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Subcultures in distributed organisations

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Abstract

The aim of the dissertation study was to describe leadership and day care work in a distributed organisation. In Finland, a day care centre director has traditionally led only one day care unit. Distributed organisations are quite new but an increasing way to organize day care units in Finland. In this study a distributed organisation means an organisation where a single director leads at least two day care units. In a distributed organisation the day care units are situated physically apart and they may offer different kind of day care services (day care, family day care and open day care). Distributed organisations are a new organisational form in Finnish day care context.

In the present case study an ethnographic approach was taken. The study was carried out in two distributed day care organisations. These organisations included four and five day care units and the total number of employees in these organisations consisted of two directors and 48 staff. The data collection methods were observation, group and individual interviews and a questionnaire. The data were analyzed using data driven content analysis. Findings that are discussed here are based on the interviews with the staff members and on the observation.

Distributed organisations can be founded in different ways. In my case there were both already existing units merged and new, founded units were merged to already existing units. In spite of how the distributed organisations are founded, merger may raise cultural questions. Traditionally culture is often defined as that what a given group shares. Culture has also been kept strong and seen as glue which sticks the members together. If culture is seen like this definition, there is hardly any space for subcultures. My basic approach was that in a multiunit organisation – i.e. distributed organisation – there may exist subcultures. Martin and Meyerson (1987) have set three different paradigms for the culture: integration, differentiation and ambiguity. Depending on the paradigm, the uniformity of the culture and the possibility for subcultures varies. According to Martin (2002), many organizational culture researchers have adopted one of these paradigms, although they could be used simultaneously.

When analysing my data, I realized, that in these case organizations according to the staff members, part of the culture should have been shared with all the members in the distributed organisation, but staff also emphasized the meaning of subcultures. One could say that two of Martin's and Meyerson's paradigms existed at the same time: integration and differentiation. My results indicate that although belonging to a multiunit organisation meant seeking for e.g. shared rules, there was still a strong need to keep something culturally unique in each unit. The task to keep and create integrated culture was set to the director; she/he had to make sure that some practices were equal in each unit. However, the staff member protected their sub cultural practices. From individual's point of view, she/he lived both in the dominant and in the sub culture.

This living in two cultural "landscapes" was also seen in how the staff described their work communities. Most of the staff members defined their own team or own unit as their work community and did not include other units to what they would call a work community. In spite of that, also the whole distributed organisation made a community. In other words, some of the staff members made two cultural borders: one between the immediate work unit and the whole organisation and the other one between the distributed organization and the other day care organisations in their municipality.

Key words: distributed organisations, organizational culture, sub cultures, day care work, leadership

Introduction

This paper is based on my dissertation (Halttunen 2009). The study explored day care work and leadership in a distributed organisation in day care context. In this study the term distributed organization refers to an organisation where a single director leads at least two day care units (e.g. Vartiainen et al. 2004). In such an organisation, the day care units are situated physically apart and may offer different kinds of day care services (day care centre, family day care and open day care). The specific aims of the study were to describe day care work and professional relationships in a day care setting, and to investigate how leadership in day care was carried out and what was expected from leadership. In the present case study an ethnographic approach was taken. Two distributed organisations participated in this study. One organisation comprised four and the other five day care units. The total number of employees in these organisations consisted of two directors and 48 staff members.

In Finland, a day care centre director has traditionally led only one day care centre. The first big change in leadership arrangements occurred at the end of the 1980s when directors started simultaneously to lead family day care and day care centres. Later, during the 1990s the smallest day care units were merged with bigger ones. This was the beginning of the use of multiunit organisations, i.e. distributed organisations in day care. The change has been rapid: According to Nivala (1999) about 30 % of day care directors in Finland worked only as administrators, with no kindergarten teaching duties. This can be compared to the percentage of directors (72 %) today who simultaneously lead both day care centres and family day care (Alila & Parrila 2007). In other words, during the course of a decade the propositions been have revoked: whereas earlier most of the directors led one day care centre and also had duties with children, today most of them focus wholly on leadership and run several units.

When organisational changes of this kind occur – i. e. units are merged – they may have more far-reaching effects than anticipated. According to Leavitt (1965), organizations comprise four interacting variables: task, structure, people and technology. Changes in any one of these, result change in the others. In my study, the starting point was a major change in the day care organisational structure and its effects on all members of the organisation. This

new model of a distributed organisation in day care needs to be investigated from both the perspective of the director and that of the personnel.

This study was conducted without adherence to a specific organisational or leadership theory. The research task was based on the idea of the coexistence of multiple theories concerning organisations and leadership (Morgan 1998; Yukl 2002). Nevertheless, at different times different theories or approaches to organisations and to leadership have been more or less dominant regarding the organisational structure as that has been favored. A distributed organisation can be seen as a postmodern organisation, where, for example, trust, low hierarchy and democracy are central (Clegg 1990). In this study, leadership was also seen in this light: the personnel as well as the director were seen as co-constructing leadership and being able to take leadership (Shamir 2007).

Organisational culture and distributed organisations

Although my basic purpose was not to study organisational culture, I was aware that cultural questions are important especially when organisations are merged. Distributed organisations can be founded in different ways: in my case there were both units that had already gone through mergers and units that were being merged with other units. De Witte and van Muijen (1999, 585) note that “when starting up a new organization, individuals have to find solutions for problems and have to work out methods and systems for an efficient daily functioning of the organization.” As mentioned, in distributed organisations units are physically apart. According to Schein (2004), geographical distance is one reason when cultural issues become important.

It is not easy to define the concept of culture – as Hatch (1997) says, perhaps it is the most difficult of all organisational concepts to be defined. The definition of culture is often based on the assumption that certain things – rules, values, thoughts, behaviour etc. – are commonly-held by a group of people. Culture is a collective phenomenon rooted in a group rather than based on individuals. (Hatch 1997; Sackmann 2001.) Hatch (1997) stresses how central the notion of sharing has been in the development of the organisational culture concept. But when we try to study these shared meanings, it is difficult to find them. According to

Hatch, what we can find, are some key symbols, which are recognized but which are associated with different meanings.

Schein (2004, 17) defines the culture of a group as a “pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.” In other words, external adaptation and internal integration are the two tasks of the culture.

Smircich (1983) notes that culture is seen as a critical variable or as a root metaphor. Depending on whether the basic assumption is a variable or a root, there are also different research agendas. A research agenda deriving from culture as a variable view, is to chart differences among cultures, locate clusters of similarities and draw implications for organisational effectiveness. A research agenda deriving from culture as a metaphor focuses as well as the former approach on language, symbols and rituals. The difference is not to take them as cultural artefacts, but as generative processes that yield and shape meanings. According to De Witte and van Muijen (1999) mainly researchers are interested in the understanding and measurement of organizational culture but for practitioners the focus is to measure to know the culture and for consultancy projects the focus is measuring how to change the culture.

Another assumption is how we understand the strength of culture. According to Payne (2001) in most writings on culture it is implicit that culture is strong. However, according to more recent work and definitions of culture, culture is also seen complex and cultures also vary in strength (Payne 2001). Culture can even be weak. Different cultures also easily get a label; culture can be named as e.g networked, fragmented, mercenary or communal (Goffee & Jones 2001). These labels and classifications also emphasize culture to be ‘one culture in one organisation’. These labels may make it sound as culture stays as it is – strong or weak – without a possibility for change.

Meyerson and Martin (1987) offer the three perspective framework to organizational culture. These three perspectives are integration, differentiation and fragmentation. Meyerson and Martin call these three views of culture as paradigms. According to them, paradigms serve as theoretical blinders for researchers; a chosen paradigm determines what we notice and

enact as culture. When a researcher adopts the integration paradigm, she/he seeks the things that are shared, because according to this paradigm culture is monolith. According to paradigm differentiation culture is composed of a collection of values and there may be different kind of subcultures. The third paradigm, fragmentation, accepts that the individuals or subcultures share some viewpoints, disagree with some and it is difficult to draw cultural and subcultural boundaries. Ambiguity does not mean that the organisation is full of conflicts. According to Martin (2002) most of the researchers have adopted one of these paradigms when studying organizational culture, although it would be fruitful to use these three paradigms simultaneously. Together these three perspectives offer a wider range of insights and avoid the research to have blind spots over the cultural questions. (see also Morgan & Ogbonna 2008.) Payne (2001) gives some critical notions about Meyerson's and Martin's (1987) framework. According to Payne the framework does not consider whether it is possible for a fragmented culture to become differentiated or integrated. Payne himself notes that it is clear that movements in all directions occur.

For the purpose of my study, the definition and paradigms of Meyerson and Martin (1987) were accepted. Much of the literature related to organisational culture refers to integrated cultures (Smircich 1983; Morgan & Ogbonna 2008). When adopting the view that culture is uniform in one organisation, we lose the sight of multiple subcultures. I adopted a view that culture is not monolith and there could be existing different subcultures. However, I did not try to find similarities and differences between different groups or the nature of each subculture. My target was more to view what the meaning of culture is and what kind of cultural issues are significant in this new organisational structure in day care context.

Methods of the study

Two distributed organizations, named here Organisation A and B, participated in this study. Organisation A comprised four and Organisation B five day care units. Both organisations had quite the same history: one by one during about one decade new or already existing units were merged. The total number of employees in Organisation A consisted of the director and 22 staff and in Organisation B of the director and 26 of staff. In both organisations the director had the office in one of the units (so called office unit) and visited the other units (so called

distance units) every now and then. Although there were similarities in these organisations (e.g. the number of the personnel and day care services), there were also differences. Firstly, Organisation A was located so that the distance between the units was less than 1 kilometre while the distance between the units of Organisation B was from 1 to 3 kilometres. Secondly, the directors had different ways to meet the personnel: the director of Organisation A kept all the meetings or annual celebrations for the whole staff and the director of Organisation B kept the staff meetings and different annual celebrations separately in each unit.

In the present case study an ethnographic approach was taken. The empirical data consist of observations, group and individual interviews and a questionnaire. Almost all the staff members were able to take part in the group interviews (11 groups), in addition to which there were 9 individual interviews. The two directors were interviewed individually three times and once together. Observation (60 hours) was done in each unit and in different staff meetings. The questionnaire was for the staff only and 29 (62 %) persons returned it. This paper and presentation are based on the interviews of the staff members and on my observation. Cultural issues and views came up when the employees described their work, relations to other units and leadership in their distributed organisation.

The data collection was done during 2003-2006. The main goal was to use several methods and to use methods that give possibility to all staff members to be able to be the informants. Only individual interviews were done for selected persons, but I also gave an opportunity for everyone to volunteer for those interviews. According to Stake (1994) a case study is a choice of object to be studied and the case can be studied in many ways. The data collection methods I chose were methods often used in case studies, but I also wanted to include a glimpse of ethnographical methods. The data was analysed using data-driven content analysis (e. g. Hsieh & Shannon 2005).

Results

Integrated and differentiated culture in distributed day care organisations

The analysis of data highlights the culture in my case organisations at least was hoped to be both integrated and differentiated. As Martin (2002) mentions, these different views can exist

simultaneously. Most of the staff members wanted cultural practices to be both integrated and differentiated. In other words, at the same time there was a deep desire to maintain something unique in each unit (differentiated culture), but there was also a need for at least some norms or rules to be similar in each unit (integrated culture). Overall, it seemed that the personnel lived in two different cultural ‘landscapes’ – integrated and differentiated.

Patterns that needed the same rules and cultural coherence in every unit where artefacts, cultural practices, which e.g. parents as clients could see: if there was a habit to offer something for parents when having annual celebrations, the practices should have been similar.

... our clients [parents] sometimes know each others and surely do some comparing and may wonder how things are done there [another unit] and how then here. There should be some common things in the same way. (A staff member, organisation B)

Also some other customs – how to use money in each unit or how vacations are held – were topics that needed to be the same in the whole organisation. The director of the distributed organisation was in charge of the equality. It is notable to mention that if there was a need for similar rules, it did not always mean that the staff members would like to spend for example more time together. It was enough that some practices were in line.

On the other hand, the staff members protected their subcultural practices. Work shifts were one example where the staff wanted the decision making to take place at the team level and not at the organisational level.

I discussed with Noora [an employee] the work shifts and that the director had wanted to affect on them. Noora said that the team had wanted to keep their customs and arrange the work shifts as they wanted. (Observation, Organisation A)

When employees discussed the uniqueness of each unit, it was not always a concrete habit. The uniqueness was more the spirit and the atmosphere in each unit, which were both felt unique and were also wanted to remain unique. Some employees described that if she/he should work in another unit, she/he would feel there as a stranger at least in the beginning. One reason for the subcultures was that those units that were found to be ‘distance units’ assumed that it was the staff’s role or duty to create a culture of their own.

We kind of used the situation where we were able to be in peace and we worked by ourselves (...) We were able to create our own habits. The director just accepted them and said that it

looks good and gave feedback. When everything went smoothly, the director was pleased and liked that we were so self-regulated. So it began with the idea that we are a team or two teams and then we have the cleaning lady and the person in the kitchen. We have to make the best and the director will visit us every now and then. (A staff member, organisation B)

There also existed some assumptions that in those units where the director did not visit so often, there were more possibilities for different cultural means to be created by the staff. In other words, the personnel in those units were suspected to be able to make their own means.

One thing I have wondered is that while the director's office is in this unit, we are a bit more under surveillance. Sometimes I think if in other units [distance units] things can be done in their own way. (A staff member, Organisation B)

Although the citations above emphasize the role of the staff, also the role of the director was significant while creating the culture. In Organisation A, the director's goal was to create one community and the director nurtured the relations between the units. In Organisation B the director accepted that it was enough that the sense of community was strong in each unit. According to my interviews, members of the staff were aware of the goal of the director whether to create one community or accept different small communities. In spite of the coherence and integrated culture, the director of Organisation A respected the uniqueness of each unit.

This living in two cultural 'landscapes' can also be argued by the statistics based on what was answered to my question about the work community. In my questionnaire to the staff I asked the respondent to continue the sentence *My work community includes...* The answers can be read in Table 1.

Table 1 My work community includes

	Organisation A	Organisation B
The whole organization	6	2
My own unit	0	12
My own team and immediate teams	8	1

The work community description is connected to cultural issues. As mentioned, in Organisation B the subcultures were very strong and the director had no plans to create an integrated culture and practices. This was suitable also for the staff: at least those staff members I interviewed had no desire to more close relationships with other units. As seen from Table 1, most of the staff members in Organisation B saw their unit as their work community. The respondents' opinions in Organisation A were more fragmented, but some viewed the whole organisation as the work community. As said, there all the meetings or annual celebrations were held together, and the director had an agenda to create the community as a whole.

I also asked a more detailed question concerning cultural issues when in the questionnaire I asked the respondent to continue the sentence *Values, targets and practices are the same...* Only four respondents answered that these issues were the same in the whole organisation and all these answers came from Organisation A. For the most respondents values, targets and practices were the same in the respondent's own team. These results emphasize that individuals in these distributed organisations saw culture to be monolith or differentiated. It is also worth to mention here that some employees said that some of the values are based on the national guidelines for early childhood education. These basic values can be seen monolith not just in these organisations but overall in early childhood education.

Conclusion

This study investigated day care work and leadership in a distributed organisation in day care context. The basic assumption was that cultural issues are significant when organisational changes like this occur. The findings suggest that Meyerson's and Martin's (1987) integrated and differentiated cultural paradigms may occur at the same time in the same organisation. My results also gave evidence that culture is not always monolith and the meaning of subcultures is evident (see Smircich 1983; Morgan & Ogbonna 2008).

It was significant that between the subcultures there were no conflicts although conflicts are characterized especially between the subcultures (see Morgan & Ogbonna 2008). Neither did there exist any competition for which of the subcultures was the more powerful – there was more a need to remain something unique in each subculture and to live in harmony. In

addition, although subcultures were strong, there were individual differences in the views of the staff within the same subculture (see Morgan & Ogbonna 2008). In my case I did not find evidence that professional groups had their own subcultures (see e.g. Schein 2004). It was the team or one unit's staff that formed a subculture. This might be due to the multiprofessional teamwork done in Finnish day care units.

My conclusion is that one reason behind strong subcultures is that this kind of organisational structure forces the staff to work independently. In the interviews employees several times emphasized that they had to work independently and self-regulated. This was seen as a good opportunity but from my point of view, it may conclude to strong subcultures.

Findings also suggest that the immediate work community is the most meaningful community for the employees. Is it then necessary to create an integrated culture for a distributed organisation? From my point of view, although the meaning of the immediate work community was important, the employees after all felt that they belonged to the whole organisation. In spite of the meaning of the immediate work community, belonging to the distributed organization was not irrelevant for the employees. Belonging to the same organisation should then mean at least some similar, integrated cultural practices. As my respondents said, for some point there is a need for a monolith culture but as far as the subcultures live in harmony, there may occur different subcultures. One interesting finding was how the employees saw the membership of a group, which is one of the elements of Schein's (2004) internal integration: the employees made borders between the groups inside their organisation but also the organisation made a boarder against other day care units in this municipality.

In sum, according to my results both integrated and differentiated culture is needed in a distributed organization. My conclusion is that there should be discussions what practices, values etc. are monolith in each unit and which of them can vary in different units and it is the director's duty to arrange possibilities for these cultural discussions. Schein (1993) emphasizes that the role of dialogue in relation to culture is essential. Schein especially points out the need of dialogue between hierarchical subcultural boundaries, but in my case there was a need for dialogue between vertical subcultures and to break boundaries between them. Is it evident according to my results that in Organisation A where there were more possibilities for

dialogue between the whole staff, there did not exist so many assumptions concerning e.g. the cultural practices in each unit.

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