



The HR connection

*Now Rann the Kite brings home the night
That Mang the Bat sets free—
The herds are shut in byre and hut
For loosed till dawn are we.
This is the hour of pride and power,
Talon and tush and claw.
Oh, hear the call!—Good hunting all
That keeps the Jungle Law!
- Rudyard Kipling, The Jungle Book*

Rudyard Kipling's famous work, *The Jungle Book*, could very well be a guide in defining and understanding organisations -- which to most of us is a place of challenges, written and unwritten codes and culture, and where adaptability and adherence to the culture determines one's chances of survival.

As a child I had fantasies about growing up like Kipling's *Mowgli* and befriending wild and the domesticated animals to acquire extraordinary skills and survive any type of challenge. Now that I am part of the so-called "*corporate jungle*" surrounded by all sorts of characters and shades, my aspiration remains the same.

Edgar Schein, a professor at the MIT Sloan School of Management, defines organisational culture as "the residue of success" within an organisation. He says, organisational cultures are, "*created by leaders, and one of the most decisive functions of leadership may well be the creation, the management, and – if and when that may become necessary – the destruction of culture.*"

Organisational culture has its roots in the 1940s. It became a business phenomenon in the early 1980s, triggered by four seminal books: Ouchi's *Theory Z: How American Business Can Meet the Japanese Challenge*, Pascale and Athos's *The Art of Japanese Management: Applications for American Executives* in 1982, Deal and Kennedy's *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life* and Peters and Waterman's *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best Run Companies* both released in 1982. All four books suggested that corporate culture was the key to organisational performance and that when properly managed, could improve a company's competitive advantage.

Levels of Organisational Culture

Professor Schein enumerated the three levels of organisational culture as:

Artifacts. These are organisational attributes which can be seen, felt and heard by any observer. Among these are the facilities, offices, furnishings, visible awards and recognition, the way that its members dress, and how each person interacts within the organisation and with outsiders.

Espoused values. Company slogans, mission statements and other operational creeds and local and personal values are usually created by organisations. By interviewing members of the organisation through questionnaires gathering attitudes about them, information about organisational behaviour can be obtained.

Basic assumptions. These include elements in the organisational culture that are often unseen or not cognitively identified in everyday interactions between members, such as those considered as taboo subjects for discussion.

Many of these “unspoken rules” exist without the conscious knowledge of those in the organisation. But some members with sufficient understanding and experience learn to accept them and thus, reinforce the rules’ somewhat “invisible” existence. Culture at this level is the underlying and driving element often missed by organisational behaviorists.

Is your organisational culture healthy?

There are many ways (*both qualitative and quantitative*) to measure whether an organisation’s culture is healthy or if it needs to be supplemented for sustenance and enhancement of growth and development. OCTAPACE developed by Professor Udai Pareek is one of the many interesting frameworks to measure and analyse how robust one’s organisational culture is.

The acronym stands for Openness, Confrontation, Trust, Authenticity, Pro-action, Autonomy, Collaboration and Experimentation. The method measures these eight dimensions to find out the robustness of an organisational culture.

Organisational culture plays a vital role in a company’s success. It helps attract the best talent available in the industry. A fine example is Google Inc.

Google has become a breeding ground for technological innovation backed by a strong organisational culture. Part of its success can be attributed to its ability to attract the best talent and retain employees.

The organisational culture was so strong and charismatic that it did not even lose a single employee during the dotcom bust in the late 1990s where the average employee turnover rate of major technology firms was at 20 to 25 per cent.

Google operates on a flat organisational structure and any one having any genuine concern is welcome to walk in to the top management's room. The environment there espouses a culture of freedom in the workplace. The set-up is quite informal -- well reflected by lava lamps and bright-coloured decoration in its headquarter, the Googleplex. Googlers are even allowed to bring their own pets at work.

"Google is designed to encourage collaboration and the exchange of ideas. From our open-floor plan and shared offices to the cafes and recreational areas, the physical space serves as a facilitator for group work. The bright colors help to stimulate creativity. Great ideas aren't only generated behind a computer, and Google works to make sure that Googlers have great spaces to meet, discuss and innovate," said Google's spokesperson Sunny Gettinger in an interview with a leading HR magazine.

A collective stand

Organisational culture consists of the things one must know about the company and its people in order to operate and behave in a manner acceptable to them. Thus, building and developing organisational culture should be a conscious and collective effort spearheaded by top management and strategic business partners, then cascaded across all levels.

The process begins with recruitment and selection, socialisation, performance evaluation, leadership and employee motivation. It also includes decision-making, designing compensation packages, grievance handling, conflicts and differences handling, discipline and morale as well as career planning and development.

In a nutshell, human relation (HR) has a very significant role to play in laying down the foundation, maintenance and strengthening of a strong organisational culture. HR has to be a real *Mowgli* of the corporate jungle.

The perception of the organisation is dependent on the robustness of its culture. Strong unidirectional culture radiates positive vibes in the marketplace. It increases the chance of market acceptance and organisational success.

As author Hofstede puts it, *"Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from another"*.

It takes a lot of work, but when properly defined, organisational culture can stand for a company's unified thoughts, ideas and action.

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