a meeting convened to pressure engineers to make cost reductions in their component designs. At a lecture at the research laboratories, however, Hiro may sound more like an engineer when he asks technical questions. Later that evening, he may again shift his orientation by speaking Japanese at a traditional dinner hosted by a Japanese American professional network in his company.

Hiro's different cultural hats may create headaches for him at times, as when his managerial role requires him to give a negative performance evaluation to a Japanese American engineer in his work group. They can also help him reduce tensions in the company. His engineering identity helps him understand why the engineers in his group disagree with decisions made by higher-levels managers, and his managerial identity lets him help other Japanese Americans in the firm to improve their career opportunities.

All of us are multicultural to a greater or lesser extent. The capacity to **code switch**—to shift cultural perspective and use different sets of symbols to communicate—is one of the ways integration is achieved in large-scale organizations. Individuals with diverse cultural identities can facilitate cooperation among different occupational, professional, and other types of cultural groups through their ability to understand, translate, and negotiate across divergent cultural worldviews.

The "Dilbert" cartoon that shows a manager being "bungeed" into Dilbert's department depicts a common point of tension between higher-level managers on the one hand and lower-level managers and employees on the other. The occupational culture of managers strongly values upward mobility



DILBERT reprinted by permission of United Features Syndicate, Inc.

within an organization. Managers are rewarded by being promoted to higher levels, and staying too long in one place is taken as a negative signal. In other words, failure to be promoted means failure. Managers who are being groomed for top positions are often moved very quickly from one assignment to another, both to expose them to different parts of the company and to signal that they are on the fast track to higher responsibility. This practice enables managers to believe that they know about the entire organization. It also facilitates retention of top talent, since a manager on the way up is unlikely to look for another job.

In American organizations, however, the fast track is at odds with the tendency of managers to "make their mark" by ordering significant changes in their departments or divisions. This reflects the American emphasis on rewarding individual achievement. A manager who wants to be noticed and rewarded must stand out from the crowd, and one way to do this is to make big changes. A fast-track manager may spend only a few months in a unit and thus not really know enough to make sound changes or not be around long enough to experience the consequences. Workers, on the other hand, may spend their much of their working lives in one part of the organization, so they may know much more about it than does the fast-track manager. They also have to live with the consequences of changes ordered by the bungee boss. The manager may not consult the workers prior to making changes since managers are supposed to know more than workers. This dynamic sets up a conflict between the bungee boss and the workers, and the workers expect the manager's effect to be temporary and probably negative.

QUESTION 8.4

How Does Organizational Culture Affect Human Performance and Social Control?

Cultural patterns and processes can influence the functioning and long-term well-being of a social group. Culture shapes people's interactions with one another and with the environment, and such interaction is critical to any group's capacity to sustain itself. The shared patterns of understanding and practice in a company influence employee motivation and morale, interactions with suppliers and customers, internal cooperation across units, and

the ability of the organization to adapt and change in response to environmental shifts. As a result, organizational culture is a critical dimension of business performance that managers cannot ignore.

The U.S. business community was introduced to the idea that organizational culture can have a powerful effect on a company's success in *In Search of Excellence* (Peters and Waterman 1982) and a number of other best-selling management books written by business consultants. These books theorized that there was an ideal type of culture that consistently produced increases in sales and profits beyond what other firms in the same industry were earning. Deal and Kennedy (1982) claimed, for example, that companies with the "right" culture could expect one to two additional hours of productive work from employees every day.

One influential idea that emerged from these books was the notion that strong corporate cultures have the ability to generate superior business performance. *Strong culture* was defined as consensual and voluntary conformity to a system of shared behaviors and values, so that employees work toward common goals. The reasoning behind this idea was that voluntary conformity to shared goals would make a stifling formal bureaucracy of control unnecessary. Also, it was reasoned, a strong culture contributes to employee motivation. Employees who share goals are better able to see themselves as members of an exclusive club, and people tend to work harder for something they are a part of.

The notion of a strong corporate culture is a modern expression of the old sociological idea of **normative control**. Normative control is a subtle and often invisible means of influencing an individual's behavior that can be more effective than overt economic incentives or punitive sanctions. The idea is that an individual internalizes the social group's norms and values and enforces them through self-discipline. Self-discipline works all the time, not only when a supervisor is watching. Harnessing the "zone of discretion" enjoyed by all human beings—that part of our life where we are unobserved and uncontrolled—is thus thought to become an opportunity for pursuit of the organization's best interests, thereby supposedly yielding results superior to those achieved by an alienated workforce that has to be monitored and policed constantly. Those who support the use of normative control as a management tool see it as a way to reduce **anomie** (normlessness) and contribute to the development of human potential; the individual whose interests merge with those of the group finds opportunity and support for self-actualization. Others fear that normative control is a more subtle and thus more dangerous form of tyranny in which people are controlled not in body, but in mind and soul. The debate over normative control has intensified with increased interest in organizational culture.

Gideon Kunda (1992) explored the nature of normative control in his ethnography of the engineering division of a high-technology company that he called Tech. The engineers at Tech were legendary for their obsessive dedication to work. Many worked late into the night and on weekends for months or even years at a time. These engineers claimed to love their work so much that they were grateful for the opportunity to dedicate themselves to new technology development and volunteered to work overtime. Some worked so

hard that they burned out, became alcoholics who could no longer cope with the pressure, and had to take less cutting-edge roles or leave the company. These engineers were viewed as people who had sacrificed themselves for Tech, another sign of voluntary commitment.

What surprised Kunda was the apparent lack of overt control. On the surface, the workplace appeared disorganized and chaotic. An accurate organizational chart was virtually impossible to find because the organizational structure constantly changed as engineers moved from one work group to another in support of new technology projects. Engineers had a great deal of autonomy to come and go as they pleased and to take their careers in various directions depending on individual ability and interest. One manager told Kunda:

The guys up here are independent and ambitious. They are working on state-of-the-art stuff—really neat things. Everyone, including the president, has a finger in the pot. The group is potentially a revenue generator. That they are committed there is no doubt. But they are unmanageable. . . . Power plays don't work. You can't make 'em do anything. They have to want to. So you have to work through the culture. The idea is to educate them without them ever knowing it. Have the religion and not know how they ever got it. [1992:4–5]

According to Tech's managers, the company's culture was the primary means by which engineers' talents were harnessed for the corporate good. Virtually all of the managers had been practicing engineers in the past, and they were convinced that they had created a culture that engineers could embrace. Embracing the culture meant enmeshing individual interests with the interests of the corporation. In fact, the culture was a managerially constructed definition of the engineer's role in the company, and it included guidance on appropriate ways to behave, to think, and, most importantly, to feel. Management spent considerable time developing, articulating, and disseminating it through an explicit organizational ideology that portrayed Tech as morally sound, honest, people-oriented, humane, and in the business of making a contribution to society through the development of advanced technology. These ideological principles were embodied in specific policies and practices that aimed at normative, rather than bureaucratic, control. For example, everyone was supposed to behave in a manner that reduced hierarchy, meaning in part that engineers were supposed to be able to walk into the offices of higher-level managers to talk about problems. The ideology thus signaled that Tech was a good company worthy of an engineer's loyalty and devotion.

Formal statements about the culture were ubiquitous in the Tech environment; e-mail messages, newsletters, posters, videos, and training sessions continuously reinforced the ideology. For example, video monitors frequently replayed an image of Tech's chief executive officer delivering the "We Are One" speech in which he elaborated on the theme that the individual and the corporation were inseparable. Managers also frequently invoked the ideology in meetings, and engineers were subtly pressured to use emotion-laden words such as *pride*, *loyalty*, *excitement*, *fun*, and *ownership* to describe their feelings about being a Tech engineer. Public displays of deviance, for example, from a burned-out engineer, were countered with silence or ridicule. When sanctioned behaviors like dedicating one's free time to work resulted in success, the engineers were rewarded with salary increases, promotions, and

greater authority. The higher an engineer advanced on the career ladder, the more he was expected to openly and genuinely endorse the culture and to forego displays of autonomy or cultural criticism that were permitted among lower-level engineers. That such critical displays were permitted at all was pointed to by managers as evidence of the culture's benign nature.

Kunda concluded that, over time, engineers were submerged in an environment dominated by an engineered culture of normative control. Eventually, the individual engineer's life was monopolized by the corporation, and establishing an independent life became increasingly difficult, if not impossible. Although the engineers of Tech enjoyed the fruits of capitalism, the price was a loss of autonomy and a diminished life outside the corporate sphere. Kunda worried that people in this kind of situation would also be diminished as citizens and as human beings.

While Kunda's ethnography is a chilling vision of human experience inside a modern American corporation, it is not without limitations. Kunda focused attention on the managers' self-proclaimed cultural engineering practices, and he did not delve too deeply into the collective lives of the practicing engineers. In effect, Kunda described the culture of engineering management at Tech, not the culture of engineering per se. Managerial culture is all about control, so it is no surprise that engineering managers believed they were controlling the engineers through a culture that the managers themselves engineered. We would expect that the engineers had created and maintained their own professional engineering culture and enjoyed some degree of autonomy despite managerial intentions. Dedication to work is a characteristic of many professional cultures. That Tech was able to provide a work environment that sustained the engineers' pursuit of their technological passion does not need to be interpreted solely as a manipulative form of normative control. Tech managers had been engineers at one point in their careers, and they created an environment engineers could be passionate about. This is not necessarily a bad thing.

Quantitative research on strong culture ultimately revealed that conformity to collective values, norms, and behavior cannot in and of itself guarantee superior financial performance (see Kotter and Heskett 1992). The organization's ability to adapt to environmental change has been found to be even more significant. An environmental shift, such as a change in customer preferences, may mean that people in a strong culture are all marching in the wrong direction. Sometimes it turns out that the very individuals who deviate from the confines of normative control are the ones who point the way to a new future.

QUESTION 8.5

How Do Anthropologists Study Culture in Organizations, and What Ethical Issues Are Involved?

To study culture in organizations, anthropologists modify the concepts and methods of cultural anthropology to work within an organizational context. These concepts and methods distinguish the anthropological approach and represent the value added to the study of organizations by anthropology.

Direct Observation in a Field Setting

Anthropology is a natural science like biology or astronomy in the sense that it seeks to directly observe subjects in their natural environment, rather than in a laboratory or an anthropology office. This is what is meant by **naturalistic inquiry**. Anthropologists want to observe and record what is really going on, rather than take someone else's word for it or rely on written reports. Data from other sources suffer from biases introduced by an artificial environment; only observation enables comprehension of actual behavior under real-life conditions.

Anthropologists nearly always spend considerable time in the field. In the case of organizational anthropology, this means spending time on the site of the company they are studying. The amount of time an anthropologist can spend in the field is determined by the nature of the study and its objectives. Organizations are often reluctant to allow researchers to distract employees for long periods of time, particularly if the researchers are not working on a problem of direct interest to the organization. The budget for a study may not be sufficient to permit long periods of direct observation, and the anthropologist may need to use "rapid sounding" techniques to efficiently capture relevant data in a few weeks or even days (see van Willigen and Finan 1991). In some cases, organizations may permit anthropologists to spend several months or even a year or more inside their facilities, especially if the study pertains directly to resolution of organizational problems.

Focus on Operations-level Activities and People

Anthropologists generally are most interested in what is happening on the "ground floor" of an organization. Instead of spending most of their research time talking with high-level managers and experts, anthropologists generally spend most of their time in operations, often talking to entry-level or other nonmanagerial employees. There are two reasons for this anthropological bias. One is that anthropologists are interested in documenting in detail how an organization actually functions. They want to know in concrete terms how employees get things done, what resources they use, how they interact with others, and what barriers they encounter. This can only be done by a detailed mapping of work activity, which requires a focus on work operations rather than the executive suite.

Secondly, managers and executives frequently have a distorted or incomplete view of what is happening "on the ground." They may rarely go to the places where work gets done, and they often rely on other people's reports. Generally, only the people at the operational sites really understand how work gets done in the organization, and this is what the anthropologist wants to find out. Anthropologists may draw work-process maps, take photographs, and even make videos to capture detailed workflow information. Such data are used to understand the nature of an organization's culture, since routine work practices embed shared understandings and relationships, and to understand the sources of problems in an organization.

Local Knowledge and the Insider's Point of View

Anthropologists not only focus on the operational details of an organization; they also value the knowledge held by working people within these operations. From classical studies of culture in traditional societies, anthropologists have come to realize that people in a local area often possess specialized knowledge about plants, animals, natural resources, and their own or others' cultures that can be quite valuable from a scientific or commercial standpoint. Ethnopharmacology, for instance, applies some of the knowledge indigenous peoples have about the medicinal uses of plants in order to create medicines commercially available to all. Likewise, anthropologists studying organizations have discovered that members of work groups possess informal, undocumented, and unspoken knowledge of how to make equipment or processes operate more efficiently, how to solve problems, and how to get things done. "Native theories" that explain certain issues or problems from the standpoint of the people working inside an operational area have proven to be useful in the resolution of problems and improvement of operations; indeed, Japanese quality improvement methods are based on obtaining input from workers.

Local knowledge pertaining to operations develops over long periods of time within occupational communities that need to get work done despite many kinds of obstacles and resource constraints. The Xerox repair technicians discussed earlier are an example. Members of these communities create localized knowledge by trial and error, exchange knowledge with their coworkers, and pass it on to newcomers. Management may know nothing of these activities. Recently, management scholars and practitioners have become interested in this type of local knowledge, which is now being viewed as an organizational asset, and in the possibility of formalizing and appropriating it for use elsewhere in the organization. This interest has created new opportunities for anthropologists to conduct research inside organizations.

Historic, Holistic, and Comparative Perspectives

Other important hallmarks of anthropological research in organizations are the historical analysis of organizations, a **holistic** approach to human behavior, and cross-cultural comparison. Since the cultures of an organization emerge from its historical experience, understanding the organization's history can provide many insights into cultural patterns that might otherwise remain invisible or inexplicable. This was seen in the comparison of the cultures of General Motors and Ford earlier in the chapter. Anthropologists often access archival material or oral histories to identify critical events in an organization's past and to obtain clues about how past events were interpreted and used to guide actions.

Anthropologists also tend to expand their field of study beyond the narrow confines of a research question or problem to encompass multiple dimensions of people's lives. Examples include the special language or jargon of the workplace, the influence of work on home life, and the influence of external communities on places of employment. In his Yankee City studies, for example, W. Lloyd Warner showed that it was necessary to take economic and technological changes and the reaction of the community to those changes into account in order to understand an unusually long and bitter strike at a shoe-making factory (Warner and Low 1946). Casting a wide net to gather and analyze data often turns up hidden factors that influence behavior on the job.

Cross-cultural comparisons are also of high utility. Anthropologists may compare and contrast organizational behaviors across national cultures, across industries, across organizations in the same industry, or across subunits in the same organization. Comparison helps illustrate the wide range of possible ways to organize virtually anything in an organization, and it also helps to illuminate the influence of otherwise intangible forces such as national culture.

Gaining Access

One of the most difficult aspects of conducting anthropological studies in organizations is the problem of access. Anthropologists need to get inside to do their work, but most organizations are very reluctant to let in outsiders who could distract employees' attention, reduce productivity, and possibly leak proprietary or damaging information to competitors or the public. Refusal to grant access to researchers has been an important barrier to advances in our knowledge of organizations.

Generally speaking, an anthropologist who is working on a problem of critical importance to the organization has a much better chance of gaining access. Whether such problem-oriented research is supported by a public agency such as the National Science Foundation or by the company itself through a consulting contract, corporations may be eager to have anthropologists investigate problems that are affecting their profitability. Such research often involves exploring the cultural dimensions of strategic issues—such as developing better relations with customers and suppliers, improving performance after a merger or acquisition, recruiting and retaining top technical talent, or implementing major new information technologies. Anthropologists must often work in collaboration with managers, and possibly with employees, to support the implementation of significant changes in policies, structures, processes, and skills. Successful implementation requires an understanding of existing cultures and their role in strategic initiatives. The anthropologist may also be asked to make recommendations about how the company can be more successful in implementing its strategy given current cultural realities.

The fact that anthropologists may have to engage in useful problem-oriented research in order to gain access does not mean that they cannot explore fundamental disciplinary questions. Frequently, plans for an investigation will call for basic research in areas where little is known or has been published. For example, globally distributed teams are new in corporate experience, so if a company wanted to find out how to make its teams more effective, it would be necessary to do basic research on how such teams are structured, how they operate, and how organizational cultures evolves when people of many different national cultures work together. This is especially true for research projects that are funded by such public agencies as the National Science Foundation. When this is the case, anthropologists may be able to publish all or part of their findings after ensuring that identities are protected and after the organization reviews a draft manuscript and requests modification to protect sensitive information. It might be necessary, for example, to disguise additional details such as the industry in which the work was conducted, or to omit proprietary or confidential information.

Ethical Considerations

Some anthropologists worry that research in organizations can create ethical dilemmas, especially if the research is focused on specific problems and/or is supported by the organization through an employment or consulting contract. Of particular concern is the possibility that the organization's management or others could pressure the anthropologist to divulge confidential information learned in observations or interviews that could damage individuals or work groups.

These concerns must be taken seriously. The American Anthropological Association's code of professional conduct provides guidelines for ethical decision-making in organizational research (available at <http://www.ameranthassn.org>). The code clearly states that subjects must be protected through the confidentiality of data. All anthropologists working in organizations are expected to review this stipulation with organizational representatives prior to beginning fieldwork and to obtain guarantees that:

1. All employee participation in the research will be voluntary.
2. The anthropologist will own all of the data collected.
3. Data will be stored off-site.
4. No data that reveal individual identities will be divulged.
5. No secret or covert research will be conducted.

Anthropologists must also obtain the informed consent of participants, which means that they are required to provide organizational members with sufficient information about the research to enable each individual to make an informed decision about participation. Organizational managers nearly always understand the logic behind anthropological ethics, and they also realize that they must respect the ethical codes of professionals working in their organizations. In the great majority of cases, anthropologists' ethical obligations are not challenged.

A few anthropologists are so concerned about the potential for ethical difficulties that they choose to forego the knowledge and benefits that could be obtained from organizational research. This point of view fails to acknowledge that all anthropological research involves ethical challenges. All anthropologists elicit knowledge from people and use it to enhance their professional careers. If they do not exchange something of value to the people being studied for this appropriated knowledge, there may be the perception or actual danger of exploitation. Many anthropologists believe that such exploitation is just as serious an ethical issue as confidentiality or intervention.

Anthropologists working in organizations have found that they can exchange the knowledge they appropriate for something of value to the people being studied. For example, employees can give anthropologists permission to transmit information to managers who might otherwise never have an opportunity to hear employee voices. Anthropologists can explain problems from the employees' point of view and can promote solutions proposed by employees. The knowledge gained through anthropological inquiry thus can be harnessed to improve the quality of working life inside the organization, which may also contribute to improvements in organizational products and services.

When anthropologists gain key insights that lead to advances in organizational theory, they are contributing to the future design and operation of all

organizations, thereby having a positive effect on society as a whole. Most organizational anthropologists believe that the value they can bring to an organization and its people outweighs the potential risks. The greater risk, both to the organizations in question and to anthropology, would be to ignore the millions of people and the cultures they create inside organizations.

CONCLUSIONS

Large-scale organizations are important features of the modern cultural landscape and shape much of what we do. There is ample evidence that many large organizations are plagued by seemingly irrational practices that waste human potential and other valuable resources. Anthropologists have found that such practices reflect cultural patterns that can be studied and understood using concepts and methods employed in ethnographic investigation of more remote societies.

The existence of organizational culture was first discovered through the application of anthropological concepts and ethnographic methods in the Hawthorne study during the early 1930s. Workers in the Hawthorne plant were found to share a distinctive set of ideas and practices that led them to withhold the extra production that management desired. Managers did not understand the reasons behind workers' reluctance to produce more, and instead saw the workers as poorly educated and incapable of economic rationality. The workers and managers were members of distinctive occupational cultures that reflected differing and conflicting interests and perspectives. Such organizational cultures arise spontaneously through their members' efforts to achieve individual and social goals.

The national culture in which a firm is grounded shapes the patterns of behavior and thought found within that organization. Ethnographic research in a Japanese bank revealed the ways in which Japanese culture is reflected in the bank's educational practices. These practices can be contrasted with those of Silicon Valley firms, which reflect American culture. Despite the importance of national culture in shaping organizational behavior, the organizations based in any country also display cultural variability among themselves. This results from differences in organizational learning experiences as well as differences in industry structure, technology, and the historical period in which a firm was founded.

Occupational and professional cultures also have a profound influence on human behavior in organizations. Members of an occupational culture share a common identity that defines their self-image, and they accept other members of their group as reference points for beliefs, values, and behaviors. At times, an occupational culture may evolve to become a community of practice in which members share knowledge and collaborate in problem-solving activity. Ethnographic research at Xerox demonstrated the importance of collective knowledge-sharing and problem-solving within the community of repair technicians. Members of different occupational communities may compete and contend with one another, causing difficulties in achieving organizational goals, or they may cooperate and collaborate on the basis of mutual interest. The fact that many individuals belong to more than one occupational community with-

in an organization and can switch their orientation from one community to another at will serves as a means of organizational integration.

The influence of organizational culture on business performance has been of keen interest to organizational theorists and practitioners. One hypothesis suggests that strong culture, in which there is a high degree of conformity to corporate values, norms, and behaviors, is a critical ingredient in high performance. This hypothesis draws on the sociological notion of normative control—that people can internalize the beliefs, values, and norms of a social group and enforce them through self-discipline. Such internal control is more effective in aligning individuals around group goals than external forms of control such as incentives or supervision, since internal control is more consistently enforced and less costly. The dangers of normative control include the potential for exploitation, burnout, and loss of autonomy, as illustrated by ethnographic research on a high-technology firm known for its strong culture. Quantitative research on culture and performance suggests that strong normative control is not sufficient to ensure high performance. Rather, the ability to adapt to environmental change, which often requires some degree of independence from group thinking, has been shown to be more critical to success over the long term.

Some of the hallmarks of organizational ethnography include direct observation in a field setting, a focus on operations-level activities and people, a search for local knowledge and the insider's point of view, and historic, holistic, and comparative perspectives. Two key issues involved in studying organizations are the problems of gaining access and dealing with ethical dilemmas. Access often is very difficult to arrange unless the anthropologist is willing to offer something of value in exchange, such as work addressing organizational problems. Regardless of whether the anthropologist is doing strictly academic research or problem-oriented research, it is imperative to review guidelines for the ethical conduct of research with organizational sponsors or clients and to get their acceptance. Anthropologists must put safeguards in place to protect the identity of informants and the confidentiality of data, to ensure informed consent by all participants, and to return something of value to the people involved in a study.

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