

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

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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.

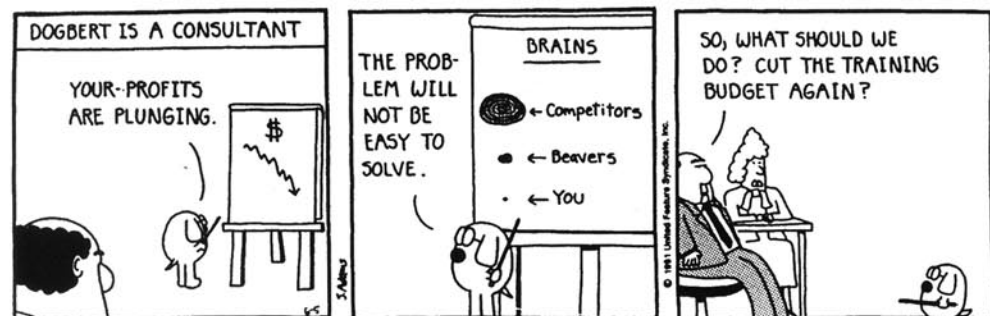
As anthropologists have discovered their own backyards, they have also “rediscovered” that many problems in modern corporations can be approached through the same basic conceptual and methodological means used to study traditional societies. This means that anthropology is beginning to find a place inside 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