

Organizational Culture Beginnings of an hei through the Leadership of a Visionary Founder

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Abstract—*This research aims to document how founders or leaders of organizations create organizational cultures. It takes one educational institution as its unit of analysis since, as this founder himself articulated, “Schools have a peculiar culture; and that all organizations develop their own culture and each one manifests unique characteristics which are either supportive of, or resistive of change.” An organization’s culture is usually the result of the leader’s initiatives geared towards realizing its vision. Schein’s seminal work on the primary embedding mechanisms of organizational culture shall serve as the theoretical model of this research. Utilizing the qualitative research design that relied on in-depth interviews, the researcher found out that the leader (in the person of Br. Rafael Donato) had adopted the six primary embedding mechanisms of Schein namely: what leaders pay attention to, measure, and control on a regular basis; how leaders react to critical incidents and organizational crises; how leaders allocate resources; deliberate role modeling, teaching, and coaching; how leaders allocate rewards and status; and how leaders recruit, select, promote, and excommunicate people. Interview results revealed the various approaches and strategies of this leader in forming, shaping, and developing an organizational culture that transformed this entity from a seemingly lethargic college to a dynamic and progressive institution that has achieved national accreditation. All throughout his administrative stint, he invested largely on people development that was sustained by his successors.*

Keywords— *DLSL, Organizational Culture, Visionary Leadership, Embedding Mechanisms.*

I. INTRODUCTION

One human resource management expert, writing in 1998, felt both amused and saddened by the “strange” truth, then, that idealists expect Human Resource people to be in the forefront of change, be change agents, what with their supposed open-mindedness and insights into human behavior, yet they were among the forty percent (40%) who resisted the step change they were undergoing. An IBM top

executive at that time who was in-charge of reengineering in the Asia-Pacific Region, revealed that in their company, the employees were spread along the change acceptance continuum when reengineering was first introduced: 40% were at the denial, disbelief and anger stage, another 40% were depressed, while only 20% were with the CEO in accepting the change (Mirasol, 1998).

Almost two decades after that article appeared in **Management Technology Link**, the Philippine educational system is currently undergoing a massive overhaul and restructuring – considering the passage and implementation of the K-12 Law. From basic education to tertiary education, all the way up to graduate studies, various stakeholders seem to be in a state of suspended animation, what with the full implementation of the Senior High School this coming academic year. Government educational planners and experts, university and college presidents, both private and public, school heads at the basic education level have been struggling to adopt and operationalize strategies as would make them “Senior High School Ready” since Level 10 high school students this year would have their first taste of the educational menu or recipe that would add two more years to their already bloated high school curriculum.

In many higher education institutions, top and middle-level administrators, as well as faculty members and staff are “already running a fever” (to borrow the classic words of Peter Drucker) --- because Drucker, the acknowledged inventor of the Management discipline aptly and sarcastically opined that “The moment people talk of ‘implementing’ instead ‘doing’, and of finalizing’ instead of ‘finishing,’ the organization is already running a fever” (Beatty, 1998). True enough, almost every council or committee is feverishly conducting meetings, brainstorming, realigning strategic directions to the mission-vision of the school, and preparing, as it were, for the much criticized (by civil society sectors) yet strongly defended (by government planners and bureaucrats) Senior High School.

As cited in the foregoing, all organizations develop their own culture and each one manifests unique characteristics which are either supportive of, or resistive of change. “[But] schools are unique because of the varied levels of interests and motives of individuals and groups involved. Although the mission of a school is education and its focus is the dynamics of teaching and of learning, the culture that surfaces is different from the culture that is subtle or hidden (Donato, 1998). Too often would individuals in an organization engage in practices that run counter to the organization’s vision and mission. Keyton stresses that they are held together by their communication within and across the organizational structure (Keyton, 2005, p.20). These communication patterns, sustained through time enable them to act in ways that run counter to what the culture of the organization prescribes, as articulated by its leader.

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Organizational Culture

The culture of a group can be defined as a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems (Schein, 2010, p. 18). According to Schein, if the concept of culture is to have any utility, it should draw our attention to those things that are the product of our human need for stability, consistency, and meaning. Culture formation, therefore, is always, by definition, a striving toward patterning and integration, even though in many groups, their actual history of experiences prevents them from ever achieving a clear-cut unambiguous paradigm (Schein, 2010, p. 18).

Martin (2002) defines organizational culture as “patterns of interpretation composed of the meanings associated with various cultural manifestations, such as stories, rituals, formal and informal practices, jargon, and physical arrangements” (quoted by Keyton, 2005, p. 21). Martin further argues that organizational culture is a subjective phenomenon viewed differently by different people. She cautions us by saying that one’s identification with an organization’s culture is not based on geography or physical location (Keyton, 2005, p. 21). It is highly probable that two members of the same organization who are working with clients in two different locations would still be considered as manifesting their organization’s culture.

When the culture is strong, managers take the lead in shaping and supporting it. Those who take this approach are called symbolic managers because they spend much time thinking about the values, heroes, and rituals of the culture. (Deal & Kennedy 2000, p. 141).

Perhaps, the most intriguing aspect of culture as a concept is that it points us to phenomena that are below the surface, that are powerful in their impact but invisible and to a considerable degree unconscious (Schein, 2010, p. 14).

Founders usually have a major impact on how the group initially defines and solves its external adaptation and internal integration problems. Because they had the original idea, they will typically have their own notion, based on their own cultural history and personality, of how to fulfill the idea (Schein, 2010, p. 220).

A power culture is ruled by a central power source, such as an owner or President, and is most frequently found in entrepreneurial organizations. Employees who develop trust and loyalty to their leader would tend to accomplish the tasks in accordance with what that leader would prefer (Urrabazo, 2010).

Visionary leadership

Sashkin and Sashkin (2003) proposed that visionary leaders have the ability to construct culture through empowering people to accomplished shared goals, in groups and teams, throughout the organization. The people from below are able to identify their behaviors, values and beliefs with those of their leaders. Thus, visionary leadership has the attributes to promote high identification in the follower and it is speculated that this will result in followers who enact visionary leader behaviors (Riesenmy, 2008)

Kotter states that the vision is the ability of a leader to look into the future while directing team members to adopt ways and means that would be aligned to the leader’s visions.

“Vision is a picture of the future with some implicit or explicit commentary on why people should strive to create that future” (Kotter, 1996, p 68)

Organizations are based on teams, and dedicated team work is required to make things happen. It is the vision of a leader that gives the assurance that actions and the decisions of organizational team are fit into the actual picture of desired future (Kotter, 1996). Kotter also discussed that without the vision of leaders the organization’s members would not have a sense of direction and guidance, as well as revitalized desire to do pursue activities in furtherance of the goals of the organization.

“Vision plays a key role in producing useful change by helping to direct, align and inspire actions on the part of large numbers of people. Without an appropriate vision, a

transformation effort can easily dissolve into a list of confusing, incompatible and time consuming projects that go in the wrong direction or nowhere at all" (Kotter 1996, p7)

Culture Beginnings through Founder/Leader Actions

Culture basically springs from three sources: (1) the beliefs, values, and assumptions of founders of organizations; (2) the learning experiences of group members as their organization evolves; and (3) new beliefs, values, and assumptions brought in by new members and new leaders (Schein, 2010).

Schein continues by saying that though each of these mechanisms plays a crucial role, by far the most important for cultural beginnings is the impact of founders. They not only choose the basic mission and the environmental context in which the new group will operate, but they choose the group members and thereby shape the kinds of responses that the group will make in its efforts to succeed in its environment and to integrate itself (Ibid.)

But culture formation happens also upon the initiative of organization's members. Keyton argues that when organizational members accept solutions that provide an acceptable conclusion to a problem, culture forms. Such solutions might be developed from problem-solving interactions designed to tackle a problem, emerge from an amalgamation of individuals' previous experiences in dealing with the issue, or be initiated by the formal or informal leader. If the solution works over a series of experiences with a degree of success accepted by organizational members, then the group starts to adopt the practice and its associated values. Over time, the group accepts the practice and its values as normative and will teach it to newcomers. In this way, elements of culture are formed when practices are accepted as *the way we do things around here* (Keyton, 2005).

The current study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify the various ways on how leaders embed their beliefs, values, and assumptions. (Edgar Schein refers to these as the primary embedding mechanisms).
2. To demonstrate concrete, illustrative examples of these various ways of embedding beliefs throughout the organization.
3. To validate the thesis that all these mechanisms do communicate culture content to newcomers, and to "older" organizational members.

Initially, the conceptual model to be used is the one formulated or designed by Edgar Schein (2013), namely the ways in which leaders embed their beliefs, values, and

assumptions. According to Schein, the primary embedding mechanisms include the following: what leaders pay attention to, measure, and control on a regular basis; how leaders react to critical incidents and organizational crises; how leaders allocate resources; deliberate role modeling, teaching, and coaching; how leaders allocate rewards and status; and how leaders recruit new members, promote and excommunicate members.

III. METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Rationale

Qualitative research design was employed. According to Cresswell (2013), qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world, he continues, into a series of representations including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, quoted in Cresswell, 2013).

Sampling Procedure

Participants for the study were derived using purposive sampling. Bernard and Ryan (2010) described purposive sampling as simply selecting participants who fit the purpose of the study, adding that it is especially useful with "special and hard-to-find populations." The criteria used for this study are two-fold: that he/she has worked closely with the founder-leader for at least three years; and that he/she occupied an important strategic position in the organization that would enable him/her to see things from a broader perspective. A total of eight (8) participants became the subjects of this study.

Data collection

Data were collected via in-depth interviews with the participants. Such interviews made possible the recollection of their experiences with the founder and their impressions about how he was able to form the culture of the organization. In the process, these experiences were expressed in lived and told stories of individuals (Cresswell, 2013). These interviews were able to surface the participants' individual experiences with the founder with so much depth and meaning.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, "the purpose of data analysis is to organize, provide structure to, and elicit meaning from research data" (Polit and Beck, 2008, p. 507). Patton (2002) recommends the inductive analysis which consists of organizing the smallest units of data into meaningful categories and themes. It begins with specific observations

and develops toward general patterns. This is because phenomenological analysis begins as soon as the data collection begins, with the goal of finding themes, concepts or patterns in data (Polit and Beck, 2008).

After the in-depth interviews were conducted and transcribed, the researcher developed codes, categories, and themes that enabled him to analyze and organize data into meaningful representations of reality. Alvesson (2011) reminds interviewers that intensive interpretation of what the researcher is concerned about should form part of the interview checklist that would affect the pattern by which interviewees would respond.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Since this study was solely concerned with the primary embedding mechanisms for organizational culture, participants were asked questions on the strategies adopted by the founder-leader¹ with respect to the six embedding mechanisms.

What leaders pay attention to, measure and control on a regular basis

All the respondents were agreed in saying that the leader declared that the institution should stand out in the region and the nation not on the basis of accreditation alone but from concretely showcasing the distinctive mark of a Lasallian school. In this regard, the faculty and employees are expected to demonstrate the quality of excellence in everything that they do and say. In order to develop the character of the school, the leader not only emphasized the Lasallian core values of faith, zeal for service, and communion in mission but also the leader's vision that a Lipa-Lasallian is a Doer, Learner, Sharer and Server, and Leader.

On the part of the academic administrators, this leader made it clear to them that as they manage the affairs of their respective divisions and colleges they were to enjoy autonomy to execute the plans and programs within their jurisdiction. But along with this autonomy is the responsibility for seeing to it that goals and targets are being met. If the academic manager fell short of these targets or if he/she is unable to achieve these, he/she should be able to show improved performance in the succeeding years.

In connection with the grant of autonomy, the academic managers are expected to think out of the box and to introduce processes that are better than the status quo. The founder-leader constantly challenges them to be innovative and creative in the performance of their respective tasks. During strategic planning meetings, they are required to present alternative scenarios for accomplishing something

and how these are to be achieved given the human, technological and financial resources available.

This leader constantly stresses the importance of regularity of meetings, practices and procedures. For instance, a college council needs to meet on a weekly or bi-weekly basis and a clear set of agenda be spelled out for those meetings. In addition, members of that council are expected to observe punctuality and to make sure that the matters being discussed or proposed therein are in accordance with the Mission-Vision of the institution.

One of the most powerful statements being attributed to this leader is the constant exhortation that we must always "begin with the end in mind." As early as the first year of his term in 1995-96, he would always begin strategic planning sessions (initiated and conducted during his term during before the end of each schoolyear) by declaring that by the year 2012, we would have been a university. Thus, all plans and programs of each college or division need to be geared towards the attainment of that vision. As articulated by Kotter, vision plays a key role in producing useful change by helping to direct, align and inspire actions on the part of large numbers of people.

He was a risk taker of the highest degree and a bold entrepreneur to boot: As two of the interviewees quoted him:

"We shall put up the buildings, and the students would come. Parents need no longer send their children to study in Metro Manila if they found out that there is a college here with comparable if not superior quality"

Indeed he was right, because towards the end of his term in 2002-03, college enrolment has trebled and the number of academic programs has more than doubled.

It is worthy to mention here that the construction of those buildings (the gymnasium, Management Technology Development Center, the hotel school, and the twin college buildings named the Noli and the Fili) occurred mainly through loans borrowed from banks and government financial institutions.

How the leader reacts to critical incidents and organizational crises

All of the participants were one in saying that they could not recall any incident or occurrence that had reached crisis proportion. One even said that:

This leader had a very good understanding of human nature and sent signals revealing the importance he attached to people and their values. He was a strong and supportive father figure but he would not hesitate to impose punishment for people whose actions might have triggered

a crisis because these actions contradicted the values he inculcated.

As one of the interviewees mentioned:

We (the Brothers) are trained to solve problems, to deal with a crisis. For him, there is no such thing as a crisis. Being proactive, he had a clear idea of how to anticipate problems and to offer solutions or remedies, or better still, to pre-empt the problem itself.

He was the type of administrator who would not dwell on problem situations; he always reminded his subordinates not to present problems especially during one-on-one conferences. Instead, he would prefer that they propose right away what they think could remedy or mitigate an anticipated problem or issue so that he could give his wise counsel about it.

Some academic leaders who perceive meager financial resources as a problem could probably learn a lesson from him. He was an expert in the art of generating funds – either thru direct donations from wealthy benefactors or thru the sponsorship of a fund-raising activity like the staging of a Broadway play that showcased the artistic talents of both faculty and students alike.

He had such a huge network of colleagues in the politico-economic arena, both locally and internationally. Such advantage he made use of by inviting top political leaders (President, VP, Senators and Cabinet Secretaries, civil society figures, and ambassadors) into the campus to deliver lectures and share their expertise. In the process, he was able to project a very good image of the institution that in turn motivated the faculty and employees to give their best.

How the leader allocates resources and how budgets are created

During the first few years of his term as President, especially during Strategic Planning sessions, the top managers or heads of divisions were required to propose five (5) major goals and five (5) specific strategies aimed at achieving those goals. There were strategic discussions and deliberations so that these strategies were reconciled on an institution-wide basis. It must be emphasized here that he gave discretionary authority to the division heads to propose programs which they think might contribute to the attainment of the MV of the institution. After all, at the operational level, each division or college has an operative college or division council that meets on a regular basis and deliberates on matters before these are elevated to the President's Council or to the Strategic Planning participants.

The participants who were interviewed thought that there were three major items that that always get the lion's share

of the budget, namely infrastructure development, faculty and staff development, and innovative program management.

In order to formulate construction policy and oversee its implementation, the leader formed a Construction Committee composed of the President himself, the Architect-in-Residence, the Finance Manager, a BOT member, and a representative from the academe. Meetings were conducted on a regular basis and project timelines were strictly monitored. Simultaneous with the ongoing construction, the Committee looked into the possible sourcing of funds through revenue-raising projects like institutional play presentations whose ticket prices are such that would make it possible to generate a substantial percentage of the project cost.

Another top priority of this leader is the area of faculty and staff development. The participants had a consensus with respect to the statement that this leader invested so much in the area of people development. Faculty members, both part-time and full-time, were sent to universities in Metro Manila to get advanced degrees; some administrative personnel attended short-term training programs in human and financial resources management; and even rank-and-file personnel had the chance to attend training and retooling seminars.

This leader's vision is to make excellence the overarching value of everyone in the institution. This visionary leadership has the attribute to promote high identification in the follower and it is speculated that this will result in followers who enact visionary leader behaviors (Riesemny, 2008). Therefore, everyone in the institution would have the tendency to set higher goals or targets for themselves and for the institution.

Some top and middle managers were sent to IALU (International Association of Lasallian Universities) conference in Rome as well as to benchmark with another Lasallian institution in the USA, Saint Mary's College of California. To top these all, we were all privileged on a year-to-year basis to go on educational and pleasure trips dubbed "Lakbay-Aral" to places like Palawan, Cebu, Bacolod, Baguio, the Ilocos Region, and other parts of the country. On the average, these trips would take from three to five days so that all the employees were able to develop closer relationships among themselves and deeper commitment and loyalty to the institution.

Innovation was a hallmark of this leader's administration. Within the first year of his term (1995), he brought along with him an IT expert who developed the system-wide network and attempted to map out a plan for

interconnectedness. All faculty members were trained along the then new hardware and software mode. Processes were re-engineered and people's mindsets were changed to conform to the new technologies. A totally innovative program, the Masters in Management Technology degree was offered, as well as new undergraduate programs in Management Technology, Financial Management, Marketing Management, Business Economics, and Entrepreneurship. Of course, the institution allocated substantial budgets for these innovative programs.

Deliberate role modeling, teaching, and coaching

One distinguishing characteristic of this leader was that he was a man of action; he did not waste his time talking and discussing about senseless matters. His simple gestures and facial expressions, once you get to know him, would already send signals as if these were orders coming from a powerful superior. Participants were of the belief that he put value to his people so much that even his day-to-day routine would include mingling and relating with them despite his busy schedule. As one interviewee put it:

For me, both messages from formal processes and informal day-to-day encounters with Br. Rafe were very powerful teaching and coaching mechanisms. To this day, as a ranking officer of a university, I often rush to events and walk briskly, but then I would remember his calm demeanor as he walked slowly in the campus with his dog "Bravo" trailing behind. Then I would recall that confident people occupying higher posts never rush but can exact outcome and be effective. He would spend hours wandering among the employees at all levels, getting to know them personally, making them feel good and important.

Some observers claimed that he would practice Management By Walking Around (MBWA) since he would really stroll around the campus from his Brothers' House residence first hour in the morning to be able to have first-hand information about the latest developments. It was not uncommon for him to barge into an office or faculty room to informally converse with their occupants.

Even his concern for student development and their growth as human individuals was unparalleled among his peers. He often told the faculty and employees that "You should consider the students as kings". His constant presence in almost all student activities – particularly when this was a showcase of their talents – strongly validate his claim that students are topmost in his priority list. Thus, he would often exhort the faculty to thoroughly prepare for their lessons and to make sure they exert utmost efforts to bring out their students' talents, creativity, and giftedness.

A researcher who investigated the role of management in shaping organizational culture argued that the attitudes, values and behaviors of an institution begin with its leadership. This is done through role modeling and communication at all levels. Managers must not forget the importance of being consistent when expressing these attitudes, values and desired behaviors (Urrabazo, 2006, p. 194). In those examples where powerful leadership appears to have a strong impact on the radical transformation of culture, it is often viewed as charismatic leadership being in operation. When a person is ascribed charisma it means by definition a far-reaching preparedness to let oneself be influenced by a person (Alvesson, 2013, p. 121)

How the leader allocates rewards and status and how he grooms people for promotion

Majority of the respondents cited that in allocating rewards and status, his foremost consideration is the person's capability or competence for the position. For somebody who had acquired experience, he looked at the track record in the previous position. The organizational structure did not seem to bother him as he would groom persons for promotion not on the basis of what the structure entailed but in terms of what that appointee had proven in his previous jobs. If an insider was qualified for the post, his other important criterion was that the person knew how to toe the line of the founder.

Second, he would look into the person's character, which included his/her honesty and integrity. Never would it occur that the prospective appointee would have unfavorable financial records or reputation. His trust and confidence would only be accorded to those who have shown impeccable character on matters relating to financial transactions and on their ability to deliver their promises.

Once you have gained his trust, he would provide you with all avenues for advancement and he would even offer you opportunities to travel abroad.

How the leader recruits new members and how he promotes or excommunicates people

According to one participant, this leader believed that the best way to build an organization was to hire visionary, smart, articulate and independent people who can think out of the box and influence attitudes and motivations of colleagues. He put a lot of premium on personality and character alongside solid credentials, such as possession of master's and doctorate degrees from reputable universities.

Another participant emphasized that he also considered the person's willingness to obey him and follow the direction or path that he wanted you traverse. Anybody who had displayed recalcitrance and rebelliousness would definitely

face sanctions such as suspension or outright separation from the organization.

Anybody who had been involved in some anomalous financial transactions or even minor acts of dishonesty (such as falsifying cash liquidation reports) could already face dismissal, because in this leader's viewpoint, people who cannot be honest in small matters cannot be honest in large transactions.

Teehankee (2001) argued that although organizational experience can really influence a school's culture, this can only be to the extent that the members themselves are open to the target values. Organization's leaders should take great care in selecting, promoting, and rewarding people. The school's values and vision must serve as the springboard for human resource policies on recruitment, motivation, and maintenance.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study attempted to describe the six (6) primary embedding mechanisms that a leader adopted in order to get his message across. According to Schein, these are the major "tools" that leaders have available to them to teach their organizations to perceive, think, feel, and behave based on their own conscious and subconscious convictions (Schein, 2010).

Foremost in the agenda of this leader was the goal of making the institution an excellent one, both in terms of its physical plant development and in making its faculty and staff equipped with both hard and soft skills as would enable them to deliver quality education to their clientele. To achieve that lofty goal, there was a need to strike a healthy balance between making it an excellent Lasallian institution and a world-class center of learning. The former presupposes that the spirit of faith permeates every member, which, in the words of the First Lasallian District Synod of 1999, allows believers to interpret, judge and evaluate reality in the light of the Gospel. The latter, on the other hand, entails that each and every member continuously learn and apply time-tested as well as current management principles and practices coupled with the utilization of modern information and communication technologies.

This leader had been very consistent with respect to making the people highly motivated and committed co-workers. For as Saint La Salle himself expected his teachers to be competent and effective, this founder-leader wanted them to be highly-motivated too, to see that the teacher does not merely work at a job: teachers have a vocation and a mission (Salm, 2015). A high priority on effective teaching

would have to continue to be a major value to be cultivated in any Lasallian institution of higher learning (Ibid.).

But the foregoing can only occur in an environment where academic managers have a sense of autonomy to act and the responsibility to account for the consequences of their decisions. They had to be given some latitude of freedom that would enable them to think creatively and innovatively as they implement the plans and programs agreed upon during the planning sessions. This, the founder-leader was able to provide. He was so effective in role-modeling that the people whom he manages had no alternative but to toe the line, not just for their own sake but for the sake of the institution as well. The norms, values, and modes of behavior that this leader had implanted during his first few years as President have been ingrained in the collective consciousness of co-workers who have decided to make the institution their second home.

As this research dwelt only on the primary embedding mechanisms involving one HEI, there is a need for future researchers to investigate on the secondary embedding mechanisms, which have reinforcing effects on the former. By investigating both primary and secondary embedding mechanisms, we might be able to have a more comprehensive grasp of how culture is created and formed in many organizations. There is also a need to determine if the kind of organizational culture prevailing in an organization has an effect on its overall performance.

¹**Brother Rafael S. Donato**, the founder-leader referred to in this paper was President of DLSU System, including DLSU; became the first Filipino president of La Salle Greenhills as well as La Salle Bacolod, later named University of Saint La Salle. From 1995-2002, President of De La Salle Lipa (In an interview, he revealed that his proudest contribution was with DLSL. It is for him the summation of all his administrative experiences). A Fulbright scholar at Columbia University where he earned MA English as Second Language & Linguistics, he received a Doctor of Education degree from Harvard University in 1976.

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