

Assessing Organizational Culture: Six Communicative Practices

Prepared by Shiv Ganesh, University of Montana

Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo articulated six communicative practices that are useful as a basis for assessing organizational culture:

1. Facts (what does the culture think?) Each organizational culture has its system of facts which members use to explain how and why the organization operates the way it does. These facts make up what might be viewed as the social knowledge of the organization... social knowledge comprises conceptions of symbolic relationships among problems, persons, interests and action which imply certain notions of preferable public behavior.... It is dependent upon the assumptions that organizational members hold.

2. Practices: (what does the culture do?) Organizational members continually reveal the practices for accomplishing organizational activities, for “getting the job done.” Practices known as “tasks” are often initially expressed formally by a supervisor, but come to be realized in the particular performances of organizational members as they become competent in the ways of their situated activities... practices such as “looking busy when there’s nothing to do” are typically never expressed formally but are nearly always disclosed informally.

3. Vocabularies (What does the culture say?): Specialized vocabularies, often called vernacular or argot, often provides clues as to what are the relevant constructs, facts, and practices of organizational life... it provides the most accessible place to begin exploration of the organization’s experiences.

4. Metaphors: (how does the culture say it?) useful displays of organizational culture related to vocabularies are the metaphors used by organizational members... organizational metaphors, when used by members, may be helpful in understanding a sense of how members structure their experiences.

5. Stories (what does the culture narrate?) Each culture also contains stories which members exchange on a regular basis. Stories such as personal successes, legends and failures allow members a sense of organizational history as well as a sense of future possibilities for organizational activity.

6. Rites and Rituals (what does the culture enact?) each organizational culture develops various rites and rituals which orient members temporally and serve as occasions for sense-making. Reviews, meetings and coffee breaks can take on ritualistic aspects that give organizational members a sense of membership.

Based on Michael Pacanowsky and Nick O'Donnell Trujillo. “Communication and Organizational Cultures. Western Journal of Communication 46 (Spring 1982) 115-130.