

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Culture as Shared Meaning

Schein · Deal & Kennedy · Trice & Beyer

PAPER 01 / 03

A Furtherance reference compendium on the intellectual traditions behind organisational design, leadership, execution, and culture.

IN THIS PAPER

This paper opens the Organisational Culture series in Furtherance's reference library. It sets out what culture *is* – the tradition that treats it as a system of shared meaning operating beneath the visible surface of an organisation. The question it answers: what exactly are we referring to when we say “culture”, and where does it live?

Before culture can be measured or changed – the subjects of the next two papers – it has to be defined. The three contributions here move from the deep and academic to the popular and back. Schein locates culture in unconscious shared assumptions. Deal and Kennedy put it on the executive agenda as “the way we do things here”. Trice and Beyer show how it is enacted through observable rites and symbols.

Edgar Schein 1928–2023

Organisational psychology · MIT Sloan · the founder of the field

CORE THESIS

Culture is a pattern of **shared basic assumptions** a group learns as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration – assumptions that have worked well enough to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel. The essence of culture is not what a group displays or says, but what it takes for granted.

FRAMEWORK

Level	What it is	Visibility
Artefacts	Visible structures, behaviours, dress, space, rituals	Seen, but hard to decode
Espoused values	Stated strategies, goals, philosophies	Consciously held; may not match behaviour
Basic assumptions	Unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs	Invisible – the true essence of culture

Leaders embed and transmit assumptions through what they attend to, how they react to crises, what they role-model, and how they allocate rewards, status and recruitment.

METHODOLOGY

Clinical inquiry – working directly with groups as a consultant-observer, reading artefacts and espoused values back to the underlying assumptions. The method is qualitative and interpretive.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

Schein's three levels are the definitional foundation of the entire field; almost every later account builds on them. The critique: the assumptions layer is genuinely hard to access and impossible to measure directly, and the model leans toward a unified, leader-driven culture, giving less weight to subcultures, conflict and power.

Terrence Deal & Allan Kennedy *Corporate Cultures*, 1982

Management consulting · the popularisation of culture

CORE THESIS

Culture is simply “**the way we do things around here**”, and a **strong culture** – a coherent, widely shared set of values – is a driver of performance. Deal and Kennedy brought culture out of the academy and onto the executive agenda.

FRAMEWORK

Culture is carried by values, heroes, rites and rituals, and the informal cultural network. They also typed cultures by two variables – the degree of risk, and the speed of feedback:

Type	Risk	Feedback	Feel
Tough-guy / macho	High	Fast	Individualist, high-stakes
Work-hard / play-hard	Low	Fast	Action, fun, high activity
Bet-your-company	High	Slow	Deliberate, big long-horizon bets
Process	Low	Slow	Procedural, cautious, bureaucratic

METHODOLOGY

Consulting observation, written for a broad executive audience rather than derived from controlled study.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

The book that made culture a mainstream management concern. The critique is substantial: the evidence base is thin, the typology is loose, and the central “strong culture equals good” claim is contested – strong cultures can also breed groupthink and rigidity, a point the third paper takes up directly.

Harrison Trice & Janice Beyer *The Cultures of Work Organizations*, 1993

Organisational sociology · culture as enacted form

CORE THESIS

Culture has a **substance** (shared ideologies) and a set of **forms** through which that substance is expressed and sustained – symbols, language, narratives and, above all, **rites**. Culture is not just held in the head; it is continually enacted through observable, patterned practices.

FRAMEWORK

Their taxonomy of organisational rites is the paper's most usable tool:

Rite	What it does
Passage	Marks a change of role or status (onboarding, promotion)
Degradation	Removes power or standing (public dismissal)
Enhancement	Confers recognition and status (awards, ceremonies)
Renewal	Refreshes and reinforces structures (offsites, training)
Conflict reduction	Manages disputes and restores order (negotiations)
Integration	Builds shared feeling and commitment (celebrations)

METHODOLOGY

A sociological and anthropological synthesis of the culture literature – markedly more scholarly and systematic than the popular treatments of the same period.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

The most rigorous account of how culture is actually *performed* through observable forms, and the rites taxonomy gives managers a concrete diagnostic lens. The critique: it is dense and academic, and offers less direct prescription than practitioners tend to want.

Synthesis

Contribution	Culture is...	Key framework	Register
Schein	Shared basic assumptions	Three levels	Foundational / scholarly
Deal & Kennedy	"The way we do things here"	Strong culture; four types	Popular / executive
Trice & Beyer	Substance enacted as forms	Taxonomy of rites	Rigorous / sociological

FOR THE OPERATOR

This paper defines the object. Culture is not the artefacts you can see but the assumptions you cannot (Schein); it can be strong or weak (Deal & Kennedy); and it is sustained through rites and symbols you can actually observe (Trice & Beyer). For the operator, the crucial implication is why culture resists direct instruction: it lives below the level of stated values. The next paper asks whether something that deep can be measured.