ANTHROPOLOGY CAREER READINESS NETWORK

Understanding Organizational Culture

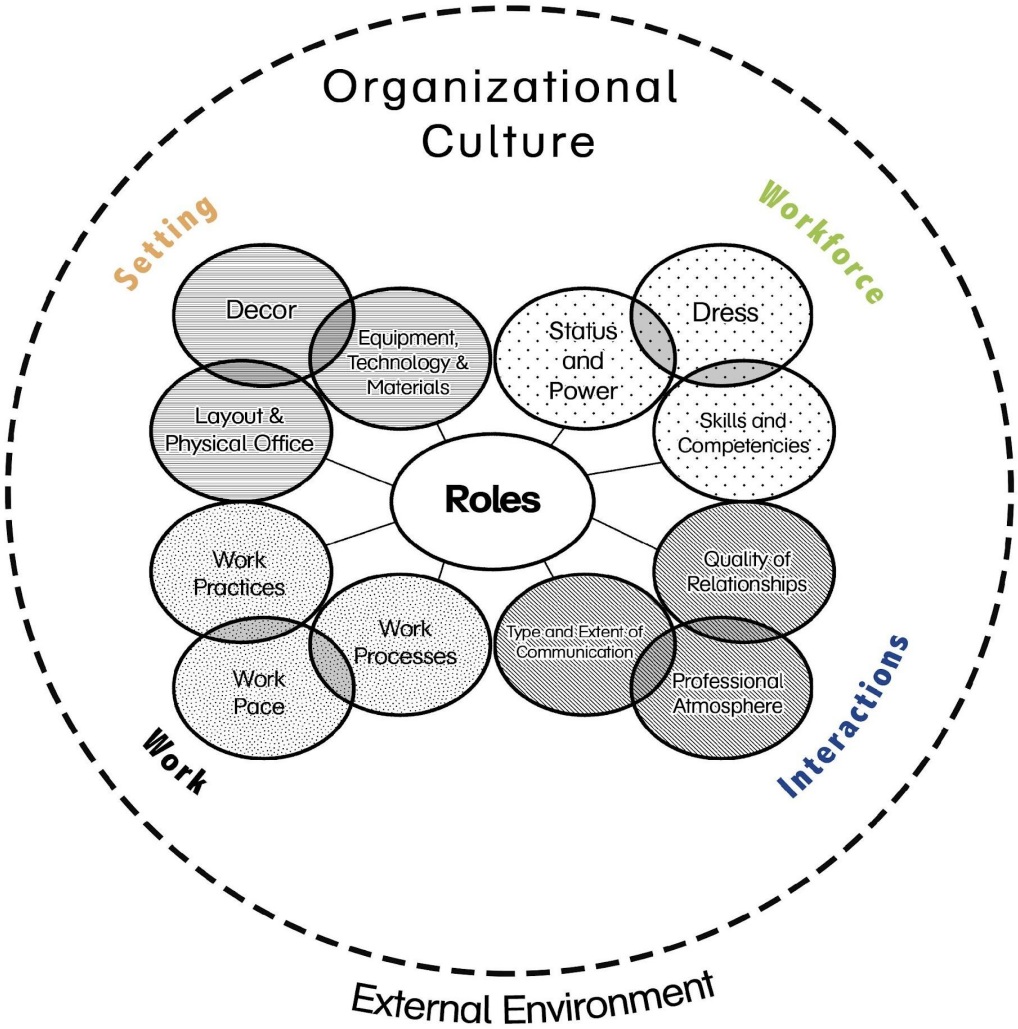
Anthropologists have a lot to offer when it comes to the study of organizational culture.[1,2] Whether working as a consultant or an employee, understanding the organization you are working for or with often means the difference between success and failure for a project or initiative. The culture of a for-profit, nonprofit, government agency, or nongovernmental organization includes how it is structured, its social networks and interactions, its practices and activities, as well as its mission, symbols, issues, and performance.

To describe an organizational culture and explain the themes and patterns associated with it:

1. Use a mix of ethnographic methods to capture multiple sources of insight, such as participant observation and conversations. Formal methods such as surveys can yield quantifiable data but are highly dependent on knowing the best questions to ask. Validating across methods will give you confidence in your results.

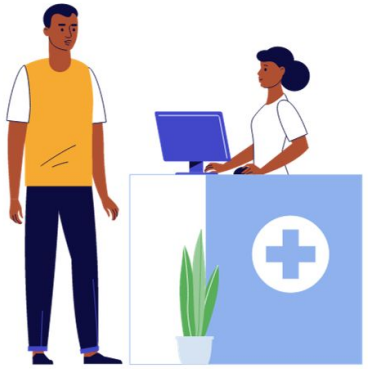
2. Apply the framework on the right[3] to learn about the context and the activities occurring in that culture:
   - **Setting**
   - **Workforce**
   - **Work**
   - **Interactions**

The **External Environment** also affects an organization's culture. It can include physical elements (e.g., climate, geographical location), commercial interests, and political and legal considerations (e.g., laws, regulations).



Exercise: A Doctor's Office

Now apply this framework to a healthcare situation. During a visit to your doctor's office, you may have observed something akin to the following:



Setting

- Waiting room décor, signage, noise level, and arrangement of chairs
- Reception desk is at one end of the waiting room; three women are behind it
- Another door leads to a hall and smaller rooms with an examination table and chairs

Workforce

- Some people wear uniforms of different styles and colors
- Those people are near the computers, not in the waiting room
- They seem to talk to each other in a friendly way

Work

- Some people use computers, copy machines, and other equipment
- Others record height/weight, take blood pressure, and jot down notes on paper
- People in white lab coats and other colorful uniforms are either working on laptops at a counter or walking in the hallway near the examination rooms
- After you were taken to a small room with an examination table, you were alone for 15 minutes before a person in a white lab coat entered

Interactions

- A person behind the reception desk smiles and greets those arriving in the waiting room, asking them for their driver's license and insurance, and to sign in
- A different uniformed person calls out a name; a person in ordinary clothing stands up and follows the uniformed person
- People in ordinary clothing occasionally talk to each other in the waiting room
- After the person in a white lab coat comes into the small room with an examination table where you were waiting, you answered questions about your health and had your sore wrist examined
- This person seemed eager to help based on tone of voice, and had a calming effect

External Environment

- You were asked for a government ID and insurance card
- A person carrying a large shoulder bag with a company logo dropped off samples and brochures at the reception desk
- You were handed a sheet of paper that directed you to a different building for some follow-up tests

Describing and Categorizing Observations and Experiences

Roles	Setting	Workforce	Work	Interactions
Person at reception desk	Space separated from waiting room by a wall with a large glass window which could be opened and closed	A woman dressed in a blue uniform and wearing a badge (on which was her name and role)	Greeted individuals approaching reception desk; verified their names and insurance; asked some of these people to fill out paper forms	Initiated by the woman in a blue uniform who routinely smiled at those she greeted and requested information pleasantly; persons in ordinary clothing complied with these requests and sometimes smiled back
Others near reception desk	Space filled with office equipment accommodating four workstations	Other people dressed in colorful uniforms and wearing badges (on which were their names and roles)	Involved with paper file folders, electronic files, follow-up appointments, payments	Focused on getting their tasks done but seemed friendly with each other due to their shared laughter
People in waiting room	Interior space without windows, painted in light gray, and filled with chairs, a few end tables, and TV	Individuals were dressed in ordinary clothing and did not appear to be part of the workforce	Scrolled through cell phones; read; watched TV; waited silently to be recognized or occasionally chatted with another person	Seemed to keep to themselves unless they arrived with another person; a few acknowledged or spoke to someone sitting nearby
Person calling out names	At threshold between waiting room and inner clinical space; a door separates the two areas	A woman dressed in a green uniform and wearing a badge (on which was her name and role) and a metal device around her neck; she was carrying a clipboard	Led people into inner clinical space; organized appointment sequence; recorded weight and height, reason for appointment, and any reported symptoms on laptop; provided follow-up paperwork at the end of the appointment	Appeared brusque when calling out names; seemed only focused on getting all her tasks done—which did not seem to include building rapport; she did not smile; person in ordinary clothing did what was asked
People in white coats	Inner clinical space at a counter and in small sparsely-furnished examination rooms	People wearing white coats, a badge (on which were their names and roles), and a metal device around their necks	Inquired about reason for the appointment; asked relevant questions; conducted physical examination; offered advice; ordered tests; recorded discussion on laptop	Smiled, introduced himself, and apologized for the delay; listened intently to symptoms; examined wrist with care; stated importance of obtaining x-rays; appeared knowledgeable and kind

Analyzing the Data

You have gathered your observations and categorized them following our organizational culture framework. Now take your observations a step deeper with the following lines of inquiry and analysis:

Work in a doctor's office

- Portray the division of labor based on how people were dressed, race/ethnicity, age, etc.
- Discuss the work practices in which the uniformed people were engaged
- Clarify who appeared to be in charge behind the reception desk, inner office space, and inner clinical areas
- Identify all instances in which people engaged in problem solving
- Explain how well the office décor aligned with its professionalism and competency

Service in a doctor's office

- Discuss your reaction to the process of setting up the appointment
- Indicate your response to the physical environment (e.g., the waiting room, examination room) and the wait time associated with it
- Reveal how long, on average, people in ordinary clothing spent in the waiting room
- Describe the key steps in the service process from arrival in the waiting room until departure
- Characterize the interactions occurring between those in uniforms and those in ordinary clothing
- After you leave, compare your experience with the text and images on the doctor's office website

Validating your insights

- Explain the degree of satisfaction you experienced during your appointment
- Assess both the effectiveness and efficiency of the doctor's office
- Evaluate the extent to which the mission of this organizational culture was achieved based on your experience

At this point, you should have a deeper understanding of the organizational culture of a doctor's office—or any other organization to which you apply this framework. The insights you draw can help you develop new questions, and possibly recommendations, to help that organization improve its services or systems. On a personal note, you can use your insights to decide whether you wish to patronize, work with, or work for that organization.

References

1. Malefyt, Timothy de Waal. 2024. *Business Anthropology: The Basics*. New York, NY: Routledge.
2. Jordan, Ann T. *Business Anthropology*, 2nd ed., Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.
3. Ferraro, Gary P. and Elizabeth K. Briody. *The Cultural Dimension of Global Business*. 9th ed., London, UK: Taylor and Francis, p. 153.

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