THE TRANSFORMATION OF WORKPLACE CULTURE

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A theoretical perspective is developed for the critical examination of organisation culture. A structurationist approach is taken to link interpretive and radical structuralist paradigms in this examination. The perspective is applied to investigate a change program in the New Zealand division of a multi-national Bank. The focus is on the use of culture by management to control and change employee performance, in particular to shift the branch culture from a credit and process orientation toward a sales and customer focus. Findings of research conducted at the senior management and branch workplace levels are reported. The goal of the paper is to encourage critical reflection on the beliefs, values, and understandings of organisational life that are sometimes represented as universal, but which advance particular interests. The study’s findings illustrate a range of techniques used by management to transform a workplace culture, and the various reactions of employees to these efforts, manifest in forms of acceptance, appropriation, and resistance.

INTRODUCTION

Escalating competition has driven business to explore new methods for increasing productivity, leading to an increased focus on the management of organisational cultures (Collins, 1998, Gee et al, 1996, Casey, 1996, Brown, 1995). As firms decentralise to achieve greater flexibility, culture becomes significant as a bond to hold the organisation together. Through culture, managers attempt to elicit greater employee commitment to organisational goals. The growth of the service industry has provided further impetus to the culture movement, where employee attitudes and beliefs are a key aspect of business performance. There has been "... a change in emphasis from control of behaviour and measurement of outputs to control of employee attitudes and commitment, the latter being crucial for the employee service-mindedness which in turn determines the level of customer satisfaction" (Alvesson, 1993: 4). A discussion of broader changes in the organisational world will help to contextualise this culture movement, and provide some background to this paper’s study of a culture change program.

In an emerging global economy with major technological advances, the traditional form of competition based on mass production is rendered less effective. Corporations must still offer the highest quality product or service at the best price to the right market, however what has also become critical is the way this product or service is designed and promoted to satisfy the identity and lifestyle of the consumer. This is symbolic value, and the knowledge it takes to design and create this value is becoming critical in the new capitalism (Gee et al., 1996). The emphasis is shifting from the actual product or service itself to the knowledge and learning needed to design and customise the product or service as a symbol by which people come to define and alter their identity. With the advances in information and manufacturing technologies, this type of competition has become globalised. It is argued that corporations need to be responsive, flexible, and lean in order to improve customer contact and service. This view can be traced back to the research of Peters and Waterman, Kanter, and Pascale and Athos during the 1980s (Collins, 1998). These authors argued that excellent companies needed to be close to the
customer, encourage innovation and autonomy, and retain a simple and lean form. In contrast, traditional organisations, with tall hierarchies and authoritarian structures, were said to often fail in providing a strong customer focus. In the 'new capitalism' there has been evidence of a trend toward flattening hierarchies and removing middle management. This point is made by Gee et al (1996: 27), who argues that: "The new capitalism is driven - according to our fast capitalist texts - by such factors as greatly increased global hyper-competition, massive technological changes, and the demands and desires of increasingly sophisticated consumers". As middle management disappears, its role is pushed down to the shop floor or front-line, with the intention that employees at this level are 'empowered' so that they become committed to the organisation and to the customer, supervising themselves and improving their performance. Gee et al. (1996: 30) comments that these empowered workers: "... can no longer be 'ordered' around by 'bosses'. As partners, they can only be 'developed', 'coached', and 'supported'. Hierarchy is gone, egalitarianism is in". The strategy is that employees will find new meaning and satisfaction in their work, and because they are empowered and will buy into the corporate vision, the supervision carried out by middle management becomes redundant. The intended outcome is that employees will be willing to work harder and for longer hours.

The changes described above challenge corporations to secure the full commitment, loyalty, and trust of their workers, so that they will produce the knowledge and symbolic value required to compete. With the need to get 'closer' to the customer, together with the flattening of organisational structures, the development of a workplace culture that integrates and commits the employees to organisational goals has become one answer to this challenge. This focus on managing culture is argued by Casey (1996: 328) to be part of broader processes in technological and societal change: "... information and manufacturing technologies, along with increasing global competition, have both driven and enabled a shift in emphasis from rigid bureaucratic structures of authority and control to designer organisational cultures". These workplace cultures are designed so that employees invest their hearts, minds, and bodies in their work. Gee et al. (1996: 7) argues that: "While this offers a less alienating view of work and labour, in practice it can also amount to a form of mind control and high-tech, but indirect coercion."

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper employs structuration (Giddens, 1984) as a meta theory to link radical structuralist and interpretivist perspectives (Burrell and Morgan, 1979), for the study of the management of organisational culture. Recent approaches to power are drawn on to develop this theoretical premise, in order to strengthen and refine the analysis of cultural change.

Structuration Theory

The focus of the study is on an organisation attempting to transform its workplace culture by altering its structure, systems, and practises. Structuration provides an appropriate theoretical framework because of its concern to identify "... the conditions that govern the continuity - or transformation - of structures, and thus the reproduction of systems" (Riley, 1983: 416). Riley argues that structuration theory occupies an intermediate position on the subjective - objective continuum, enabling a variety of research methods to be used depending on the phenomenon under study. This approach supports the interpretivist dimension of the study, while the focus of structuration on economic and political structures supports the radical structuralist approach. Riley asserts that "... the theory of structuration embraces the interplay of people and systems as the embodiment of the cultural mechanism - why the organisation is what it is" (p. 437). Weaver and Gioia (1994: 577) argue that Giddens theory of structuration allows a multi-
paradigmatic view: "Structuration provides a basis for seeing how organisational scholars can invoke different assumptions, pursue different goals, ask different research questions, and use different approaches, but nonetheless be engaged in inquiry with commonalities despite such diversities". This approach supports the more recent claim by Weick (1999: 800) who, in his review of articles addressing theory development and research methods, suggests that "...one can ignore those [paradigm] wars, recast them into schools, bracket paradigms and blend them into a metaparadigm perspective..."

Drawing on Giddens (1979), Riley defines structure as the rules and resources people use in interaction, being both the medium and the outcome of that interaction:

They are the medium, because structures provide the rules and resources individuals must draw on to interact meaningfully. They are its outcome, because rules and resources exist only through being applied and acknowledged in interaction - they have no reality independent of the social practises they constitute.

Central to Giddens structuration theory is this notion of the duality of structure, as described by Clegg (1989: 139): "Human agency produces structures which simultaneously serve as the conditions for reproduction of human agency in a continuing process. Human agency is ineradicably tied to power: without power there is no human agency". Harnessing the theory of structuration enables a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of organisational change. A central element of this theory is Giddens notion of practical consciousness, which posits that people are unable to articulate discursively much of what they know of their actions, limiting the agency of actors to express and orchestrate 'conscious' change. In our practical consciousness exists the routinisation of daily life, an embedded and often unrealised structure which both enables and constrains our agentic capacity, manifest in intended and unintended consequences:

The repetitiveness of activities which are undertaken in like manner day after day is the material grounding of what I call the recursive nature of social life (by its recursive nature I mean that the structured properties of social activity - via the duality of structure - are constantly recreated out of the very resources which constitute them) (Giddens, 1984: xxiii). Applying the concept of practical consciousness to the study of a culture management program makes accessible the dynamics of power inherent in the taken for granted and routine structures of everyday organisational life.

Giddens (1984) conception of power and agency argues that power is manifest in all action, departing from traditional views of one actor's power over another, to an understanding of power as 'pre-conscious', existing prior to subjectivity: We should not conceive of the structures of domination built into social institutions as in some way grinding out "docile bodies" who behave like the automata suggested by objectivist social science... all forms of dependence offer some resources whereby those who are subordinate can influence the activities of superiors (Giddens, 1984: 16). Power is embedded in the micro-level routines and structures of daily organisational life, shaping identities and subjectivities in subtle and overt ways. This notion of power has parallels with Foucault's disciplinary power, in which "...all actors operated within an existing structure of dominancy - a prevailing web of power relations - from which the prospects of escape were limited for dominant and subordinate groups alike" (Hardy and Clegg, 1996: 632). This understanding of power makes accessible an understanding of deeper structures that constrain all actors, limiting, in the case of this study, the agency of managers to effect change.
Interpretivism and Radical Structuralism

The interpretive strand of the study is concerned to understand the fundamental nature of the social world at the level of subjective experience (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Explanation is achieved from the realm of individual consciousness and subjectivity, within the frame of reference of the participant as opposed to the observer of action. Social reality is seen as an emergent process which is created by the individuals concerned. The interpretive view of culture enables an understanding of organisations as expressive forms and manifestations of human consciousness. Accordingly one strand of the study analyses the Bank as the subjective experience of its members. The world of the Bank is seen as constructed by people and reproduced by cultural mechanisms that intend to unite people and make shared action possible. Power is implicit in this process of producing reality: "...power defines what counts as rationality and knowledge and thereby what counts as reality" (Flyvbjerg, 1998: 227). Culture is manipulated by management to present an open and negotiable social reality as natural and given, and beyond questioning. In other words organisational culture is a management strategy which aims to implant management’s favourable perceptions and definitions of social reality in the interpretive schemes of employees.

Radical structuralism, as with interpretivism, is based on particular assumptions which constitute a way of knowing and understanding the world. Unlike interpretivism, radical structuralism operates from an objectivist standpoint and is "... committed to radical change, emancipation, and potentiality, in an analysis which emphasises structural conflict, modes of domination, contradiction and deprivation" (Burrell and Morgan, 1979: 34). Radical structuralists seek to interpret and explain social phenomena by concentrating their perspective on structural relationships and characteristics within a realist world. Radical change is viewed as an integral part of the nature and structure of society. Contradiction, domination, structural inequality, power relations, and emancipation constitute the focus of theorists that operate within radical-structuralism. Societal structures are viewed as instruments of domination for higher, over lower, members of the social hierarchy. This view offers insights which are proscribed in mainstream approaches because they refuse to "... delve into the power hidden in and mobilized through apparently neutral structures, cultures, and technologies, the vast majority of researchers preferred to continue to view these constructs as apolitical management tools" (Hardy and Clegg, 1996: 631). The goal of radical structuralist theory is to investigate, explain, criticise and act on these structural mechanisms, with the end purpose of transforming them through collective resistance and radical change (Gioia and Pitre, 1990: 589-590). The study pursues the initial goals of radical structuralism to investigate, explain and critique the control of culture in the Bank.

Shifting to the organisational level, radical structuralism focuses on the organisation as an institutional manifestation of vested interests and power structures, rather than neutral technical instruments (Drazin, 1990: 248). Organisations are the arenas in which conflict, as opposed to order, is endemic. Power and political forces are the determinants of decisions and behaviour in the organisation, as distinct from ‘natural’ forces of cohesion and equilibrium stressed in much of the mainstream literature. Radical structuralism is adopted here for the explanatory value derived from its emphasis on the power and structural relationships that shape and determine the organisation of work. The radical structuralist perspective critique’s the use of culture as a tool of management, examining the conscious use of culture elements, as distinct from viewing culture as an inherent aspect of organisations that is ‘above’ manipulation (Smircich, 1983; Ray, 1986). Culture is investigated as a managerial strategy of control, articulated and channelled to direct and guide employees and to imbue them with ‘appropriate’ values for the achievement of corporate goals. Culture is used to promote loyalty, enthusiasm, commitment, and to make personal and organisational goals appear congruent. Properly implemented, the internalisation
of desired values and norms occurs, making constant surveillance unnecessary (everyone knows
the guiding values). The aim is for employees to possess direct ties to the values and goals of
the dominant elite. Power and control is achieved through the use of culture, and operates in its
guise.

To build on a radical structuralist perspective, this paper incorporates recent approaches to
power, outlined earlier, to examine the change effects of the management of culture, and the
various forms of employee reaction to this process.

CORPORATE CULTURE

From the broad definition of culture as manifest in organisational rules, procedures, rituals,
tasks, and jargon (Martin, 1992), this paper views culture as a variable used by management to
exercise control over employees, and as an expression of meaning and interpretation. Both these
definitions are drawn on in accordance with the multi-paradigm approach taken in the theoretical
perspective. This approach to culture draws on both definitions made in Smircich’s (1983)
classic distinction between culture as a variable and culture as a root metaphor. Researchers
who have a more traditional and objectivist view of social reality, tend to see culture as a means
of improving organisational effectiveness, while researchers who see culture as a root metaphor
draw upon anthropology and approach organisations as cultures themselves. The problem with
one or other of these distinctions is that cultural concepts do not readily lend themselves to
quantification or variable analysis, while at the other end:

... taking culture as a root metaphor leaves little room for aspects other than
symbols and meaning: but organisations are normally economic entities in which
material conditions; external environment, competition, and performance -
dimensions not well captured by a cultural perspective - must be included
(Alvesson, 1993: 15).

The paper utilises the strengths of both perspectives, underpinned by the theory of structuration,
to study organisation culture. In so doing it avoids the reduction of all data to symbolism, and
the limitations of treating culture simply as a managerial tool or variable.

While acknowledging that there are a number of approaches to the study of organisational
change, this paper limits itself to the cultural field, because of its primary focus on the study of
culture as both a vehicle for change, and an arena of change. For a detailed analysis of different
approaches to the study of change see, for example, the work of Collins (1998). Collins reviews
a range of studies, which can be classified into managerialist (hero-manager reflections and guru
works) and critical (sociological research) groupings, of which this study falls into the latter
category. Culture is a key with which managers attempt to influence and direct the course of
their organisation, and can be understood as an ideology cultivated for the purpose of control
and legitimation. Cultural artefacts are a powerful symbolic means of communication used to
build commitment, convey a philosophy of management, rationalise and legitimise activity,
motivate personnel, and facilitate socialisation. Pettigrew (1979: 577) argues that: “... the role of
culture change mechanisms is to disengage the person from pre-existing attachments and to
redirect their system of language, beliefs and social relationships toward organisational goals”.
In the research setting of this study such a role applies to managerial efforts to disengage branch
employees from the traditional credit and process orientation and redirect them toward a focus
on sales and performance. In this sense Bank management are attempting to achieve a change of
culture rather than a change in culture. Management must influence the conditions that
determine the interpretation of situations and the regulation of ideas. Changing core beliefs is
ultimately a process of connecting what are perceived to be coherent solutions at particular
points in time to legitimate problems.
Corporate culture is predominantly articulated and formed by top management, with sub-cultural differences existing among lower level employees. "The concept of culture is (thus) frequently used when dealing with culture in a managerial perspective or even when dealing with the company in a particular business context" (Alvesson and Berg, 1992: 68). The types of subcultures include enhancing cultures that reproduce in an exaggerated form the views of top management; counter cultures that constitute pockets of resistance to the views of top management; and neutral cultures that act indifferently to the corporate culture, neither supporting or resisting it. It is argued that the study of organisation culture is incomplete without taking into account the prevailing culture that influences organisation members in 'shopfloor' jobs. People in non-managerial positions often view both their jobs and the experience of working quite differently from those in managerial positions: "Organisation members in lower-level jobs are often united in a common distrust of management and an identification with actions and antics that can alleviate the boredom of excessively narrow jobs" (Davis, 1985: 165).

Alvesson and Berg (1992: 62) write that: "The simplified assumption that management culture is identical with corporate culture ignores the possibility of several cultures in a company-possibly competing at different levels". The authors argue that one must not take for granted that the organisation has one culture and to realise that there might exist a number of overlapping cultures. Workplace cultures can form around an antagonism against the dominant managerial culture or against other groups within the organisation. This produces solidarity and is manifest in the development of a core set of values or beliefs that justify behaviours and attitudes.

METHODS

In accordance with the interpretive strand of the study, qualitative methodology was employed, with the conception of culture based on sub-cultural interpretations of the meaning of organisational phenomena (Rousseau, 1990). Researchers need to set aside their own conceptions of organising and meaning to probe those of others. A less structured approach allows probing and feedback from informants to verify interpretations. When the interpretation of individuals is the primary cause of behaviour (reality as social construction), measurement systems that are more flexible, interactive, person and situation specific are required. Kunda (1992: 23) writes that "Culture, in short, must be studied in context and the entire normative transaction examined: managerial conceptions of the culture, their enactment, and the responses of members".

Van Maanen (1979: 9-10) refers to qualitative methods as a term covering interpretive techniques which "... describe, decode, translate and come to terms with the meaning of phenomena in the social world". Social phenomena is regarded as more particular and ambiguous than replicable and clearly defined. Description is the fundamental act of data collection, as the author states: "Qualitative researchers seek to construct (better descriptions) by minimising the use of such artificial distancing mechanisms as analytic labels, abstract hypotheses, and pre-formulated research strategies". The 'nature' of culture provides validation for the use of interpretive methods in its investigation. Van Maanen in 'Tales of the Field' (1988: 3) writes that:

Culture is akin to a black hole that allows no light to escape. The observer knows of culture's presence not by looking, but only by conjecture, inference... A culture is expressed (or constituted) only by the actions and words of its members and must be interpreted...
This methodological approach is akin to narrative strategy, which is described by Langley (1999) as the building of a story from raw data, an approach particularly useful for the study of cultural change. By applying the theoretical perspectives drawn on in this paper, the study is able to move from the surface data to an underlying narrative or structure, or from description to explanation (see Pentland, 1999).

Although not an ethnography, the study borrows from the lessons of this approach, consistent with its interpretive and qualitative approach. An ethnographic style was adopted in designing and conducting the interviews. The interview questions were worded broadly, being simple and primarily open-ended: “These kinds of questions give the informant an opportunity to answer in ways and with content that is important to him or her - not to the researcher” (Schwartzman, 1993: 58). The person being interviewed was treated as an informant or teacher, the expert on the subject. The goal was to avoid problems created when researchers impose their own categories on the situation (Morey and Luthans, 1985). Morgan and Smircich (1980) argue that understanding the production of commonsense, shared knowledge is achieved by ethnomethodology’s identification of a subjective and agreed social order. Ethnography provides the study with an interview framework and method, enabling the researcher to learn subcultural concepts for social categories and to identify contrasting orientations (Gregory, 1983). The approach preserves and explains the basis of controversies, and explores the detail of group views. In this way the culture of groups can be discovered and studied via the subjects in their own terms. The assumption is that knowledge of a culture is tacit and experiential, and emerges in situations through observation and interviewing, checked against the biases and interests of informants and the preconceptions of the researchers themselves. The qualitative nature of this research requires direct interaction with the informants who use their own terms and concepts to express their point of view, structuring to some extent the direction of the research through their answers (Sutton and Rafaeli, 1988: 31). Alvesson and Berg (1992: 51) state that more serious organisational culture research employs in-depth interviews, studies of documents and material symbols, and content analysis of texts.

The Bank

To enable a productive analysis of culture an organisation going through a major change process was chosen, one which had a recently appointed Chief Executive Officer at the helm. The organisation is the New Zealand division of a multi-national Bank. During a restructure members of the organisation are likely to feel uncertain and management may be more able to articulate the important values than they were before the change. At the time of the study the organisation operated in an over-banked and deregulated industry, with twenty registered banks servicing 3.3 million people. The Bank’s Economic Report stated that the domestic population per branch was 2,300, compared to an international average of 3,400:

- Competitive pressures are increasing as major players complete internal restructuring and refocus externally on their customers. Customer information systems are being improved to facilitate more sophisticated segmentation and marketing strategies.

Referring to an unfavourable retail banking position, the report lists weaknesses such as a lack of ability to understand customer needs and a lack of proactive staff in the branch network.

The transitional stage of the organisation was captured in a document entitled Retail Banking: The Way Forward, in which the General Manager addressed Bank employees with a message concerning the need to change: “To meet our challenge of being the Best Bank in the eyes of our customers, staff and shareholders, we need to change the way [the Bank] works to meet a number of key challenges”. These key challenges were driven by the increasing competition that the Bank faces. Thus: “We’re in a marketplace where customers are increasingly aware of
financial products, and where their expectations of service are high. We face narrowing interest margins and increasing competition”. In the context of these pressures the General Manager articulated a key value proposition to guide all decisions made in the Bank: “[W]e will be the banking home for those who value convenient banking, local relationships and service, competitive products, and staff who seek out, understand and respond to customer needs”. He concluded that all the changes made are to support this value proposition.

In accordance with the radical structuralist perspective, an investigation of the structural mechanisms of culture change was carried out. In order to investigate the power relationships in the Bank, interviews were conducted at senior management and branch level. Full approval of the research program was achieved, with the Chief Manager of Human Resources granting the author access to senior management and branch staff as required, and the freedom to design the interviews and research foci. A range of confidential company documents was made available. Analysis of these documents was made to gain an overview of the Bank and an understanding of its espoused culture. Interviews were tape recorded with the permission of interviewee’s, who could decide not to participate. Confidentiality and anonymity was assured. Nine of the eleven personnel on the top management committee were interviewed, including the Chief Executive Officer. A further eight middle to senior managers who had direct involvement with the change program were also interviewed. These interviews captured almost complete coverage of top management.

After transcription and analysis of the management interview data the focus shifted to the branch network. A sample of six branches from a region of fifteen that had recently been through the change program was selected. Interviews of a cross section of staff within each branch were conducted. A total of twenty-five interviews were carried out, with on average four interviews held in each branch, including the branch manager. Two stages of analysis were applied to the raw interview data. Stage one entailed the transcription of the interview tapes. The interview survey was organised into two sections, the first capturing positional and organisational information, the second focused on management and branch culture. Stage two involved integrating the data from the interviews. This was achieved by identifying the themes and response categories that emerged from the transcriptions. In quantifying the data, the study provides a multi-method approach to enrich its findings: The quantification strategy will be much more convincing if it is used in combination with other approaches that allow contextualisation of the abstract data, adding nuances of interpretation… (Langley, 1999: 698).

FINDINGS

An analysis of company reports was made, including documents ranging from mission and value statements to strategy formulations, performance and remuneration policies, and Branch network plans. The human resources strategy review specified goals such as: “The development of a sales culture across the Bank... the development of employee relations policies that assist the line managers manage in a decentralised climate with minimal third party interference and regulated constraints...”. The employee relations strategy document emphasised mutual workplace cooperation between employee and line management and a working environment wherein managers lead and motivate employees, and which is responsive to business unit and employee needs: “... the values fostered, cherished and rewarded within the organisation culture are those of team contribution; innovation and calculated risk taking; service orientation; quality in everything that is done”.

A Statement of Business Principles and Values articulated a managerial view of the desired culture. The business principles were to recognise personal accountability, foster innovation,
and reward performance. The key values commensurate with these principles were: integrity; continuous listening and learning; courage; consideration and fairness; valuing team and individual performance; inclusivity; and the recognition of diversity. The statement concluded: “These values, when practised, will provide a culture of great resilience. They will foster consistent expectations amongst us all. Everyone will understand and accept that they have a role to play in the successful operation of our Bank”. The General Manager’s vision, set out in the document, states that the Bank is to be a high performing organisation “... where we are happy and proud to work”.

The statement of desired culture was an expression of ideals and ‘enlightened’ values which presented a positive facade to the new culture. Values such as integrity, consideration, fairness, and continuous learning were intended to legitimise the new culture for the purpose of gaining individual commitment. This is also represented in the General Manager’s vision of the Bank being a place where people are happy and proud to work. Expressions such as these act to engage people by informing them in a positive way how the new culture should be interpreted. There is evidence of the use of language to legitimise and establish the new culture, illustrated in the reference to the fostering of consistent expectations so that staff will understand and accept that they have a role to play in the successful operation of the Bank. The statement reflects management’s effort to create and maintain a system of shared (or imposed) meaning, and to facilitate and control action. These abstract principles project management’s desired culture, which is connected to the performance and success of the Bank.

*Best Bank* quarterly newsletters were issued to staff for the purpose of “... keeping you regularly informed about what is happening on the Best Bank Program”. The newsletters portray a bus symbol at the foot of each page with the General Manager as the conductor, asking staff to ‘get on’ and travel down the road, which will be “... a bit bumpy at times”. The first newsletter in the series pictures the General Manager dressed in a conductor’s uniform and surrounded by branch staff. This represents the culture change program to Branch employees as being a shared experience with a common destination. The newsletters describe a management vision that urges staff to see the organisation as being the best bank to work for. In the third edition of the newsletter, the General Manager sought to co-opt staff in the change program: “You will make us the Best Bank by putting forward ideas and looking for ways to take care of our existing customers”. In the fifth edition the General Manager continued to interpret the organisational reality as a shared one in which all will prosper:

> We are progressing as quickly as we can and I know that the new Bank we are building will be better for us all... I am committed to reaching our goal and although the road can be a bit bumpy at times, I am convinced that we have what it takes to be the Best Bank.

The documents articulate policy statements on changes in structures and practises that are viewed as integral to achieving the desired culture. Five year goals set out in the *Human Resources Strategy Review* are, among others, to: “... direct resources at skill gaps in accordance with the desire to develop a customer oriented and sales driven workforce...”. These goals represent an attempt to change training and communication structures to facilitate a customer and sales focused culture, characterised by cooperation between managers and employees. Statements made in the employee relations strategy document, recommended that the Bank:

> Put in place employment contract arrangements which support corporate culture and individual business objectives... [E]liminate the need for third party involvement in our contract arrangements. Clearly define the role of FinSec [the Financial Securities Union], if any, recognize that Finsec are infinitely better communicators with our staff than we are! **This must change** - we cannot allow FinSec to continue such dominance.
These strategies reflect a unitarist approach in which the goals of management and employees are represented as shared. This helped to disguise management’s vested power structure in a veil of neutrality and cohesion. In so doing, management is exercising control over employees to establish commitment to the Bank’s goals. From an interpretivist perspective, they represent an effort to create and develop a shared vision for the future of the Bank. This is achieved through the creation of the type of values and practises management desire for the branch workplace. The treatment of culture can also be understood from a radical structuralist perspective in the use of culture as a control tool applied by management to branch employees. The documents reflect the attempt to exercise the power of management to change the values and attitudes of employees.

Analysis of the interview data identified the traditional branch subculture as bureaucratic, characterised by seniority, rank, and adherence to the rule book: “... there is still the public servant culture of rule book following, no one taking ownership for anything and no reward for being innovative” (Chief Manager of Human Resources). Credit and process activities were referred to as the valued activities, with one manager commenting that the branch people viewed the customers as irritants. An increasing focus on sales and customers was described as the culture the Bank was moving toward. Of the new culture one manager commented: “It has changed a lot of people, the ethos is a strong understanding that you must sell and pay your way, it is performance based”. Negative views about the transition in culture were expressed by some staff, in particular one of the branches which can be described as a “counter-culture” branch. Referring to the old and the new culture, the manager of this branch stated that:

Up to five years ago the Bank was a family, as a person you were respected. I think that has gone, perhaps I am old fashioned but I am saddened by it. They ask a helluva lot from the staff, but we don’t get job security or loyalty in return. I am not a socialist, and we did look after a lot of deadbeats, but somewhere in between we should be.

This disaffected attitude is found in the comment of a Customer Service Consultant (CSC), who suggested that a number of staff had changed their views, no longer associating a career or loyalty with the Bank. This view is also expressed by two interviewees in another branch, who referred to a focus on sales and not staff: “The people aren’t happy. When you saw how the old system works and how it works now... we run on a skeleton staff with some staff employed off the street”. These findings demonstrate some support for Giddens (1984) view that institutions are not structures of domination exerted over ‘docile bodies’.

Analysis of the management findings identified a range of change objectives, including the centralisation of credit and process work; increasing the sales focus; communication; staff changes (the common perception of the purpose of the staff changes was to remove those that didn’t fit into the new paradigm, and to signal that there was no going back, that change has arrived); branch redesign; performance measurement; and training and development. The first of these change activities will be discussed.

Credit and process centralisation was the most commonly cited means of change, with nine managers describing this restructuring activity as a key mechanism in the transition toward a sales culture:

In order to get a substantial change we had to take away the blockages: the credit and paper process: 87 per cent of people’s time were taken up in these activities. Two per cent was taken up with selling and the rest with customers... We have taken out of the branch the power of credit; we have taken the back office out so that if you are not serving a customer there is nothing to do. There is no paper out the back to go and hide behind.
Essentially, as a prerequisite to achieving a sales and customer focus in the branch network, all non-customer activities were centralised. The credit and process work were viewed as blockages to affecting the desired shift in focus. This measure was described by one manager as a dramatic demonstration to customers and Bank staff of the shift toward a sales focus.

The desired outcome of this shift in employee focus was to increase customer care and exceed customer expectations. Management seek "... the development of a bias toward markets and customers rather than products and production processes: an ability to smell a dollar" *(Human Resources Strategy Review)*. The branch technology rollout and sales platform is designed to set up branches principally as sales and service units, with back office work carried out in area operations centres:

The next step was to refine and re-engineer our process management, simplifying it to reduce the bureaucratic involvement. Specialist work that doesn't have a direct involvement with the customer would be centralised. A straight split between centralised non-customer activities and de-centralised customer activities.

The intention was for the branches to operate as one effective team to ensure that sales and service objectives are met.

The centralisation of credit and process work was primarily a structural mechanism of control designed to shift the branch culture away from its traditional process focus and toward a customer and sales focus. By radically restructuring the day-to-day activities of the branches, management were using structure as a medium of culture change, illustrated in the comment above that "... if you are not serving a customer, there is no paper out the back to go and hide behind". Content analysis of the branch interview data suggests that the changes were moderately effective in achieving the desired transition of the workplace culture toward a sales and customer focus. Of those interviewed, thirteen described an increased customer focus, and nine a decreased credit and process focus, as a result of the centralisation of credit and process work. This structural change has had the desired effect of shifting the branch focus from credit and process work to customer service. The removal of paper work has enabled staff to give customers undivided attention, as the following comment from a branch manager illustrates:

The entire function of the branch staff now is to be up front, virtually all front line staff so that customers get undivided attention without staff having to worry about a lot of work that they still had to go through during the day. The ultimate [goal] is that customers get better service, and there is still a wee bit to be developed there.

Another branch manager commented that the restructure has removed the repetitive and desk bound work which before would not allow people to get near the customers. Staff can now deal with customers more effectively as a consequence. One comment was that when customers come in they see that staff are there to serve them and are not sitting behind desks. This point is reinforced by a branch manager who stated that: "... those staff who are here are here to serve the customers, and a lot of the desk work can be put to the AOC" *(Area Operations Centre)*. A CSC said there was more time to spend with the customers to sell, and that giving good service was all that was required.

The change was seen by one branch manager as accommodating the tendency of people to be either desk or customer oriented: "We have been able to say this is where your skill lies and this is what your job is going to encompass". This comment finds support in the view of a Supervisor who noted that the change:

... is really good because it takes away a lot of the crap work and spares up time so you can deal with the customers. Before when you were dealing with the customer you always had in the back of your mind the work you had to do out back. Now,
as soon as you have finished dealing with the customer half the time it [the paper work] goes to the AOC, so you are a lot more customer focused.

The Supervisor identified competition as motivating the change, commenting that the banking industry offers the same products and services, so that how you deal with your customers is important. These perceptions were reinforced by a CSC who referred to the pressure of trying to concentrate on service quality and also having the back office function to perform, so that while dealing with the customer you were always worrying about not doing the daily paper work: “Now all you have to do is serve customers, that has been achieved.”

The centralisation of credit and process work was not well received by all staff, particularly those, as you would expect, in the counter-culture branch. Staff in this branch believed that not enough back office work had been removed, the processing time was slower, and that you were dependent on other people in the Area Operations Centre. The branch manager stated that: “We are relying on some faceless people to do the work now, whereas previously it was done in the Branch far quicker, and errors are inevitable...” The CSC made a similar point in that you are relying on someone else to do the work for you (basic functions like looking up to see what a cheque was written for) so you spend more time on the phone and fax machine. The respondents in this branch all believed that after-sales service had declined as a result: “Things don’t go away, you can’t serve the customers and they walk out the door and it is over, it doesn’t work like that. Now you deal with the AOC and there is breakdowns in communication”.

The counter-culture branch resisted the division of the branch into sales and payments teams, a change measure designed to support the centralisation of credit and process work. The branch manager refused to divide his branch into sales and payments:

I do not believe in dividing teams up, it just means more friction. I don’t see why everybody isn’t involved in sales from the front line to the office type person. I think all staff should be involved in the sales meetings, whereas according to the book, payments staff shouldn’t be. I think this goes against the sales culture.

The CSC of this branch stated a dislike of being separated by the offices allocated to the ‘payments’ staff. This comment is borne out in the view of a supervisor in a different branch who stated:

It [the new job roles] has caused some conflict, you get the ‘them and us’ attitude. You should still be acting as a team. The Bank will have to be careful in paying commissions for sales because it will become cut throat, the branches will be split and it will create more friction.

These findings demonstrate the power of pre-existing routines and structures of activity in resisting change, and the power of subordinates to reject, rather than automatically accept, changes imposed by management.

DISCUSSION

Management, in the organisation studied, produced and reproduced the workplace culture to unite people, to make shared action possible, and to facilitate changes in action. Culture was manipulated to present a negotiable social reality as natural, legitimate, fixed, and beyond questioning. The shaping of culture can be understood as a managerial strategy to promote a definition of social reality in the interpretive schemes of employees, and to reproduce a particular social order. This was achieved by influencing the conditions that determine the interpretation of situations, structures, and ideas. The use of language to gain individual commitment, manipulation so that organisational and personal goals appear to be congruent, the internalisation of desired norms and values, and the centralisation of sales/performance and marginalisation of credit/process work, were the key mechanisms in this control process.
Across the application of radical structuralism and interpretivism in this study of culture runs a theme of control and change. Drawing on the theory of structuration linked the two perspectives and enriched an understanding of the process of control through culture. Applying structuration as a meta-theory provided an understanding of the application of rules and resources (structure) by Bank management to transform the branch culture, in particular through employee interaction with the transformed structures. The relationship of branch employees with the transformed structures and activities is the embodiment of culture change. Employee interaction with the structural changes was understood from the interpretive dimension of culture as meaning, while the application of the change mechanisms was understood from the radical structuralist dimension of the control of culture. In this sense the interplay of people and structure is both the embodiment of culture and the mechanism of cultural change.

Analysis of the Bank findings does question the extent to which the culture change program was effective. Evidence exists of a contradiction between the espoused nature of the new culture, as communicated by Bank management, and the ‘reality’ of that culture as interpreted by branch employees. In particular, this evidence emerged in findings from the counter-culture branch, and from various employees located in the other five branches. On one hand management described the new culture in terms of positive values such as fairness and consideration, and promoted the Bank as a place where people would be happy and proud to work. As already stated, this projects a humane image of the Bank’s desired culture, describing an organisation which is focused on people and characterised by shared goals. This ‘soft’ image of the culture, however, was contradicted by employee views that: “... the Bank expects more from its staff... they [management] ask a helluva lot from staff but we don’t get job security or loyalty in return... the people aren’t happy. When you saw how the old system works and how it works now... we run on a skeleton staff...” This contradiction in the findings questions the effectiveness of culture as a means of control, suggesting that some employees, instead of accepting the new culture, view it as a means of intensifying the work effort. The counter-culture branch findings demonstrate employee appropriation of, and resistance to, the new culture. This supports the view that workers, as well as managers, exercise power:

“...by factoring in the differential possibilities for creativity, it becomes clear that organisational members have some control over their disposition to exercise power, both to challenge and to reproduce the formal organisational structure in which differential powers are vested, legitimated and reproduced” (Hardy and Clegg, 1996: 624).

A similar contradiction can also be identified within the management findings in terms of the portrayed cultural values and the definition of the team concept. Values of inclusivity, recognising diversity, consideration and fairness appear at odds with the team metaphor advanced by management, in which those employees who do not ‘fit’ the team are singled out and ‘moved out.’

The apparent willingness of most branch employees to accept the new culture, in part, reflects the efficacy of the change program. However, the question must be raised as to how far this efficacy can be construed. Positive responses about the culture change program, rather than reflecting ‘happy’ employees going on board the bus to the new culture, may reflect employees fearful of aligning less their jobs. In other words, the data collected may be contaminated by a reluctance to profess negative views to a researcher who, for all they know, may be an agent of management. Lukes (in Hardy and Clegg, 1996) third dimension of power helps to make sense of the quiescence on the part of some employees in the context of the culture change program. This view argues that power is manifest in the status quo, in which actors are unaware of their subjugation. This relates to Gramscic’s concept of ideological hegemony (Clegg, 1989), in which
actors internalise the values and assumptions of the ruling elite, as if they were their own. This is power in a subtle, unobtrusive, and effective form.

One aim of this paper has been to critique the function of culture as used by management within the Bank. A critical perspective has afforded an examination of the rationale behind the culture change program. This perspective is valuable considering the often uncritical and inadequate treatment of organisational culture in much of the mainstream and practitioner literature. This literature tends to misuse the culture metaphor by neglecting its elements of power and control, and defining it instead as a shared and value-free phenomenon. A critical perspective has enabled an understanding of the domination of meanings and beliefs through the pervasiveness of culture. This understanding can help to facilitate conscious reflection and questioning of some of the inequalities inherent and concealed in organisations.

REFERENCES


