

# An Ethnographic Study of Culture in the Context of Organizational Change

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The author employed an ethnographic research approach, combined with a clinical element, to explore the nature and role of culture in the context of organizational change. The study took place at the U.K. operations of a global human resources consulting firm, People Associates. Using Schein's levels of culture model, the author identified cultural assumptions and values and explored how these relate to behaviors, using the author's relationship with the organization as a rich data source. This study contributes in two main ways: first, it shows how an organizational culture develops historically, is internally coherent, and has potent effects on behaviors that should be studied and understood by managers and clinicians undertaking organizational change programs. Second, it highlights and illustrates how researcher reflexivity and subject reactivity can be useful sources of data for understanding an organization.

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Dealing with organizational culture is a key consideration in change programs and ignoring it is an important reason for which change programs fail (Johnson, 1987, 1990; Pascale, Milleman, & Gioja, 1997). Understanding culture in any particular context, however, is not an easy task. Against this background, I sought to gain a deeper understanding of the nature and role of organizational culture through an ethnographic study of the U.K. operations of a global human resources consulting firm, People Associates. The study took place in the context of a transformational

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*The author would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers and the editor for their insightful comments on earlier versions of the manuscript.*

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change program through which People Associates aimed to achieve cultural change (especially a shift away from individualism to teamwork), substantial growth in size, a more focused client-relationship management process, increased breadth and depth of consultants' expertise, and integration of various distinct consulting methodologies.

Using Schein's (1984, 1992) levels of culture model, I identified People Associates' cultural assumptions and values and explored how these related to behaviors. Given the crucial role of the researcher in ethnographic research, I used my relationship with the organization as a rich data source to further understand its culture. This study contributes in two main ways: first, it shows how an organizational culture develops historically, is internally coherent, and has potent effects on behaviors that should be studied and understood by managers and clinicians undertaking organizational change programs. Second, it highlights and illustrates how researcher reflexivity and subject reactivity can be useful sources of rich data for understanding an organization.

### **Organizational Culture in the Management Literature**

The surge of interest by management academics and practitioners in the 1980s in organizational culture and symbolism has been prompted by the publication of books and articles on the importance of culture for organizational effectiveness (Barney, 1986; Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982); the academic critique of positivism (Silverman, 1970); the increased legitimacy of qualitative methodologies (Jick, 1979; Sanday, 1979; Sanders, 1982); and intensifying global competition, with culture seen as a key facilitator of the high economic achievement of countries such as Japan (Turner, 1986).

Organization theory from early on has highlighted the human aspects of organizing (Daft & Weick, 1984; Dandridge, Mitroff, & Joyce, 1980; Pondy & Mitroff, 1979). Culture has been studied as an organizational variable within a functionalist frame of reference, something an organization "has," or as a root metaphor for conceptualizing organization, something an organization "is" (Smircich, 1983a). Organizations were seen as shared meanings (Smircich, 1983b) or as "distinctive social units possessed of a set of common understandings for organizing action . . . and languages and other symbolic vehicles for expressing common understandings" (Louis, 1983, p. 39). Cultural views of organization emphasize that individuals' actions are based on their subjective definitions of the situation (Thomas & Thomas, 1970), that people "act out and realize their ideas" (Weick, 1977, p. 287), collectively creating their own realities.

Initial writings on organizational culture portrayed it as an integrating, cohesive mechanism and focused on its potential links with organizational effectiveness, an approach aligned with the structural-functionalist stream in anthropology (Meek, 1988). Studies indeed have shown that organizational culture does have potent effects on such issues as employee retention (Sheridan, 1992), job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991).

There are several challenges, however, to the proposition that organizational culture can necessarily provide sustainable competitive advantage. Although culture is a potent force, it cannot fully dominate thought and action because of the capacity of human agents to comment critically on their situation and to choose to abstain or act

otherwise than the dominant cultural norms would dictate (Golden, 1992). Thus, there is the potential for multiple and even competing subcultures existing in an organization (Lucas, 1987). Moreover, culture varies more across industries than within them, indicating that many cultural elements are not unique to particular organizations in the same industry (Chatman & Jehn, 1994; Gordon, 1991). Far from the managerialist view of culture as a route to competitive advantage, others argued that culture is a self-disciplining form of employee subjectivity, the last frontier of control of labor by capitalism (Ray, 1986; Willmott, 1993).

### **Organizational Culture and Planned Change**

The idea of planned organizational change is integral to the field of organizational development (OD) (Beckhard & Harris, 1987; Burke, Church, & Waclawski, 1993; Porras & Robertson, 1992) and has been since its inception (French, 1969). The concept of organizational culture is an important aspect of this planned change process (e.g., Burke, 1995, pp. 155-159) and a basic concept of the OD field in general. This is evident, for example, in OD frameworks that explicitly portray culture as a subsystem of the organization (Heracleous & Devoge, 1998; Kolb & Frohman, 1970) or implicitly portray culture in terms of organizational purposes and relationships (Weisbord, 1976). Several authors have argued that understanding organizational culture is essential for achieving successful organizational change; and where culture is ignored, change programs are likely to fail (Johnson, 1987, 1990; Pascale, Milleman, & Gioja, 1997).

### **Schein's Levels of Culture Model**

Schein's (1984, 1992) levels of culture model has been very influential in the study of culture as it is one of the few structured and insightful ways to understand this phenomenon (Hatch, 1993). Schein (1984, 1992) suggested that culture can be analyzed in terms of three interrelated levels: artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions. Artifacts are "all the phenomena that one sees, hears, and feels when one encounters a new group with an unfamiliar culture" (Schein, 1992, p. 17). Artifacts are observable but hard to decipher because similar artifacts may mean different things in different cultures. Espoused values are a "sense of what ought to be as distinct from what is" (Schein, 1992, p. 19). These develop over time based on workable solutions to critical problems that a group faces, and if the solutions continue to work long enough, they gradually drop out of conscious awareness and become basic assumptions. Basic assumptions are "the implicit assumptions that actually guide behavior, that tell group members how to perceive, think about, and feel about things" (Schein, 1992, p. 22). These are taken for granted and mutually reinforced and thus normally are not confronted or debated. Challenging basic assumptions leads to high levels of anxiety and initiates defense mechanisms that enable the group to continue functioning in a stable manner. Basic assumptions, according to Schein, are the essence of culture because they represent taken-for-granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings that are the ultimate source of individuals' values and actions.

Apart from his levels of culture model, Schein (1984, 1992) has discussed issues such as the cultural rules of interaction (1987a) and culture as an aspect of group growth and development in his writings on "process consultation" (1988). Schein's writings on organization culture have been highly influential in the OD field. Cultural discussions in OD textbooks are largely based on Schein's theories (e.g., Cummings & Worley, 1993; French & Bell, 1995). More recently, Schein has forcibly argued for increased attention to cultural aspects of organizations based on ethnographic field observations rather than on abstract survey measurements of culture (Schein, 1996).

## METHOD

In early 1994, I set out to study the role of organizational culture in the context of organizational change. I collected the empirical data reported here between June 1994 and March 1996. I also conducted retrospective data gathering that focused on the organization's history and critical incidents, going back to the organization's founding in the United Kingdom in 1963. My research was characterized by the following philosophical commitments, methodological paradigms, research strategy, and methods (see Table 1).

### Philosophical Commitments

The philosophical commitments guiding the research program centered on interpretivism, the conviction that accounts of social life must consider the actors' frame of reference and be adequate at this level of first-order meaning. According to the sociologist Max Weber (1978), in the study of social systems, "we are in a position . . . to achieve something that must lie for ever beyond the reach of all forms of 'natural science' . . . what we can do is to 'understand' the behavior of the individuals involved" (p. 18). Reality, in this view, is not seen as a hard and objective entity to be broken down and measured through positivist methods but as an intersubjective and socially constructed reality to be explored and interpreted inductively (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). I thus aimed to observe and make sense of agents' actions in their real-life context so as to gradually gain "access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them" (Geertz, 1973, p. 24). This viewpoint presupposes knowledgeable agents whose actions are not structurally determined and who could always choose to act otherwise (Giddens, 1979).

### Methodological Paradigms

I employed the methodological paradigm of ethnography with an action research or clinical element. My role approximated what Schein (1987a) calls "the ethnographer as clinician." I partly acted as a clinician because I was allowed access to the organization on the assumption that my involvement would "add value" to the organization change program under way. Gradually, I was expected to take initiative and be self-suf-

**TABLE 1**  
**Methodological Orientations of the Research**

Philosophical commitments	Interpretivism, nondeterministic view of human existence, importance of agency, reality as socially constructed
Methodological paradigms	Ethnography with clinical component
Research strategy	Longitudinal case study design, qualitative methodologies, triangulation
Methodologies	In-depth interviewing, participant and nonparticipant observation, cultural audits, use of informants, descriptive surveys, document analysis

ficient in terms of gaining access to employees and building my own networks in the organization as sources of data. I was soon asked to provide not only data describing what was found but also recommendations for action based on the data.

Given the importance of researcher reflexivity in ethnographic research, I carefully observed my relationship with People Associates, and used my observations as data that could be used to further understand the organization. I will discuss this reflexive activity in more detail later on.

#### **Research Strategy and Methods**

The commitment to understanding the “natives’” frames of meaning (Geertz, 1973) means that qualitative methodologies have to be employed. I employed the research strategy of a longitudinal case study (Eisenhardt, 1989). Within this strategy, I used the methods of in-depth interviewing, participant and nonparticipant observation, cultural audits through focus group sessions, informants, periodic descriptive surveys, and document analysis. I conducted a total of 104 interviews involving consultants, surveys and IT staff, support staff, and past leaders of People Associates. I triangulated the data within and across methods in order to increase the internal validity of the findings and to discover within- or between-method divergences or convergences that could lead to new lines of inquiry (Jick, 1979). After I discerned the main cultural values and beliefs of the organization, my findings were circulated to all employees, who widely judged them to be representative of their organization. This process is an important validating criterion for ethnographic research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

#### **Data Analysis**

My initial analytical task was to detect patterns and processes that could help to “make sense of what is going on in the scenes documented by the data” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, pp. 209-210). I was conscious throughout the research program, in this regard, that “what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to” (Geertz, 1973, p. 9). This, in effect, is what Giddens (1993) calls the “double hermeneutic” in social science and Van Maanen (1979) “first and second-order concepts” in ethnography. Within this process, I continually sought to differentiate between “presentational” and “opera-

tional" data (Van Maanen, 1979) and to reflect on what these data revealed about the agents involved and the research setting.

I did not take individual fragments of data as indicative of cultural features but interpreted them as part of a wider corpus of data. The data analysis was characterized by a hermeneutic, iterative process of going back and forth from critical reflection to the data, and from part to whole, searching for key themes and patterns, and questioning, redefining, or buttressing the key themes and patterns identified with further evidence (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1987; Thachenkery, 1992).

## RESULTS

### Central Values and Beliefs of People Associates

People Associates has developed a "thick" organizational culture during over three-and-a-half decades of operating in the United Kingdom. My interviews with past leaders and my document analysis indicated that People Associates' early growth was characterized by conditions fostering the development of such cultures, including a long history and stable membership, absence of institutional alternatives, and frequent interaction among members (Wilkins & Ouchi, 1983).

Both employees and clients of People Associates viewed it as a human resource consulting firm, with the core business being job evaluation. Job evaluation has been the firm's core business since its founding, and its early consulting projects were based almost exclusively on this methodology. The belief that job evaluation was People Associates' core business was manifested in consultants' daily communication using terms related to this methodology as part of a shared vocabulary that helps to constitute an identity for organizational members (Evered, 1983). Although the language of job evaluation still is prevalent in People Associates, the perception that this is the firm's core business has been weakening. Financial analyses have shown that job evaluation sales as a percentage of total sales have been decreasing, while sales from other fields such as organizational change and human resources planning and development have been increasing. Senior management has made a conscious effort to develop consultants' expertise in these other fields, through holding consultant training programs and client seminars, and encouraging consultants to inform clients about other consulting services offered by the firm.

Second, clients are considered as all important in People Associates, almost always taking priority over internal systems and commitments. When consultants are asked to explain their actions/inactions, their rationalizations (Giddens, 1979) mainly rest on the premise of acting in the best interest of the client. According to consultants in People Associates, "if a client says 'jump,' you jump!" Moreover, People Associates' client orientation is reflected in its carrying out periodic client satisfaction surveys, in what clients say during these surveys regarding the firm's commitment to them, in the substantial power base of individuals with large client portfolios and strong client relationships, and in People Associates' flexible, loose structure allowing it to keep close to, and respond swiftly to, clients.

Third, People Associates has been characterized by strong individualism and high autonomy of its consultants since its inception. This is exemplified by the daily behaviors of its consultants as well as by the organizational mythology. Many consultants I talked to said that they were attracted to People Associates, as opposed to other major consulting firms, because of the lack of strict rules and regulations and the high autonomy they enjoyed, provided they met their targets. One consultant joked that, "if you meet your targets, you can do what you want, even be a double-glazing salesman if you like." In addition, the organizational mythology is replete with figures of "lone rangers," currently senior people who have exhibited highly individualistic behaviors in dealing with clients, and "guidechart jockeys," who would "ride" in an organization with their job evaluation guidecharts to solve client problems.

Fourth, People Associates has been carrying out reorganizations on an annual basis. Over time, these changes have become institutionalized as part of its culture and are referred to as *autumn maneuvers* in the organization's vocabulary. My interviews with senior management indicated that they saw these as fundamental changes (as opposed to incremental ones). The manager of the change steering group told me that the group would never have realized on their own that these changes were in fact incremental, focusing solely on structural change without challenging the organization's established assumptions, values, and beliefs.

Fifth, clients often requested advice from consultants in areas in which those particular consultants may not have been experts. Because of consultants' high pressures to meet their targets, and the fact that client relationships were a potent power base, consultants were reluctant to relinquish control of those clients to others. They thus ended up offering advice in various human resource areas. This situation led to an internal perception of "generalist expertise" in several fields as opposed to deep expertise in selected ones.

Last, due mainly to the high autonomy and individualism of consultants who often did not pay much attention to internal procedures, and to the fact that the *autumn maneuvers* did not lead to any fundamental, cultural changes in the organization, the perception developed over time that there are few "real" decisions taken by senior management. On several occasions during the research, I observed new internal procedures or rules being implemented but never followed. Examples include the requirement that consultants keep detailed written records of how they spent their time during client engagements or any other activity; and new record-keeping procedures for billing clients introduced by the finance department. Both of these were ignored by consultants, who said that they were too time-consuming and cumbersome, and both were subsequently dropped. As one consultant told me, "nobody will be hanged for violating procedures, but they will be hanged for getting it wrong." In other words, at People Associates, it was more important to get it right with clients than to follow internal procedures.

#### **The Consulting Subculture as the Dominant Cultural Force**

The above values and beliefs represent the predominant, consulting subculture in People Associates. Although there are other subcultures in this organization (e.g., the

subcultures of the support staff and of the surveys department), it is the consultants' subculture that dominates. Its importance is indicated by the high numbers of its members, its potent influence on organizational decisions and actions, and its strong internal homogeneity. In terms of membership numbers, over two thirds of People Associates' (United Kingdom) employees are consultants, and most of the 20% of employees who work in the survey/IT departments aspire to becoming consultants in the longer term, as ethnographic data have shown. In terms of influence on decisions and actions, leaders of the consulting subculture determine People Associates' strategic direction and most of its internal organizational arrangements. Last, in terms of homogeneity of the dominant consulting subculture, my data on the recruitment process, observation of behaviors, and in-depth interviews indicated a highly homogeneous body of consultants. When interviewing new recruits and asking for surprising or puzzling features of People Associates (Schein, 1992), many marveled at how "everybody is so much like me."

#### **The Internal Coherence of the Organizational Culture**

There are strong interconnections among the values and beliefs of People Associates. For example, the individualism and high autonomy of consultants is related historically to the nature of the core business (job evaluation), which did not require any teamwork among consultants. The institutionalized incremental changes, which have not led to fundamental organizational change and have not challenged the organization's values and beliefs, in combination with consultants' high autonomy and individualism, have led to a further belief that senior management at People Associates makes few "real" decisions. Values and beliefs also are highly interconnected with artifacts. With regard to individualism and high autonomy, there are stories and myths about "lone rangers," the organizational structure accommodates and encourages individualism by being loosely coupled and chaotic, control systems and incentives focus on and are geared to individual evaluation and performance, communication is informal and largely based on one's own interpersonal networks, and last, high achievers in terms of billing and sales have been individually praised consistently on such occasions as Christmas parties.

#### **People Associates' Governing Assumptions in Historical Perspective**

I analyzed the qualitative data from various sources, guided by Schein's (1984, 1992) writings on the nature of basic assumptions. This analysis indicated that five powerful governing assumptions operate in People Associates. These are portrayed in Table 2.

From a historical perspective, these governing assumptions derive from the vision and actions of the founder and early leaders of People Associates and from the way People Associates has approached internal (e.g., recruitment, incentives, and control systems) and external (e.g., market development) issues since its inception (Schein, 1983).

**TABLE 2**  
**People Associates' Governing Assumptions**

Organization's relationship to its environment	The organization should be proactive toward its environment and strive for continuous improvement
Nature of reality and truth	Reality and truth are derived from a combination of that which works (the pragmatic orientation) and that which is scientifically established
Nature of human nature	Individuals should be self-motivated and capable agents and therefore should act entrepreneurially and proactively
Nature of human activity	A "doing" orientation predominates rather than "being" or "being-in-becoming" orientations
Nature of time	Time is polychronic rather than monochronic or cyclical

*The organization's relationship to its environment.* The assumption regarding the proactive and developmental stance of the organization to its environment was embodied in the vision of the founder about the future of the organization. In 1943, he wrote, "The human element in industry has not received adequate or sufficiently skillful attention. . . . The most successful companies of the future will be the ones to take advantage of improved personnel techniques" (People Associates, 1993, p. 2). According to the current chairman and CEO of People Associates (Global), "the one common thread through our exhilarating roller-coaster ride between 1943 and today is that [our founder's] original vision has always proved to have flawless clarity" (People Associates, 1993, p. 4). The vision was proactive and progressive for its time, as thoughts about the importance of the human side of work were not common in 1943, and indeed academic management thought was very much engaged with the mechanistic approach of "scientific management" (Taylor, 1947).

The proactive and developmental nature of People Associates' actions toward its environment also can be seen in its early globalization processes and in its current annual organization change programs. With regard to globalization, "the real enduring impact of this foreign expansion is that once we started, we stayed at it—even if the short-term financials weren't good." This allowed People Associates to "stay ahead of the curve . . . to understand what was—and would be—happening to business in time to develop positions and expertise necessary to help our clients" (People Associates, 1993, pp. 4-5).

The organization, in addition, has not been complacent about its early monopolistic position in the job evaluation field. It has instead institutionalized annual incremental changes (termed *autumn maneuvers* in the organizational vocabulary), and since 1994, has been proactively pursuing a transformational change program. As senior consultants said, "nobody's holding a gun to our head." In a 1994 speech, at the start of the change process, the U.K. managing director explicitly recognized that the organization had been successful and that there was no crisis at hand; but also that unless People

Associates proactively made significant changes, it would, in the near future, be at a competitive disadvantage.

*Nature of reality and truth.* The assumption regarding truth as a combination of that which works (a pragmatic orientation) and that which is established by scientific method is embodied in the founder's pool of early employees deriving from his circle of friends in academia (science) and from retired businessmen (pragmatism). Two men who would later prove to be pivotal figures in the development of People Associates were hired in 1949. One had 25 years' experience in management and manufacturing (pragmatism) and is credited with developing the firm's proprietary job evaluation methodology. The other was a 28-year-old who had just earned a Ph.D. in industrial psychology and who subsequently developed several psychological assessment tools (science). Bringing together the two elements of pragmatism and science in a combination that provided sustained commercial success for the organization gave rise to a cultural precedent that gradually dropped out of conscious awareness and became a governing assumption. This respect to both practical knowledge and scientific findings has been manifested in my relationship with the organization, as discussed later.

*Nature of human nature.* The assumption that individuals are self-motivated, capable, and responsible agents was apparent in People Associates' early recruitment policy in the United States. People Associates' human resources strategy was to develop the geographical markets they entered using "the best available local talent." The Canadian office was the first one in what subsequently became an intense drive for market development, leading to People Associates' current international presence with 90 offices in 30 countries: "When we went to Canada, we asked who's your best guy in personnel? And then we sought that person out and recruited him" (People Associates, 1993, p. 4). The current recruitment policy is a continuation of high standards set historically. Interviews with consultants and the personnel manager have revealed that the recruitment process lasts about 3 to 4 months and commonly consists of three interviews, three psychometric tests, assessment centers involving debate of real-life organizational problems, and, interestingly, a dinner during which the social skills of short-listed applicants are observed by partners. In response to my questions about what organizational features consultants found unexpected or surprising when they entered the firm, several said that the recruitment process was the most extensive they had ever gone through. However, once they had crossed the boundary into the organization, they were equally surprised by their high level of autonomy and the looseness of the organization.

*Nature of human activity.* A "doing" orientation predominates in People Associates, as opposed to "being" or "being in becoming" orientations. A "doing" orientation is one that assumes that "the proper thing for people to do is to take charge and actively control their environment" (Schein, 1992, p. 127). This orientation finds expression in the idea that "adding value" to clients and to the organization is of paramount importance, a concept that was implicit in the vision of the organization's founder, as discussed earlier. This concern in turn derives from an industrywide focus on "adding

value” (Chatman & Jehn, 1994; Gordon, 1991). This “doing” orientation led to the creation of what Harrison (1972) calls a “task” culture, in which organization structure and systems, as well as agents’ actions, are geared toward and subordinated to achieving the superordinate goal of “adding value.”

*Nature of time.* The dominant time orientation in People Associates is polychronic rather than monochronic or cyclical. Polychronic time is “a kind of medium defined more by what is accomplished than by a clock and within which several things can be done simultaneously” (Schein, 1992, pp. 107-108). This is apparent in the complete control consultants historically have had over their time/space movements, some not coming into the office for months at a time. This is quite acceptable because, as the managing director (MD), U.K., said during an informal conversation, if they are in the office, this means that they are not out with clients. Some senior people have characterized People Associates as “a club” in this sense. Consultants have complete control of what they do and when they do it and it is normal for them to be engaged in several client projects simultaneously. Secretarial support also operates within a polychronic time orientation as support staff have to carry out many tasks simultaneously, and they partly control such issues as their time of arrival to work, their lunch breaks, and their departure from work.

The surveys/IT part of the organization, on the other hand, operates with longer and more defined time horizons. Many surveys are annual, and the “bespoke” ones take a specific amount of time to be completed. Survey production is characterized by highly interdependent and sequential tasks, which is consistent with a monochronic time orientation. This dissonance of time orientations may be a primary reason for the poor interrelationship between these two subcultures. Surveys/IT people often complain that they are the poor relation of the consultancy, and consultants for their part complain about the low responsiveness of the surveys/IT function to urgent client and internal issues.

### **How Governing Assumptions Manifest in Practice**

*My own experience in gaining access and conducting research in People Associates.* In early 1994, I approached People Associates and other management consulting firms in order to negotiate access, planning at that time to utilize a purely ethnographic approach to the research. The MD, Europe, replied that he would like to meet me. I arranged for an appointment during which I explained the focus of the research, and left with the understanding that the organization would contact me for further discussion. About 2 months later, the director of recruitment wrote to invite me to a further meeting, during which I again explained the focus of the research and gave him samples of my work. At one point, he effectively asked what I would offer in return for access. I replied that I could offer the findings from the fieldwork. He then said that People Associates was about to commence a program of organizational change which I could study, adding value to the process while I did so; to which I agreed.

From the outset, therefore, a clinical element was incorporated in the research program (Schein, 1987b). The change steering group, composed of senior executives,

requested my periodic feedback on management of the change process. Once the research program was under way, I also felt an ethical obligation to convey to the change steering group employees' task-related concerns derived from the diagnosis stage (White & Wooten, 1983). Senior management was not aware of most of these issues, as became obvious from surprised reactions during my first feedback session to the steering group.

People Associates' expectation of my "adding value" in return for access to the organization aptly illustrates the cultural rule of behavior as social exchange (Schein, 1987a). In evaluating my feedback, senior individuals in fact have often used the term "adding value" to the change process. Also, I was told by the manager of the steering group early on in my involvement that my presence alone would be of symbolic value (Dandridge, 1983; Johnson, 1990) because it would indicate that the current change was a fundamental one, as opposed to previous incremental changes that were not taken very seriously.

Moreover, as the research process progressed, the initial support afforded to me (assigning a secretary to help with arranging interviews and conveying any other information about the organization that I needed) was not offered for later phases. Instead, I was expected to develop my own networks and forge my own links with the organization's employees, much as a new recruit is expected to be self-sufficient after an initial period of limited support and low targets. The above examples illustrate the behavioral manifestations of the governing assumption that individuals are self-motivated, capable, and responsible agents and therefore should be able to function individually without any support. They also illustrate the "doing" orientation, which finds expression in this context in the importance of "adding value."

Assumptions about the nature of truth are reflected in the way my feedback and suggestions were received. Initially, I was surprised and puzzled by the seriousness with which my feedback and suggestions were handled. Summaries of my feedback reports were circulated to the whole organization, my suggestions were discussed at high level and many have led to action. My surprise lay in the fact that at that time, I did not have any consulting experience; People Associates made a point of recruiting consultants at least in their 30s with much industry experience; and senior directors with two or three decades of consulting experience solicited and considered extensively my suggestions for action. Upon critical reflection, this has made sense. The governing assumption that truth is a combination of pragmatism and scientific knowledge means that scientific knowledge is highly respected and taken seriously even if it derives from a source having little or no experience of what works in the specific context of the organization (pragmatism).

*Induction process and early period for new recruits.* The induction process for new consultants was very unstructured, and the onus was largely on individual consultants to prepare a self-development plan and to act on it. In the unusual event of direction from senior people, this was restricted to the first couple of months, after which the responsibility for self-development and network building rested completely with the individual. In interviews, many new recruits described the process as "hard" and

“painful.” Most experienced high anxiety levels because of the uncertainty over whether they were doing the right things. The following extracts from an interview with a newly recruited consultant give a representative description of the situation:

**Consultant:** I had a phone call from my team leader, X . . . he said it helps if you have a high tolerance for ambiguity, you know things aren't gonna be structured, and . . . I didn't even know whether I was gonna have a desk, so I was quite relieved to find that I was gonna have a desk.

**Interviewer:** Is it usual that the regional operations directors decide which training courses you go on, or do you normally have to choose yourself?

**Consultant:** Hmm. Like everything at People Associates, it's not . . . made explicit, but I think what happens is that you're put down, and you very rapidly discover that there are a whole lot of things, and if you have any sense . . . you find out that, hmm. . . Y has got a list of training courses, and you go and look and you say, “Oh, that's interesting, and that's interesting, and that's interesting.” and then you go back to your ROD and you say, “Hmmm, I see there's all these training courses I'd quite like to go on, is that OK?” . . . and then you're encouraged to make appointments with senior people, go and see them, and talk to them about what they're doing, and basically do a bit of marketing in terms of saying, “Oh, this is what I'm doing, or this is what I have done, this is what I can do.” . . . I think for everybody, it's difficult. . . . I think I found the first three months, ahmm, OK, because I was going on a lot of training courses, I was learning a lot, hmm, but, I think what I found very unnerving was the complete and utter responsibility to determine my future direction. It was like, there was no direction whatsoever, hmm, and there was no management whatsoever. I had been used to having a line manager, and there wasn't any.

Schein (1984, 1992) suggests that a researcher or clinician should further examine the features that surprise or puzzle them or new recruits in order to reveal basic assumptions that drive these features. Interview data showed that one feature that has surprised most new consulting recruits is this: whereas in other organizations there was work waiting for them as soon as they entered, in People Associates, they spent the first few weeks trying to find work. One new recruit said that for the first couple of months, she felt guilty receiving her paycheck because she had not done much work at all.

In People Associates, the onus is on the individual agent to find work in a Darwinian setting in which one either meets one's targets (which are negligible for the first few months but then escalate rapidly) or one is soon in trouble. A consultant referred to the operation of an internal market as follows:

I think the other thing which is different from other companies is the sort of internal market . . . where you're basically selling yourself to your colleagues to get involved in a project. . . . Lots of freedom, but you're sort of, you name your price . . . if I wanted to do something, if I'm desperately short of work, I could price myself at half the time and am actually encouraged to do so in order to just get the numbers up.”

The internal market leads to a situation in which “in People Associates, it's dangerous to say you're not busy,” as another consultant pointed out during informal conversation. “If you do that, then the other people will start wondering what's wrong with you.”

The above are organizational and behavioral manifestations of the governing assumption that individuals are self-motivated, capable, and responsible agents who

should forge their own links and internal networks and learn the ropes, without much help from others.

*Perceptions of how one rises in People Associates.* Perceptions of how one rises in People Associates also are indicative of the assumption that individuals are self-motivated and capable agents, as well as of the “doing” orientation that finds expression in the perceived importance of “adding value” commercially to the organization by achieving one’s individual targets.

The way one rises in People Associates, as perceived by consultants, primarily is to be a high biller (number of consulting days billed to clients) at associate consultant and consultant levels. At senior consultant level and above, one should in addition be a high seller of large consulting projects, provided they are not perceived as unfair or unsupportive in terms of the billing they allow to other consultants on projects that they had sold. After one reaches a certain level, moreover, one has to promote oneself through actions such as writing unsolicited papers to other senior people, preferably the decision makers, as well as going to various meetings to network. A widely held view in People Associates was:

**Interviewer:** How do you think one rises in People Associates?

**Consultant:** I’m sure you heard this *many* times, I think that no matter what anybody else says, the key things are around billing and selling. . . . I think for me to go from senior consultant to principal would be around sales success; I think perhaps associate consultant, or whatever, it might be around billing success, but I think it’s those things.

Consultants are evaluated individually on their billing and sales targets and have ultimate personal responsibility for reaching them. Thus, consultants have to develop their own internal networks so that they can be kept informed of new projects sold, who sold them, and how they can get on them. My interviews revealed that the pressure to hit the targets often leads to high levels of anxiety. One telling example occurred when a consultant who had been sick returned to work before fully recovering so that hitting his targets would not be jeopardized.

## DISCUSSION

### The Role of Culture in Organizational Change

This case illustrates how an organization’s cultural assumptions develop historically, underpin values and beliefs, and have subtle but nevertheless pervasive effects on organizational actors’ interpretations and actions, as well as on organizational arrangements.

In-depth knowledge of the organizational culture can assist clinicians in identifying appropriate change strategies that would fit with the organization’s unique cultural context, for example, in making a choice of a more collaborative or a more coercive style of change management (Dunphy & Stace, 1988, 1993). If, for example, the coer-

cive change management style is used in an organization in which a deep cultural assumption regarding human nature sees individuals as capable, self-motivated, and entrepreneurial, there would be a significant clash between the agents of change and the organizational actors, which would severely jeopardize the success of the change program.

This case study illustrates empirically why organizational cultures are so inertial and resistant to change. Behaviors, values, beliefs, and assumptions all are interconnected in a coherent whole that resists change attempts (Johnson, 1987; Pascale, Milleman, & Gioja, 1997; Pettigrew, 1987). The internal coherence and self-legitimacy of cultural elements mean that efforts to change the cognitive aspects of culture directly are likely to fail. Focusing on behavioral change as a start to longer term cultural change may thus be a more viable option (Beer, Eisenstat, & Spector, 1990; Burke, 1995).

A vital test of successful organizational transformation is whether behavioral change occurs (Blumenthal & Haspeslagh, 1994) because such change is necessary for favorable organizational outcomes (Robertson, Roberts, & Porras, 1993). This study draws attention to the fact that behaviors, values, beliefs, and assumptions are intimately interrelated. However, governing assumptions can be supportive or in conflict with the new behaviors, values, and beliefs advocated by a transformational change program. Thus, it is important for clinicians to identify the organization's governing assumptions and ensure that the new behaviors, values, and beliefs the organization pursues do not conflict with, and are supported by, these governing assumptions.

In People Associates, the executives used the cultural elements identified as benchmarks on which to articulate a new cultural and organizational direction. The cultural values aimed for in this case did not challenge the organization's governing assumptions. This had facilitated the organization change process. Subsequent evaluations indicated that the original cultural situation started to "unfreeze" and move toward the desired direction (Lewin, 1952). Use of Schein's levels of culture model in this case provided further clarity for the rather vague and potentially misleading idea that transformational change involves wholesale cultural change. A new strategic direction does not necessarily need to challenge the organization's governing assumptions or even all of its prevailing cultural values, beliefs, and behaviors. The challenge is to identify which cultural elements need to be changed and which need to be preserved, given the organization's strategic direction. If intended changes in values, beliefs, and behaviors build on existing governing assumptions, the change effort is much more likely to succeed.

#### **Researcher Reflexivity: How Organizational Culture Influenced the Research Process**

Researcher reflexivity, subject reactivity, and the role of text in constructing what it purports to report objectively are important considerations in ethnographic approaches in which the researchers are themselves central tools in the research process (Sanday, 1979). These realizations have led to challenges to "realist" ethnography

and to the emergence of “confessional” accounts detailing the pivotal role of the researcher in the process of enquiry (Van Maanen, 1988).

The cultural characteristics of the organization, in this case, influenced both the research approach (the need to incorporate a clinical element) as well as the conduct of the research (the increasing individual initiative and responsibility I was expected to display as well as the increasing expectations for me to “add value” to the change process). There were analogies in my experience as a recently accepted outsider in People Associates with the experience of new recruits. This analogy helped me gain an empathetic understanding of new recruits’ experience and in turn of People Associates’ organizational culture.

Pursuing this line of investigation can shed considerable light on how a clinician’s perceived role, relationship with the client organization, and, ultimately, effectiveness in making a difference to the organization’s functioning are influenced by these cultural assumptions in ways that most often remain unspoken and unacknowledged. It can be revealing, as illustrated here, if the organization’s stance and actions toward the clinician are not merely taken as objective or rational reactions to them. Rather, these actions should be seen as useful data sources and as reflections of the organization’s deep psyche that can be decoded within an inductive ethnographic paradigm.

The incorporation of a clinical element can enable the clinician to be taken “behind the scenes” by senior managers who seek advice but also could constrain data collection from lower levels of the organization whose members perceive the clinician as an instrument of management, or “one of them” (Schein, 1987b). However, in this case, being perceived as a clinician in a clinicians’ land was an important facilitating factor in data collection from all levels of the organization. Positive effects included being afforded initial access, being allowed to walk about freely, even in areas housing confidential materials such as client reports, having access to anyone I wished to, being perceived by consultants as “one of us” and thus receiving more open and cooperative treatment, and last, being able to access senior management readily to elicit their thoughts and opinions. In general, being perceived as a “helpful” part of the group led to a high level of cooperation and motivation by the actors involved (Schein, 1992, pp. 170-171). Constraining aspects related mainly to the content of the periodic surveys I conducted, which had to be approved by senior management and to be seen as relevant to situational exigencies. This has limited the potential comparability of the results across the surveys but also has increased their applicability to current issues. Another constraining factor of my role as a clinician was the defensiveness of certain senior members, referred to as the “old guard,” in the organization. These were the “lone rangers” and “guidechart jockeys” of the organizational mythology, who provided sparse and filtered responses to my questions and shifted uncomfortably in their seats during our interviews. I interpreted this behavior as an indication that they perceived my presence as a threat to their cozy working life. My presence symbolized change, and they perceived that their working life was about to be disrupted because of the refocusing of the organization on more teamwork, a client management process that could reallocate some of the clients they “owned” to other consultants, and added responsibilities for mentoring newer consultants on their expertise development. This was one example of subject reactivity, discussed in more detail below.

**Subject Reactivity: What I Learned From Senior Management's Responses to My Recommendations**

I treated subject reactivity as a useful data source rather as something to be avoided. For example, certain employees engaged in self-promotion during interviews, offering to undertake positions of responsibility within the change program and recounting their recent successes, knowing that I had the ear of senior management and made frequent recommendations to them. I, of course, did not convey any such information to senior management. I felt that management itself could choose whom it wanted to place responsibility for the change program. Also, I felt that the respondents' attempts at self-promotion were rather uncalled for in this context.

Another revealing example, which I discuss in some detail, concerns whether my suggestions to senior management were implemented or ignored. Recommendations based on knowledge of what generally helps change programs, and that did not challenge cultural values and assumptions, were implemented. For example, senior management readily adopted my recommendations relating to the timing, means, and content of communications. I suggested in the initial stages that face-to-face management-employee meetings were more appropriate than simply using written communications, as this was intended to be a transformational change. In addition, I indicated that such meetings should take place as soon as possible, as opposed to the original plan of holding them around 6 months after the change initiatives started. I commented that delaying these meetings would have led to the impression that decisions had already been taken by senior management and that these meetings were not really for consultation but for paying lip service to the need to show that management cares about employee concerns. In fact, in informal conversations, some employees expressed such concerns to me in spite of the fact that these meetings were indeed moved to earlier dates than originally planned. Third, I proposed that the content of change communications should be tailored to the various change- and task-related concerns widely expressed by employees during my confidential interviews with them. This would indicate to them that their concerns were being heard and taken seriously by senior management.

On the other hand, suggestions generally helpful to change programs but which in this case challenged cultural "sacred cows" of the organization were ignored. For example, early on in the research, several concerns of both consulting and support staff were identified. I suggested that both groups' concerns should be addressed as part of the change program so that employees would feel more motivated to change in the desired directions. Interview, survey, and observation data collected in 1995 and 1996 consistently showed that consultants' concerns were being addressed, but support staff concerns were not, despite the statements of senior management that everyone's concerns mattered. I interpreted this nonaction with regard to support staff concerns as being yet another manifestation of the cultural importance of "adding value." Support staff never met with clients, and their contribution to client satisfaction was at best indirect and hidden. In addition, their skills may have been seen as widely available in the open labor market, as opposed to consultants' skills. People Associates in fact subsequently faced significant constraints to their expansion plans because of a shortage

of what they saw as suitable candidates for consulting posts. Therefore, support concerns were not seen as important as consultant concerns and were not sufficiently acted upon.

One important aspect of the cultural change pursued was a shift from the high levels of individualism to more teamwork among consultants. This was intended to support the move to selling large consulting projects drawing from integrated consulting methodologies rather than from single consulting tools. During mid-1995, I pointed out in one of my presentations to senior management that there was a dissonance between the existing reward and evaluation system, which was based on individual billing and selling targets, and the pursued value of teamwork. Why would consultants operate as teams if they were being evaluated individually and praised individually at public occasions based on their own sales and billing performance? There is no doubt that most consultants in People Associates are keenly aware of the importance of aligning reward and evaluation systems with the desired behaviors. In spite of that, this issue was not addressed or even discussed until I brought it up. Two months later, the organization's foremost performance management practitioner was asked to lead an internal review of the performance evaluation process. The result was a new process, implemented at the end of 1995, that included both individual targets as well as softer criteria depending on a consultant's role profile (for example, whether they were a team leader, a consulting practice leader, or on their level of seniority). However, my interviews and surveys in 1996, as well as an internal diagnostic exercise conducted by People Associates, showed that consultants still believed that what mattered most in their evaluation were their individual targets, and that there was little evidence of behavioral change based on the new performance evaluation process.

I interpreted this situation as an affirmation of the pervasive and inertial nature of cultural elements, in particular the assumption regarding human nature, the individual importance of "adding value," and the belief that one adds value through selling more and bigger projects and billing more days to clients. This focus put on the backburner other potentially value-adding actions such as helping to develop newer colleagues, spending time on original development of consulting methodologies, or spending time on one's own expertise development. In fact, senior management saw the fact that important internal training programs often had low attendance because consultants who originally committed to attending did not go because they had last-minute client work, as a problem.

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