Changing culture – the experience of TU Delft Library

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Abstract:

When seeking to introduce change into an organisation, it is usually the organisational structure that is the main focus of attention. A reorganisation, however, does not necessarily resolve underlying cultural problems. It can, in fact, be just these cultural problems that prevent the organisation from moving on. In 2002, the TU Delft Library recognised that a recent reorganisation had also led to changes in organisational culture and that certain issues needed to be addressed, particularly within the group providing front-office services. The Librarian decided that the only way forward was to focus on the social and cultural context in which staff carry out their work and instigated a programme of cultural change. The management of cultural change requires a broad range of policy instruments. The Library began by letting two cluster managers exchange places. This broke through a stalemate situation and facilitated a fresh approach to problems. Heads of department were given tasks that gave them more insight into the activities of other departments. Formal communication between the section manager and departmental managers was greatly increased; quarterly meetings involving all staff in the section were put in place. The various library locations were given extra manpower to compensate for the increased workload of the departmental heads. Staff was given the opportunity to work for the customer services department, in combination with existing duties. A project was started to better define and further develop front-office skills in the light of customer expectations. The overall results have been very encouraging. The exchange of information between the various departmental heads has increased and has improved their understanding of the Library's processes and activities as a whole. The lines of communication within the section have been shortened. Staff has been able to develop skills and knowledge through working in the customer services department. The cultural gap between the central library and the various faculty libraries is being bridged. Longstanding prejudices and working habits are now being discussed and addressed.

The Delft Library - organisational structure

In 2000/2001 the Library of Delft University of Technology was structurally divided into 4 clusters (or, as we called them: our core competences):

- Information Selection,
- Information Mediation,
- Information Logistics
- Consultancy.

In addition there were 4 staff departments: Finance, Personnel, Marketing and Development & Innovation. This was done by reallocation of existing departments to a new cluster. The idea was that in the year(s) after this reshuffling the clusters

would develop further into collaborative teams, with competence specific tasks and a new internal structure.

In our paper today we concentrate on the developments in the cluster Information Mediation. This cluster (managed by a cluster manager, who is also part of the management team of the library) covers the front office in the central library (with one department head) and all faculty libraries (front offices) on campus: there are 7 libraries (each with a department head) with 13 locations. All personnel in the faculty libraries is appointed by the Library organisation, but paid for by the faculty. We operate on the basis of Service Level Agreements with the faculties.

At the same time (2001) the organisation struggled with a problem that was going to have important repercussions for the cluster Information Mediation. For some time, the library had had a customer service department to deal with external clients that was embedded in the marketing department. It became clear that the people working in this department were not able to carry out this service satisfactorily, neither for themselves nor for the customer.

Colleagues in the operational clusters did not feel that the staff handling customer inquiries had up-to-date knowledge about all products and services of the library. In addition, front office and back office tasks were too intertwined, causing constant response time conflicts.

This situation needed resolving.

Change: how *not* to

To develop the cluster Information Mediation into a collaborative team, one of the first requirements we recognized was that the people working in the cluster should get to know each other better and should get to know each others activities, in order

- to replace each other when needed – the Service Level Agreements define opening hours and staffing of the front offices in the faculty locations – to be able to provide enough staff at all times for the front offices at the 13 locations, in order to fulfil the requirements of the SLA, a bigger 'pool' of replacement staff would be helpful
- to develop more involvement and commitment towards each other: there seemed to be a mental gap between the colleagues of the central library and the faculty libraries with mutual preconceptions of, for example, the level of knowledge that was required in the front offices at both sides.

At the end of 2001 the following solutions were proposed:

- the front office workers of the central library were to be transferred to and divided over the faculty libraries
- the central library was going to be staffed (on a rota basis) by all front office workers (former central library staff and staff from the faculty libraries)
- all front office workers would get the same job description and (more importantly) the same job rating.

The manager of the cluster at that time was absolutely convinced that these solutions would be accepted by the people working in the cluster, as he felt he had discussed and communicated this intention to all front office workers. There was therefore much disappointment at the management level of the library when resistance to these plans was encountered.

The resistance centred around the following points:

- image:
    - each faculty has its own specific domain-related knowledge that is not easy to share/learn
    - to work in the front office of the central library you have to be a generalist
- the strong connection that was felt (especially by the faculty workers) with the physical work environment / location
- people did not want to work in shifts in the evening or at weekends, when they had not done so before (the front office workers in the central library are used to that, faculty workers are not)

It was only later that we realised a new structure was offered to provide solutions to 'problems' that in fact were not 'structure' problems but 'culture' problems.

Change: theory of 'how to'

Organisational changes are not always successful. Research shows that only 30% of projects result in success. This is mainly due to the approach of the changes and due to the actors themselves.

Actors try to organize and control the dynamics of their organisation by structuring and restructuring the organisation. They think they can steer changes methodically, but this approach denies the influence of cultural elements underlying the dynamics within the organisation.

Furthermore, changing culture is even more difficult than changing the structure of the organisation. Projects that merely aim at culture change have an even lower success rate. Only 19% out of 59 projects that were surveyed (Smith, 2003) "attained breakthrough or near-breakthrough success".

Why is culture important? For the group member, culture is the "social glue that helps hold the organization together by providing appropriate standards for what employees should say and do" (Robbins, 1996, p. 687). As a consequence, culture reduces an employee's uncertainty and anxiety about expected behaviour.

Organisational culture can be seen as (Schein, 1992, p. 12): "A pattern of basic assumptions about how the group copes with the outside world and about how members should act within the group".
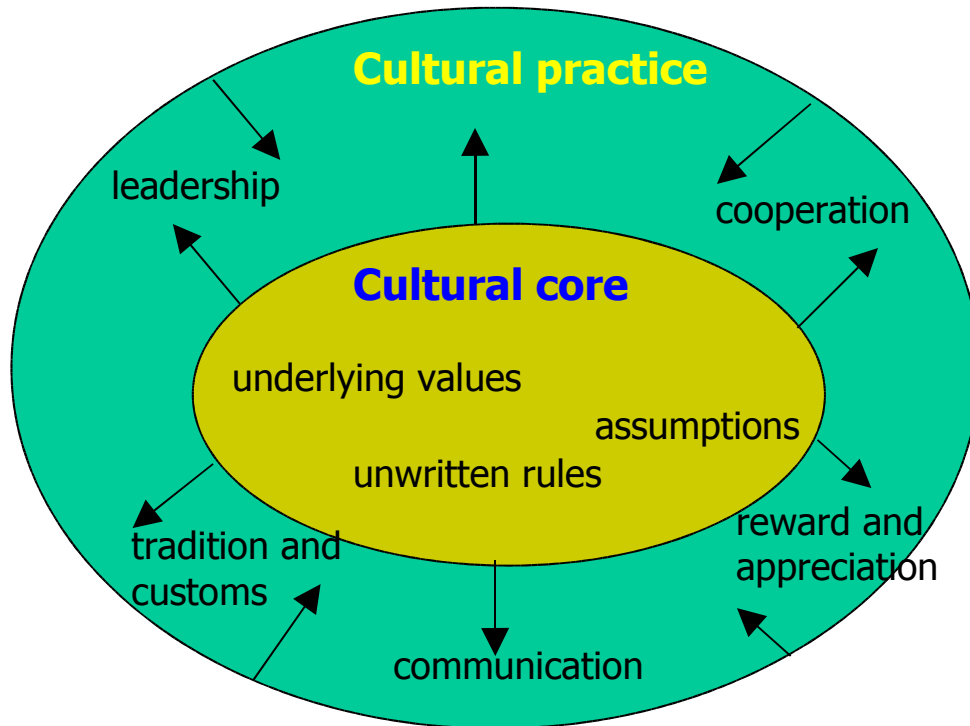
- These assumptions define how members should perceive, think and feel about problems.
- These assumptions have been invented, discovered or developed by the group out of their experience.
- The group sees these assumptions as valid, i.e., they "work."
- The group thinks these assumptions are important to teach to new members.

Van Nistelrooij (1999, figure 1) would define this as 'the cultural core': difficult to influence and invisible. These are the implicit assumptions, rules and values that people perceive. However he also defines 'cultural practice', visible characteristics of culture such as:

- tradition and customs,
- the way people cooperate and communicate,
- leadership
- the system of reward and appreciation.

Changes in cultural practice, that people encounter every day, will interact with changes in the cultural core and vice versa.

Figure 1: Cultural core and cultural practice

Cultural practice

leadership

cooperation

Cultural core

underlying values

assumptions

unwritten rules

tradition and customs

reward and appreciation

communication

Change: from theory to (cultural) practice

Back to the Delft situation: in fact, several of the cultural core elements, as mentioned in figure 1, did finally come to the surface through the resistance of the front office workers. Since these elements are not always visible, the cluster manager had not recognised them as being relevant to the decision process.

In the beginning of 2002, the Library decided that it was not a very good idea to enforce the above mentioned solutions and we realised that we had made an error of judgement with respect to the acceptance of our solutions.

This was painful, but it was not too late to choose another path and the path chosen was along the lines of the cultural practice as showed in figure 1.

I will illustrate them all:

- *leadership* –

One of the ideas was that a change in leadership of the cluster itself would also bring a new management style that could be fruitful for the next stage. As a result, two of the cluster managers offered to swap places with each other: both saw this as a good career move.

Also the heads of the 7 faculty libraries were given broader assignments. There are many tasks within the faculty libraries that need overall coordination (e.g. coordination of security aspects, coordination of development of library instructions). Previously the cluster manager had been performing many of these tasks, with 2 obvious disadvantages: a heavy workload for the manager and less commitment to those tasks from the library personnel. So it was agreed that each of the heads of the faculty libraries were to be given extra coordinating tasks. The heads themselves allocated these tasks to one another.

At the same time the library choose to follow a new direction in management: heads of the departments were given more responsibility for the strategic direction of their department, including aligning this in a departmental plan with the balanced score card (BSC) of the cluster and the organisation as a whole. The strategic aims of the department were to be reflected in the personal development plans, also a new human resource management tool, of the individuals within the teams. Of course, the purpose of this idea was (and is) to make strategic goals of the (parts of the) organisation more visible for the people working in the departments. This would encourage commitment to the aims of the organisation as a whole. We hoped that this would lead, in the faculty libraries, to a stronger feeling of 'belonging to the Library Organisation'.

- *communication* –

A higher frequency of communication was started: not only communication with the department heads, but also all personnel of the cluster (about 60 fte) are invited 4 times a year for a big meeting. For this purpose front offices are closed to allow everyone to attend.

- *cooperation* –

At the end of 2001, an external adviser suggested that it might be better to integrate the customer service activities into the cluster Information Mediation and to staff the department with front office workers, who would be most up-to-date with all products and services of the library. The idea was to offer people shared jobs: both in the customer service and in the front office of the central library or the faculty library.

This suggestion was accepted and was implemented in April 2002. A head of department was appointed and (to our surprise) there were many applicants (from the front offices) for the shared jobs. We offered customer service positions for 12 hours a week – all other hours should be worked at a front office location.

This meant that on a voluntary basis 8 people started to work in 2 jobs, under different heads of department, with all sorts of associated practical problems or better 'challenges'.

This proved to work well and achieved a situation which, only months before, had been met with resistance

- *tradition and customs –*

A project was started to define all necessary competencies (knowledge and behaviour characteristics) for front office workers, both in the central library and in the faculty libraries.

At the same time expectations of the customers were evaluated and all existing formal procedures were reconsidered and revised where necessary.

- *reward and appreciation –*

The heads of the faculty libraries were confronted with a higher workload, caused by the extra tasks and some loss of efficiency caused by the fact that people were having 2 jobs.

The library decided to add 2 full time equivalents (for 2 years) to the faculty libraries, financed by the library and not by the faculties. People experienced this as a form of appreciation to help the departments cope with this new situation. Incidentally, these 2 fte were embedded in the shared job concept: 4 persons were hired and each of them started working at 2 locations.

All the job descriptions and job ratings of the front office workers were equalized: this would no longer be an obstacle for exchange of personnel.

Cultural practice OK, but cultural core?

Looking at the cultural practice, the library tried to work hard to improve the several visible cultural elements that people encounter every day. And by addressing each of them separately it turned out that people accepted this way of gradual development.

It was much more difficult though to work at the elements of the cultural core. Between the different groups within the cluster, people also had different values, assumptions and rules. In practice (in most recent years) what happened was that individuals who came from the central library to work at a faculty library quickly adopted the set of values, assumptions and rules from that library and forgot totally about the existing prejudices towards each other.

The success of the shared job scheme however made everybody interested in embracing the idea and at the start of 2003 60% of the front office workers were already working in a shared job. To date this has increased to 80%.

And its effects on cooperation, knowledge sharing, communication and leadership were tremendous.

The fact that people were now working, at the same time, in both the central library and a faculty library made it also possible to start sharing the underlying values, rules and assumptions.

To get to know each others 'cultural core' better, the library started in 2002 a project that aimed at a 'greener' organisation.

The basis was the Harvard negotiation method, where thinking and acting along the lines of 'interests' is important as opposed to thinking and acting along lines of positions or rather: points of view. It is good to have an open eye for the interests of the individual person, next to those of the department and those of the whole organisation. They have to be consistent with each other and can then only lead to a general sense and feeling for shared values, rules and assumptions.

All Library personnel was trained in the basic elements of this method and now, in 2004, we are still working hard to try and follow these principles. But the principles require that you show openly your interests and as a consequence it makes you vulnerable. This frightens people when they experience the environment they are working in as being 'not safe'. And uncertainty and anxiety are the most basic elements that need to be taken care of by the existing culture (according to Robbins quoted above). So a new 'cultural glue' only works when these new ideas are totally accepted.

Conclusions

- in 2001 the library tried to change the cluster Information Mediation in a top-down manoeuvre - although the signs seemed to indicate that the group involved would accept the change, in practice this was not the case and resistance was the result;
- the solutions that were experienced as 'obligations' in 2001 were in fact split up in several smaller parts in 2002;
- this provided for a more gradual and successful introduction of new elements of cultural practice like leadership, communication, cooperation in the different groups within the cluster;
- the shared job concept is accepted as a good solution and proved to have a positive influence at cooperation, knowledge sharing, communication and leadership;
- thinking and acting along the lines of personal and organisational interests, that should be consistent, could lead to a change in 'cultural core'; but this can only be expected after a longer period of time.

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