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Culture and its elements

Word 'culture' comes from the Latin word 'cultura' which is related to cult or worship. In its broadest sense, the term refers to the result of human interaction.

The culture of society comprises the shared values, understandings, assumptions, and goals that are learned from earlier generations, imposed by present members of society, and passed on to succeeding generations.

Sometimes an individual is described as a highly cultured person, meaning thereby that the person in question has certain features such as his/her speech, manner, and taste for literature, music or painting which distinguish him from others.

Culture, in this sense, refers to certain personal characteristics of an individual.

However, this is not the sense in which the word culture is used and understood in social sciences.

Sometimes culture is used in popular discourse to refer to a celebration or an evening of entertainment, as when one speaks of a 'cultural show'. In this sense, culture is identified with aesthetics or the fine arts such as dance, music or drama.

This is also different from the technical meaning of the word culture.

Culture is used in a special sense in anthropology and sociology. It refers to the sum of human beings' lifeways, their behavior, beliefs, feelings, thought; it connotes everything that is acquired by them as social beings. Culture has been defined in a number of ways.

There is no consensus among sociologists and anthropologists regarding the definition of culture.

There are some writers who add to these definitions some of the important "other capabilities and habits" such as language and the techniques for making and using tools.

What is Culture?

Culture has been defined in a number of ways, but most simply, as the learned and shared the behavior of a community of interacting human beings.

According to British anthropologist Edward Taylor, "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society".

According to Phatak, Bhagat, and Kashlak, "Culture is a concept that has been used in several social science disciplines to explain variations in human thought processes in different parts of the world."

According to J.P. Lederach, "Culture is the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them".

According to R. Linton, "A culture is a configuration of learned behaviors and results of behavior whose component elements are shared and transmitted by the members of a particular society".

According to G. Hofstede, "Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another."

According to H.T. Mazumdar, "Culture is the sum total of human achievements, material as well as non-material, capable of transmission, sociologically, i.e., by tradition and communication, vertically as well as horizontally".

Actually, culture is defined as the shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and effective understanding that are learned through a process of, socialization. These shared patterns identify

the members of a culture group while also distinguishing those of another group.

Elements of Culture

Culture is transmitted to employees in a number of ways. The most significant are stories, rituals, material symbols, and language.

The culture of society also comprises the shared values, understandings, assumptions, and goals that are learned from earlier generations, imposed by present members of society, and passed on to succeeding generations.

There are some elements of culture about which the managers of international operation should be aware of.

- Languages,
- Norms,
- Symbols,
- Values,
- Attitude,
- Rituals,
- Customs and Manners,
- Material Culture, Education,
- Physical Artifacts,
- Language, Jargons, and Metaphors,
- Stories, Myths, and Legends,
- Ceremonies and Celebrations,
- Behavioral Norms, and

- Shared Beliefs and Values.

Languages

It is a primary means used to transmit information and ideas. Knowledge of local language can help because-

- It permits a clearer understanding of the situation.
- It provides direct access to local people.
- Understanding of implied meanings.

Religion: The spiritual beliefs of a society are often so powerful that they transcend other cultural aspects. Religion affects-

- The work habit of people
- Work and social customs
- Politics and business

Norms

Cultures differ widely in their norms, or standards and expectations for behaving. Norms are often divided into two types, formal norms, and informal norms.

Formal norms, also called mores and laws, refer to the standards of behavior considered the most important in any society.

Informal norms, also called folkways and customs, refer to standards of behavior that are considered less important but still influence how we behave.

Symbols

Every culture is filled with symbols, of things that stand for something else and that often suggests various reactions and emotions.

Some symbols are actually types of nonverbal communication, while other symbols are in fact material objects.

Values

Values are a society's ideas about what is good or bad, right or wrong – such as the widespread belief that stealing is immoral and unfair.

Values determine how individuals will probably respond in any given circumstances

Attitude

circumstances and with specific meaning. They may be used in such as rites
Attitude is a persistent tendency to feel and behave in a particular way.

Actually it is the external displays of underlying beliefs that people use to signal to other people.

Rituals

Rituals are processes or sets of actions that are repeated in specific of passage, such as when someone is promoted or retires.

They may be associated with company events such as the release of a new event. They may also be associated with a day like Eid day.

Customs and Manners

Customs are common and establish practices. Manners are behaviors that are regarded as appropriate in a particular society. These indicate the rules of behavior which enforce ideas of right and wrong.

They can be the traditions, rules, written laws, etc.

Material Culture

Another element of culture is the artifacts, or material objects, that constitute a society's material culture. It consists of objects that people make. Like-

- Economic infrastructure (transportation, communication and energy capabilities)
- Social infrastructure (Health, housing, and education systems)
- Financial infrastructure (Banking, insurance and financial services)

Education

It influences many aspects of culture.

Actually, culture is the entire accumulation of artificial objects, conditions, tools, techniques, ideas, symbols and behavior patterns peculiar to a group of people, possessing a certain consistency of its own, and capable of transmission from one generation to another.

Physical Artifacts

These are the tangible manifestations and key elements of organizational culture.

If you visit different organizations, you'll notice that each is unique in terms of its physical layout, use of facilities, centralization or dispersion of common utilities, and so on.

This uniqueness is not incidental, instead, they represent the symbolic expressions of an underlying meaning, values, and beliefs, which is shared by people in the organization. The workplace culture greatly affects the performance of an organization.

Language, Jargons, and Metaphors

These elements of organizational culture play an important role in identifying a company's culture.

While the language is a means of universal communication, most business houses tend to develop their own unique terminologies, phrases, and acronyms.

For instance, in the organizational linguistics code, "Kremlin" may mean the headquarters; in Goal India Limited, the acronym. J.I.T. (Just In Time) was jokingly used to describe all the badly planned fire-fighting jobs.

Stories, Myths, and Legends

These are, in a way, an extension of organizational language. They epitomize the unwritten values and morals of organizational life.

If you collect the various stories, anecdotes, and jokes that are shared in an organization, they often read like plots and themes, in which nothing changes except the characters.

They rationalize the complexity and turbulence of activities and events to allow for predictable action-taking.

Ceremonies and Celebrations

These are consciously enacted behavioral artifacts which help in reinforcing the organization's cultural values and assumptions.

For example, every year Tata Steel celebrates Founder's Day to commemorate and reiterate its adherence to the original values of the organization.

Stating the importance of ceremonies and celebrations, Deal and Kennedy (1982) say, "Without expressive events, and culture will die. In the absence of ceremony, important values have no impact."

Behavioral Norms

This is one of the most important elements of organizational culture. They describe the nature of expectations which impinge on the members' behavior.

Behavioral norms determine how the members will behave, interact and relate with each other.

Shared Beliefs and Values

All organizations have their unique set of basic beliefs and values (also called moral codes), shared by most of its members. These are the mental pictures of organizational reality, and form the basis of defining the right or wrong in the organization.

In an organization, for instance, if the predominant belief is that meeting the customers' demands is essential for success, any behavior which supposedly meets these criteria is acceptable, even if it violates the established rules and procedures.

Values and beliefs focus organizational energies toward certain actions while discouraging the other behavioral patterns.