

Why do you not just do as you are told to?

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Some constraints for safety

- Continuously larger knowledge about risks
- The knowledge is systematically transferred to rules and procedures
- Practice may have strong deviations from rules:
 - A study of nurses in USA: Most of the nurses broke safety rules most of the time – in the best interest of the patients
 - The analysis of the Esso gas plant explosion in Melbourne proved that safety rules were systematically pushed aside for production priorities

Strategies to overcome the constraints

- Integrate safety in technology
- Training and information
- Control of behaviour

But:

- People still violate rules every days
- They know the risk, the rules and the sanctions

Why?

Searching for meaning

- Human activities need to be meaningful for the actors
- Loss of meaning create demotivation and impaired mental health
- A fundamental human drive to create meaning
- Safety is also subject to the search for meaning
 - If interpreted conflicting with actors main meaning system it's downgraded

Organizational culture

- The main key to meaning in the organization
- Is used to make sense of everything
- Also to create meaning out of safety rules, procedures and practice
- Safety culture is part of organizational culture
 - And safety culture is subject to the meaning systems of the dominating culture

What is culture?

- Culture is related to history and tradition
- Culture refers to a collective and shared phenomenon
- Culture is about meanings, understandings, beliefs, knowledge and other intangibles
- Culture is holistic, intersubjective and emotional rather than analytic and rational
- Culture is difficult to grasp and account for – must be interpreted

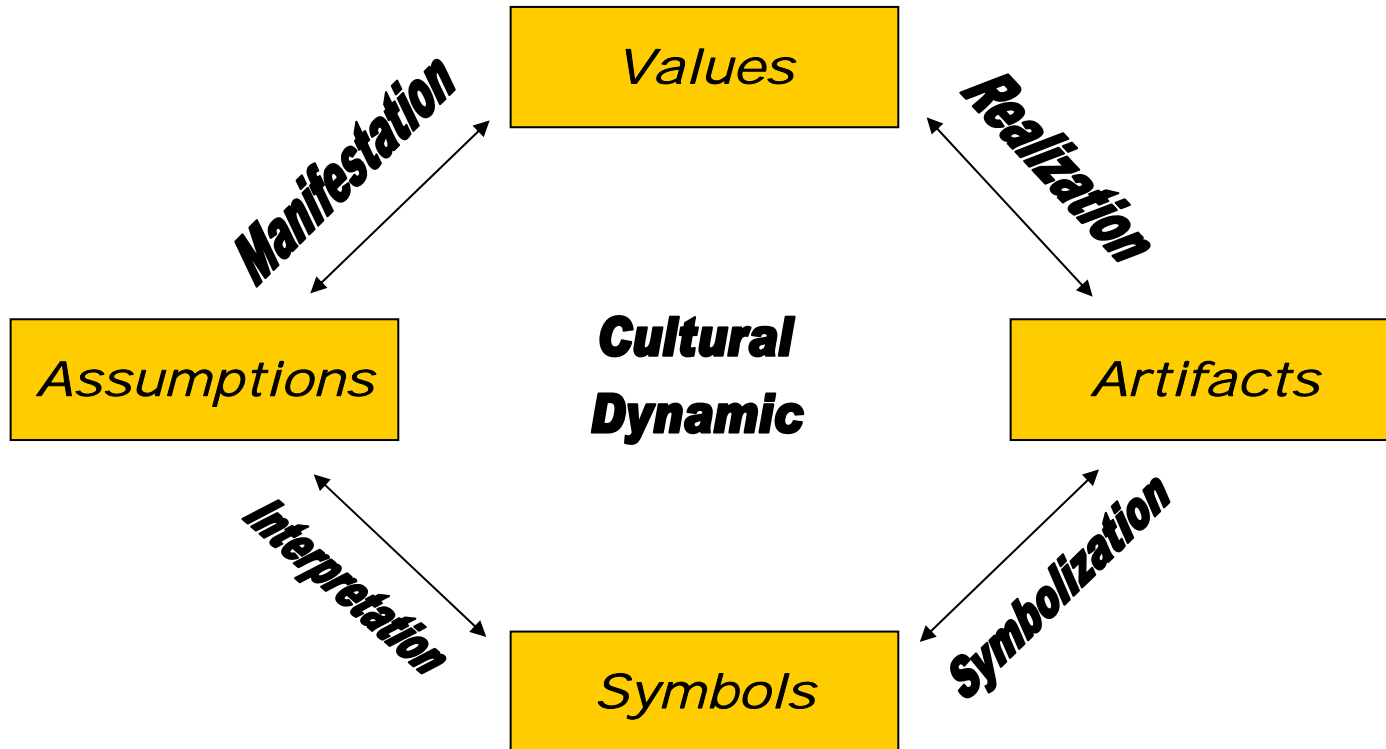
Alvesson, 2001

A definition of culture

- Shared and learned world of experiences, meanings, values, and understandings which inform people and which are expressed, reproduced, and communicated partly in symbolic form

Alvesson, 2001

Understanding culture



Mary Jo Hatch (1993)

A case story from a petfood factory

- 100 employees mostly unskilled
- Management has for long campaigned for work environment and safety
- A serious accident occurs:
 - A worker loses 4 fingers in a meat grinder
- Management is bewildered:
 - What went wrong

The accident analysis

First level:

- He stuck his hand into the grinder to release sinews
- The stop button was pressed, but not the main switch as required
- A short circuit in the switch released the grinder

Deeper levels:

- He (and others) normally used an unofficial iron hook without taken the main switch
- The hook was missing at the time of the accident
- The main switch was located on the other side of the grinder

Several rules were broken

- It was not allowed to enter body parts in the grinder
- The iron hook was not allowed for the release operation
- No interventions in the meat grinder without taking the main switch

- How come that these rules were broken?

A simple cultural analysis of the accident

Values:

- production has first priority

Assumptions:

- the risk is low
- we are here to produce - not to make safety

Artifacts:

- an iron hook
- main switch far away
- knowledge of the practice

Symbols:

- the iron hook symbolizes ingenuity
- the knowledge the low priority of safety

The usual answer to such an accident

- A campaign to increase awareness
 - "safety first"
- Strict enforcement of rules
 - Perhaps makes an example with sanctions

But too often:

- Top management still talks about production targets
- Delays are criticized
- Cost reductions are emphasized
- Other safety shortcuts are neglected

The culture is used to make interpretations

- 'Safety first' becomes a symbol of a double-tongued management
- Management only talks about safety to avoid criticism
- The real value is production above all
- The risk of repetition of the occurred accident is prevented and generally risk is still low

The outcome:

- The cultural interpretations force the safety standard back into the old track – not much is improved

Recognize that workers are doing their best

Workers are doing what gives meaning:

- Meaning is often attributed to the common good
 - "we want production to be effective"
- To the meaning of the individual job
 - "my job is to make this machine running"
- To interpretations of management behaviour
 - "what they really mean are...."
 - "they don't understand the problems at the shopfloor"

Workers are normally not stupid or obstructing

Working with the culture

Change artefacts:

- Remove artefacts
 - Supporting low value to safety
 - Symbolizing low risk or management ambiguity
- Create new artefacts
 - Supporting safety as a real value
 - Symbolizes a high safety standard
- But it does not work with low trust and low justice

Trust and justice

Workers need:

- To have trust in management actions
 - Otherwise safety measures tend to be interpreted in a negative way
- To experience organizational processes as fair and respectful
 - Otherwise resistance towards what is interpreted as unfair can be expected

Development of trust

Trustworthy behaviour from management:

- Behavioural consistency
- Behavioural integrity
- Sharing and delegation of control
- Communication (e.g. accuracy, explanation, and openness)
- Demonstration of concern

Proces justice

- Consistency (equal treatment of the employees)
- Involvement (the affected persons are consulted)
- Respect (opinions are treated seriously)
- Transparency (the decision-making process is transparent)
- Explanation (why did the decision end as it did and what will the consequences be?)
- Possibilities for appeal (unfair and wrong decisions can be changed)

To summarize

Working with culture to improve safety:

- Treat worker attribution of meaning with respect
- Remove artefacts that symbolize low safety
- Introduce artefacts the symbolize high safety
- Organize fair and transparant processes through involvement of workers
- Develop trust through trustworthy behaviour