

A Reflection on Organizational Culture in Higher Education

Nadia Laura Serdenciuc
Teacher Training Department
Faculty of Educational Sciences
"Stefan cel Mare" University from Suceava
nadianutu@yahoo.com

Received 03.03.2016; Accepted 23.04. 2016

Abstract

The present study focuses on the role of the organizational culture in sharing values, shaping goals and guiding actions of the organization's members. It also discusses the relationship between the tangible components and the less visible ones in the structure of the organizational culture. After a brief description of a few coordinates defining the organizational culture, our study focuses on the context and on the descriptors that establish some traits of the specificity of the organizational culture in the contemporary higher education.

Keywords: organizational culture, academic organization, higher education, organizational culture's dynamic, shared organizational values

1. Introduction

An organization is a dynamic structure. It has its own life and it marks the life of its members in a sense of identity and belonging. Many recent researches are focusing on the organizational culture with the intention to explain the evolution of an organization and trying to delineate some useful coordinates for an efficient management (Eşi, 2014, 131-138). The analysis of the organizational culture can provide useful information in order to help managers face the change and its implications in the organization's life.

Considering the culture as a result of social interaction consisting in a sum of rules, norms, beliefs and structures, which guide the behavior of the community members, E. Schein (2004) analyses its implication at the level of an organization. The author emphasizes on the fact that the culture cannot be defined as *good* or *bad*, but it can be appreciated as *functionally effective* in relationship with the context of its development. The culture can be viewed in relation to power: it guides and constrains our behavior.

Culture gains more power in a certain context. Culture is important in building strategies of action for people, affirms A. Swidler (1986), and this is a specific trait for the institutionalized culture because it expands beyond the simple way of life oriented on achievements (Eşi, 2010, 41-50). The author emphasizes on the role of the values: shaping goals and regulating actions. We think that the functionality of an organization is determined by the assumed values. This functionality is validated

in terms of the organizational performance or in terms of its members' attitude because of the shared values, the responsibility in assuming actions and the correspondence between the members' professional goals and the organization's goals. We consider that an analysis of an organizational culture can provide some predictors for the evolution of an organization and can explain some choices in the professional life of the organization's members.

2. A few coordinates of the organizational culture's structure

For a better understanding of the specificity in the organizational culture's dynamics we will point out some components which sustain the organization's functioning and which have important consequences on its effectiveness. A conceptual framework delineated by Y. Allaire and M. Firsirotu (1984), based on a literature review, proposes three interrelated dimensions that characterize an organization: the socio-structural system (consisting of all formal elements that determine its functioning), the cultural system (the shared beliefs and values) and the individual actors. The main components of the organizational culture are, in authors' opinion: the myths (fictional component expressed in symbolic terms), the ideology (a system of beliefs that explain reality) and the values (as symbolic interpretations of reality). Some theories include in the system of the organizational culture a few strategic and contextual components. A configuration model of the organizational culture should include the following domains, in the opinion of D. Dauber et al. (2012): a values and beliefs system, a strategy, a structural system, organizational activities/ actions, an external environment.

Schein (apud P. Gagliardi, 1986) considers that the development of an organizational culture is related to a process of dynamic learning that establishes actions to be done with the intention of external adaptation and internal integration, that looks for alternatives when the given response is no longer valid.

Even if we can analyse an organization as an autonomous entity, the organizational culture is connected to the social culture, because an organization is functioning in a social context and needs to cope with its challenges. The functioning of an organization is analysed by D. Denison and A. Mishra (1995) in a framework built on two types of coordinates: internal integration and external adaptation. According to the authors' opinion, the capacity of the organization to cope internally and externally is related to four cultural traits: adaptability, mission (for external orientation), involvement, consistency (for internal integration).

We can find an interesting perspective on organizational culture in B. Schneider, A. Brief, R. Guzzo (1996). The authors consider that the organizational culture is represented by its members' beliefs and values that are not directly visible, because they are placed at a less conscious level, but that are very deeply implemented and hard enough to change. The organizational climate is presented as the tangible perspective of policies, practices and routines. The organizational culture is related to the organizational climate according to the authors' opinion, because the change of beliefs and values that represent the organizational culture can occur through the organizational climate and the change of practices and routines.

Although the social values influence the organizational culture, D. Dauber et al. (2012) affirm that the organizational values differ significantly from the societal values. The organizational culture reflects in a certain way the social culture because an organization consists of individuals who are members of the society, but they understand, explain and act in an organization according to their personal values built in a social context.

Thinking about a culture of an organization E. Schein (2004) means more than *shared* elements or things held in common, the organizational culture is about structural stability (it doesn't change easily, even if culture is a dynamic structure), depth (below visible line, sometimes represented by unconscious elements), breadth (meaning the culture extension covering all perspectives in the organization's functioning) patterning or integration – which makes possible to consider cultural elements as parts of a larger structure. Organizational performance is a result of the organizational culture put in action. W. G. Tierney (1988) identifies three coordinates of analysis for the internal dynamic of the organizational culture: values, processes and goals. These are concretized at the level of decisions, actions and communication process.

Different types of approaches proposed by the studies on organizational culture point out that researchers are interested in understanding the mechanisms that generate this reality, in putting it in correspondence with an efficient functioning of an organization, in explaining and predicting the actors' behavior. D. Dauber et al. (2012) consider that literature emphasizes on three categories of approaches related to the organizational culture: the dimensions approaches (focusing on measuring the relations between different variables of interest), the interrelated structure approaches (focusing on linking the organizational culture to other constructs of an organization) and the typology approaches (focusing on defining certain categories of organizations). If some theoretical approaches bring in attention different organization types, others focus on components that assure the organization's internal functionality, emphasizing on the specific traits of this internal perspective, in relation with the mission of the organization and with its general functioning.

3. Higher education institutions - descriptors and context of the organizational culture

The organizations evolve and it is interesting to observe their efforts in order to find functional responses to the problems faced. The type and the mission of an organization generate specific traits regarding the organizational culture. The organizational culture links together the mission of an organization and the identity of its members in a communication process based on shared values. Using the image of the culture as a *tool kit* for problem-solving situations proposed by A. Swidler (1986), we can analyse the actions of the actors from the high educational institutions in some sort of a technical manner but in the same time as a result of a personal reinterpreting of symbols, rituals and ways of action. Considering a university as an *organizational actor*, G. Krücken, F. Meier (2006) confirms its functional autonomy and, at the same time, underlines the image of an integrated entity which has its own goals, chooses its own strategies of action and is ready to assume the consequences of its actions. W. G. Tierney (1988) describes a few key dimensions of culture providing a framework of the organizational culture: the *environment* (the way it is defined by the members of the organization and the attitude towards it), the *mission* (its statement and its power in the decision making process), the *socialization* (the basis for relationships between

members, all the relevant information that helps the members to survive in the organization) , *the information*, (the context and conditions for the information flow), the *strategy* (related to the decision making process), the *leadership* (the organization members' expectations from the leaders, the type of leaders), which are appropriate for higher education organizations. These descriptors draw the context for the interaction and communication between the members of the organization.

The academic organizations, linking education and research with socio-economic environment as part of the national innovation system (Mowery and Sampat, 2005) become the center of the international knowledge system by putting in correspondence technologies (Eşi, 2014, 87-92), communication and culture (P. Altbach, 1998). This proves that universities play an important role in the contemporary infrastructure of knowledge.

4.Values and functionality in higher education - a few landmarks of a contemporary organizational culture perspective

Globalization, as a main feature of the contemporary society, generates changes in culture, politics, economy and social life and also contributes to the redefinition of the institutions at their structural and organizational level. In the higher education sector we can also observe new values at the level of the scientific theory (Eşi, 27-38, 2010), and a process of deep institutional change that “involves the deinstitutionalization of its rooted policy and values frameworks and the parallel institutionalization of new ones” (M. Vaira, 2004).The economic forces of the modern world transformed the academic life according to the market coordinates and the educational services can now be viewed in terms of sale and purchase. Frank Furedi (2010) considers that this marketization in higher education is more a political ideological process than an economic effect because governments put pressure on universities to compete for funds and to sell their services. What happened to the system of shared values and to the development of the organizational culture in higher education institutions in regard to these changes? F. Furedi (2010) considers that it is difficult to fit academic teaching into the marketing paradigm because the research - based knowledge cannot be transformed into consumer goods and because the relationship between teachers and students is more about quality than about the quantity.

T. Lewis, S. Marginson and I. Snyder (2005) propose the concept of a network university based on the changing nature of the contemporary social relations transferred in the context of academic collaboration, on the coordinates of an information society. This vision offers a decentralised approach to the university management and the sharing process at the level of beliefs and values of the organizational culture, shifts our attention on the extended meaning of a contemporary university: a “borderless university”, opened to the community and to the social concerns.

A belief passes through different phases until it is born as an organizational value that determines the thoughts, the feelings and the actions of the organization's members. M. Vaira (2004), analysing the cause - effect relationship in terms of the organizational culture, delineates four phases in the process of transforming a belief into an organizational value. The point of start is the vision of the leader that externally orients the behaviour of the members in the desired direction, even if the members don't share the beliefs of the leader yet. The second stage occurs when the experience confirms, by bringing the desired result as a consequence of the vision put in action, the belief of

the leader. This belief has then the power to influence the choices of the members, even in those areas that aren't under the direct control of the leader. The third phase is related to a change of orientation from the "effect" to the "cause" (it is the stage of identification with the "cause" and according to M. Vaira, an organization will fight from now on for a cause, not for an effect). In the final fourth phase the value will automatically orient the behaviour of the members, it is "shared unquestioningly" (M. Vaira, 2004). The power of shared values influences not only the functioning of a higher education institution but also sustains its evolvement. A study of C. Zhu and N. Engels (2014) emphasizes on the relationship between the organizational culture and instructional innovations, founded on the specificity of goals, on the desire and the openness for collaboration and a shared vision among members. This perspective shows that it is important to build a collaborative environment in the higher education institution in order to facilitate this kind of transfer. It is important for us to know that the higher education organization needs to adjust to the changes of the external environment but the change occurs also within the organization determining the activation of its members' thoughts, feelings and actions in a constant perspective, based on deep-rooted values or on the integration of new values and beliefs in the structure of the organizational culture.

5. Conclusions

The organizational culture's dynamics is related to the capacity of an organization to react in a functional manner to the change manifested on internal or on external coordinates, based on the validation process of the needed alternative from the variety of possible responses. The higher education institution assumes its role as an *organizational actor* and chooses its own strategies of action in the context of the socio-economic challenges of the contemporary society, playing an important role in building *the infrastructure of knowledge*, while expanding at the same time the territory of the shared beliefs and values.

References:

1. Allaire, Y., Firsirotu, M.E. (1984) Theories of organizational culture in *Organization Studies*, 5/3, pp. 193-226.
2. Altbach, Philip G. (1998), *Comparative Higher Education. Knowledge, the University and Dvelopment*, Ablex Publishing Corporation, London, England.
3. Dauber, D., Fink,G., Yolles, M. (2012)- *A Configuration Model of Organizational Culture*, SAGE Open Mar 2012, 2 (1) DOI: 10.1177/2158244012441482.
4. Denison, D. R., Mishra, A. K. (1995) *Toward a Theory of Organizational Culture and Effectiveness in Organization Sciences*, vol.6, No.2, March- April 1995, pp. 204-223.
5. Eşi, M. C. (2014). *About the Idea of an Intuitive Didactics and the Role of Intuition in the Activity of Teaching and Learning Assessment*. *International Journal of Social and Educational Innovation*, 1, 87-92.

6. Eşi, M.C. (2010) Legitimizing the Educational Experience in the context of the Didactic Methodology, in *Revista Romaneasca pentru Educatie Multidimensionala (Romanian Journal for Multidimensional Education)*, Volume 4, August, 2010, year 2, Lumen Publishing House, 41 – 50.
7. Eşi, M. C. (2010). Normative explanatory valences at the level of the scientific theory. *Revista Românească pentru Educație Multidimensională*, 2(5), 27-38.
8. Eşi, M.C., (2014), The Missions statement of the business organisation by referencce to the economic market requirements, *The USV Annals of Economic and Public Administration*, vol.14, number 2(20), 131-138.
9. Furedi, F. (2010) Introduction to the marketization of higher education and the student as consumer in vol. “The Marketisation of Higher Education and the student as a consumer ” M. Molesworth, R. Scullion and E. Nixon (Eds.), Tylor & Francis e- Library
10. Gagliardi, P. (1986) The Creation and Change of Organizational Cultures – A Conceptual Framework in *Organization Studies*, 7/2, pp. 117-134.
11. Krücken, G., Meier, F. (2006) Turning the University into an Organizational Actor in *Globalization and Organization: World and Organizational Change*, edited by Gili Drori, John Meyer and Hokyu Hwang; Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, 241-257.
12. Lewis, T., Marginson, S., Snyder, I. (2005) The Network University? Technology, Culture and Organizational Complexity in Contemporary Higher Education in *Higher Education Quaterly*, vol. 59, January 2005, pp.56-75.
13. Mowery, David C., Sampat, Bhaven N. (2005), Universities in national innovation systems, www.vwl.unimannheim.de/stahl/!/van/fss07/Literature/05_Universities/MS_uninis_WP.pdf
14. Schein, Edgar (2004) *Organizational culture and leadership*, Jossey- Bass, A Wiley Imprint, USA.
15. Schneider, B., Brief, A., Guzzo, R. (1996) Creating a Climate and Culture for Sustainable Organizational Change in *Organizational Dynamics*, Volume 24, spring, 1996, pp. 7-19.
16. Swidler, Ann (1986) Culture in action: Symbols and Strategies, in *American Sociological Review*, Vol.51, No.2, pp.273-286.
17. Tierney, W. G. (1988) Organizational Culture in Higher Education: Defining the Essentials, in *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol.59, No.1 (Jan- Feb 1988), pp.20-21.
18. Vaira, M. (2004) Globalization and higher education organizational change: a framework for analysis, in *Higher Education*, 48, pp. 483-510.
19. Zhu, C., Engels, N. (2014) Organizational culture and instructional innovations in higher education: Perceptions and reactions of teachers and students in *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*, vol. 42 (1), pp. 136-158.