The Complexity of Organizational Culture in Global Teams

INTRODUCTION

Jennifer L. Gibbs

The metaphor of "culture" has become quite popular to describe and understand organizations. You may hear managers or employees say "our culture won't allow us to do that," or "we have a fast-paced culture of 'work hard, play hard.'" Newspaper and magazine articles refer to IBM having a "conservative, suit-and-tie" culture, or Apple as having an "innovative, creative" culture. Just as anthropologists study the culture of particular societies such as Australian Aborigines or the Trobriand Islanders of New Guinea, organizational culture scholars study the culture of particular organizations. The organizational culture metaphor rose to popularity in the 1960s among management theorists, and it
quickly permeated the discourse of scholars, managers, and the popular press (Eisenberg & Riley, 2001). Studying organizational culture enables communication researchers to understand the underlying core assumptions, values, and beliefs held by organizational members that guide their work behavior and communication. 

Think about the various organizations you have been a part of: school clubs or associations, sports teams, a fraternity or sorority, church or synagogue, or a company where you've been employed. As a member, you probably learned certain “rules” about how things were done in the organization—whether formal policies or informal norms and expectations—as well as specific rituals, ceremonies, dress codes, and jargon. You may have shared inside jokes, stories, and specialized knowledge with other organizational members. There may have been sanctions or punishments for breaking the rules. These are all aspects of organizational culture. Culture is made manifest through everyday language and talk, through “rituals, stories, humor, jargon, physical arrangements, and formal structures and policies, as well as informal norms and practices” (Martin, 2002, p. 55).

Through their interaction, organizational members develop a common set of practices, rituals, or norms, have certain expectations for how things are done and what is “normal” behavior, and may even develop their own special language or terminology.

As researchers of organizational culture, we study both the formal and informal rules, symbols, and practices that constitute culture, in an attempt to understand and interpret the underlying meanings and assumptions guiding collective behavior in organizations. The goals of organizational culture studies are to learn as much as possible about a single case or culture by generating in-depth, richly-layered understanding and insight and to interpret organizational reality through the eyes of its members, rather than generalizing across many cases to predict and control behavior of a large population. This chapter reviews an overarching theoretical framework integrating several key perspectives used in organizational culture research. After reviewing literature on organizational culture and global teams, it then applies these perspectives to study a particular global software team in order to illustrate different approaches to study organizational culture.

The Complexity of Organizational Culture in Global Teams

The workplace is becoming increasingly global, as more and more companies extend their operations internationally and conduct business with customers in remote and far-flung markets. The globalization of business has significant implications for organizations and their individual members, including much greater reliance on information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as email and the Internet to interact with others, and increased intercultural communication, as such technologies, bring together organizational members from diverse national cultures, as well as functional and professional backgrounds. As a result of these trends, work is becoming increasingly geographically distributed (Hinds & Kiesler, 2002) and many organizations are responding by adopting new organizational forms such as global virtual teams (Snow, Davison, & Hambrick, 1996), which are teams that span boundaries of time, space, and culture. This chapter examines theories of organizational culture and how they might be applied to analyze culture in global teams. After reviewing research on global teams and several key theoretical perspectives on organizational culture, the paper applies each of the three cultural lenses to analyze data from ethnographic study of a global software team, in order to highlight elements of cultural convergence and divergence and their implications for global team culture.

The Complex Culture of Global Teams

Companies are increasingly using global teams to accomplish work across borders and time zones. Global teams can be defined as work teams whose members are virtual, culturally diverse, structurally dynamic, and whose members collaborate on a global task using ICTs (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000). As virtual teams, they are both geographically distributed across multiple locations and dependent on computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Cohen & Gibson, 2003; Griffith, Sawyer, & Neale, 2003; Lipmanick & Stamps, 1997), though they may vary on the degree of each of these characteristics (Cohen & Gibson, 2003; Gibson & Gibbs, 2004). In addition, global teams are often characterized by a high level of cultural diversity, as well as dynamic structural arrangements (Gibson & Gibbs, 2004), in which there is high member turnover and collaboration is temporary, informal, and project-based (Gibbs, 2002).

Global teams are interesting as communication phenomena as they provide a field in which individuals around the world from
different cultural backgrounds actually interact with one another on a global scale. They collaborate on common tasks by communicating with other individuals located around the globe through travel, email, phone, videoconferencing, and other technological means. For teams that are geographically distributed, communication itself provides the substance of organizing since these teams may have no physical instantiation and members may never meet one another face-to-face; it is through the interactions of team members that the team is enacted or constituted. Global team members face unique communication challenges that traditional teams have not had to contend with, due to the need to coordinate tasks and processes across time, space, and multiple layers of cultural complexity (Carmel, 1999).

In fact, due to their virtual, culturally diverse, and dynamic nature, global teams pose a challenge to traditional conceptions of organizational culture. The structural characteristics defining global teams—geographic distribution, electronic dependence, cultural diversity, and dynamic structure—result in more loosely-coupled team interactions (Gibson & Gibbs, 2004; Gibbs, 2002) and act as centrifugal forces that pull such teams apart through loss of communication "richness," breakdown of coordination, loss of "teamness," and cultural differences (Carmel, 1999). Specifically, geographic dispersion is theorized to result in less contextual knowledge of other sites or locales and coordination challenges (Carson, Madhok, Varman, & John, 2003; Sole & Edmondson, 2002), while greater reliance on CMC results in lower message clarity and misinterpretation of knowledge due to the lack of nonverbal cues and behavior (DeSanctis & Monge, 1999; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). Dynamic structural arrangements (which are often inter-firm) are likely to give rise to concerns about confidentiality and proprietary knowledge and reluctance to share knowledge across sites or organizations, making it difficult to build relationships and establish trust within the team (Gibson & Gibbs, 2004). Finally, cultural diversity often results in communication breakdowns, misunderstandings, and stereotyping due to different culturally-conditioned norms and expectations, which can result in rifts and conflict that reduce team cohesion (Adler, 1997; Earley & Mosakowski, 2000). These elements of loose coupling in global teams (Gibson & Gibbs, 2004; Gibbs, 2002) pose challenges to traditional notions of culture as bounded, shared, and stable.

Culture is a contested term that has been given many different definitions, from anthropological notions of culture as "webs of significance" spun by human beings to make sense of their social interaction (Geertz, 1973) to more social-cognitive views of culture as a form of mental programming or "software of the mind" (Hofstede, 1991). Organizational culture has traditionally been conceived of as a set of deep-rooted assumptions, values, and artifacts (Schein, 1992) that are shared among organizational members. These assumptions provide a blueprint or set of rules or guidelines for how members should behave, as well as helping to reduce uncertainty and normalize events (Schein, 1991). In this sense, culture is often regarded as a type of "social glue" that holds teams or organizations together and provides a mechanism for building organizational cohesiveness by giving its members a sense of identity, loyalty, and commitment (e.g., Kramer, 1995). Teams with a strong culture are argued to be more effective due to their shared rules, roles, and expectations (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Schein, 1992).

Other researchers have recognized the multidimensional nature of cultural identity and developed multi-faceted frameworks to account for more complex, dynamic interactions among co-existing cultural groups. These frameworks acknowledge that multinational organizations and teams are characterized by dialectical tensions between convergence and divergence, independence and interdependence (Earley & Gibson, 2001; Stohl, 2001) and propose that elements of both are inherent in the complex processes of global organizing. Sackmann and her colleagues address this notion of cultural complexity through their "multiple cultures perspective," which acknowledges that organizational members are simultaneously carriers of multiple cultures (such as nationality, race, gender, and occupation), and that all these potential cultural identities influence the cultural context of the organization (Sackmann, 1997). Social identity theory also posits that team or group members possess and negotiate multiple identities derived from organizational and social group affiliations, and these identities may become more salient or important to them in some contexts than others (Nkomo & Cox, 1996; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1987). While dimensions of national or corporate culture are most commonly studied (e.g., Hofstede, 1991), they are not always paramount; for example, a shared functional or professional background (e.g., among a group of engineers) may damper differences in national culture if this identity is more salient to team members (Chevrier, 1999). Different cultural identities may become salient at different times, depending on the situation at hand or the organizational context (Sackmann, Phillips, Kleinberg, & Boyacigiller, 1997). International project teams in particular are characterized by multiple dimensions of culture, due to their high degrees of cultural complexity (Goodman, Phillips, & Sackmann, 1999).

Most organizational culture studies have been conducted in physically-bounded, collocated contexts. Studying global team contexts presents new opportunities for reconceptualizing culture in electronically-mediated settings. What does culture mean for a global team? In what ways is it shared or integrated, versus differentiated or fragmented? The next section reviews a tripartite framework of organizational culture (Martin, 2002) that can usefully be applied to examine elements of cultural convergence and divergence in global team culture.

Organizational Culture Perspectives

To explore the cultural complexity of global teams, the organizational framework developed by Martin (1992, 2002) will be applied. This framework is characterized by three epistemological perspectives used to study culture: integration, differentiation, and fragmentation. Each perspective represents a different lens through which to focus on and understand particular aspects of the organizational cultures in which global teams are embedded. Together, these lenses offer a rich understanding of the various dimensions of cultural convergence and divergence within a particular global team.

The integration perspective has characterized the majority of culture research, especially management studies done in the 1980s with the goal of improving organizational
effectiveness and performance (e.g., Deal & Kennedy, 1982). This approach is characterized by the conception of culture as unified, cohesive, and stable. Integration studies focus on consensus and consistency (though not necessarily unanimity) and assume culture is shared and reflects the views and interests of all members of the organization. Any ambiguity in perceptions or disagreement is excluded from the study, as it is not considered part of the culture. This approach tends to focus on upper management and their interests and assumes that culture is created by a charismatic founder or leaders by communicating and instilling certain corporate core values and mission, which then become institutionalized and shared by organizational members (Schein, 1991). For example, McDonald's (1991) study of the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee illustrates the strong culture of excitement and inspiration created among Olympic volunteer workers over taking part in the shared Olympic cause. Another integration study examines the shared, deeply held assumptions underlying the work of funeral directors that produce common understandings and set procedures and rituals that are practiced consistently by those in the profession (Barley, 1983). In these studies, differences of opinion or diverse activities among organizational members are excluded in favor of emphasis on their shared core values and assumptions.

By contrast, the differentiation perspective focuses on contradiction, rather than consensus. This approach regards organizational culture as "a mosaic of inconsistencies" (Martin & Meyerson, 1988) full of politically-charged oppositions, consisting of one or more subcultures whose motives, goals, and perceptions conflict with management or with other subcultures. This lens regards consensus and consistency as residing within subcultural boundaries, yet admits the existence of inconsistency and ambiguity—which is channeled outside of subcultural 'islands of clarity' (Martin, 2002). These subcultures may exist in harmony, in conflict with or independently of one another. Differentiation studies often focus on resistance to management by lower level employees. An example of this is Van Maanen's ethnographic account of Disneyland employees, in which distinct occupational cultures develop hierarchical norms and practices that run counter to the homogenizing and order-enforcing goals of the Disneyland corporate culture (Van Maanen, 1991). Other studies examine conflicts between various organizational subcultures, stemming from cultural distinctions between "bag" and "work-wear" employees (Young, 1991) or higher-status techies and "extraculturals" (those with lower status who are not invited to work on the more prestigious projects) at Tech corporation (Kunda, 1992). Differentiation studies often have a somewhat Marxist political agenda and thus concern themselves with labor relations and inequalities in the workplace in order to effect change.

While the integration approach tends to be managerial and come out of the functionalist positivist tradition and the differentiation perspective is associated with critical theory and Marxist cultural studies, the fragmentation approach tends to be closer to post-modernism. Fragmentation studies view culture as neither clearly consistent nor clearly inconsistent (Martin, 2002). Similar to the multiple cultures perspective (Sackmann, 1997), the fragmentation approach assumes that individuals in an organization have multiple identities (due to race, gender, nationality, occupation, etc.) that they are continually negotiating, and that thus their group memberships are constantly changing. The fragmentation lens embraces ambiguity and regards organizations as sites of multiple perspectives and interpretations which are fluid and shifting (Meyerson, 1991). This perspective is suspicious of consensus and the existence of monolithic cultures, as well as being skeptical of stable, coherent subcultures with fixed boundaries. It acknowledges that consensus may occur around specific issues, but regards it as fleeting. For this reason, the fragmentation perspective regards culture as inconsistent, ambiguous, and constantly in flux. An example of such a study is Weick's analysis of the Tenerife disaster, in which he examines the different perspectives and meanings attributed to events by the individuals involved (the pilots and air traffic controllers of different national cultures) in this KLM / Pan Am plane crash. He focuses on the ambiguity of the situation and how the increased stress it produced led to tighter coupling of events and thus less room to maneuver and avert crisis (Weick, 1991).

Through the use of these three cultural lenses together, multi-layered, "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973) of culture can be constructed. Although most studies tend to be rooted in a single perspective (see Hylmo & Buzanell, 2002 for a notable exception), Martin advocates utilizing all three lenses in a single study in order to overcome the blind spots inherent in each perspective and uncover elements of culture that may be hidden or suppressed by the researcher's own biases (Martin, 2002). Each cluster of assumptions directs our attention to particular elements of culture and guides us as researchers to see or interpret a different set of cultural patterns (or lack thereof). As Martin contends, organizations involve a great deal of complexity and each perspective offers only a partial view of what is going on, but together they may illuminate different facets of the culture in order to yield a wider range of insights and gain a more thorough understanding of it than any single lens would provide (Martin, 2002). Taking different perspectives or approaches illustrates how different, yet equally plausible explanations can be given for the same data, as culture is socially constructed.

These three perspectives of organizational culture will now be applied to analyze the culture of a particular global team. To illustrate the ways in which various cultural identities become salient in global teams and the impacts they have for the team's organizational culture, data collected in an ethnographic study of a global software team at a large high-tech corporation called "PrintTech" (a pseudonym) will be used.

**Cultural Analysis of a Global Team**

The research site studied was a global software team involved in off-shore outsourcing of software development skills. This team, called Global Software Operations (GSO) provided human resource assistance to software development teams within PrintTech. The team outsourced work to GSO-owned software centers in Brazil, China, India, Ireland, Singapore, and the UK. This outsourcing frequently required software developers from these centers to spend time overseas as foreign "assignees" in the East and West Coast-based project teams on short-term assignments lasting from 6 months to 2 years.
on average, working for "customers" within PrintTech.

Participant observation and in-depth interviews were conducted on both the East and West Coasts with a total of 50 foreign assignees, managers, and customers involved in outsourcing activities. These interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes. Interviews were semi-structured to ensure that certain questions were asked of all participants but also to allow participants the freedom to bring up other important issues they felt were relevant to the research. Additional contextual data were collected from e-mail communications, notes from team meetings and conference calls, informal conversations, and other company documents, as well as a field log of observations and reflections from my 18 months of study in the organization. Nearly all of the in-depth interviews were audio-recorded, and all tapes and notes were transcribed. Interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed using Atlas.ti content analysis software.

This remainder of this section analyzes the organizational culture of GSO by illustrating the different dimensions of culture that were salient in the team, drawing on cultural lenses of integration, differentiation, and fragmentation to assess their differing implications.

Integration Perspective

Examining GSO through the integration lens revealed a coherent vision of a unique and flexible team embedded within a strong corporate culture with shared values and members coming from a common engineering background. These elements of corporate, team, and functional culture helped unify team members by providing them with a set of shared assumptions about how work was to be conducted (Schein, 1992).

PrintTech had a distinctive, ingrained corporate culture that influenced its work practices and climate, and GSO's globally distributed team members all shared certain common assumptions and values as PrintTech employees. In the midst of downsizing trends and start-up companies with high rates of change and turnover, PrintTech remained a bastion of the old "career company" model. Most of the company's employees joined the company straight out of college and never left. The company rewarded its employees by promoting from within and valued long-term employee relationships. Its structure was rigid and vertically integrated, and the company placed great value on "process." One element of corporate culture that influenced the culture of GSO was the corporate value placed on putting the "customer first." This and other core company values were reinforced through standardized framed posters on the walls of the hallways and conference rooms, which were the same in each company location worldwide. PrintTech employees were also socialized into the culture through orientation seminars, internal trade shows, weekly company wide email memos, the company Intranet, and recorded updates on company changes left by the president of PrintTech on each employee's voicemail.

There was also a shared team culture within GSO. GSO managers were proud of their unique, ad hoc, and flexible culture, especially given the rigid and bureaucratic corporate culture in which it was embedded. Their discourse revealed a view of themselves as entrepreneurial "mavericks" who had built the team (which had been in existence for more than ten years) as a start-up organization from the ground up, formulating their business model, strategy and processes on their own, through trial and error. The team leader, who was also a high-ranking vice president in PrintTech, was described by the other managers as a "creative, visionary" who put a great deal of energy into developing the business from a single software center in Singapore in 1989 to six centers worldwide by the year 2000, with plans for further expansion. The foreign assignees who were contracted to work temporarily in PrintTech software development teams also described GSO as unique and appreciated the opportunity to do innovative development work through these foreign assignments with flexible working arrangements. Despite the apparent contrast between GSO's informal, flexible culture and PrintTech's rigid corporate culture, the shared PrintTech corporate value of putting the "customer first" was used to justify the flexibility in GSO's culture. As one manager put it, the nature of the outsourcing work was unpredictable and did not lend itself well to standardization, since every project and customer relationship was different. Team members shared a desire to maintain processes that were flexible and ad hoc rather than standardized, in order to satisfy the customer through personalized and responsive relationships. The discourse of both managers and assignees indicated a strong awareness of the importance of this customer service mentality.

A final unifying cultural dimension was that of functional or professional culture. Most of the team members, including management, had a common engineering background, and most of the assignees shared the same professional culture, as software developers. The common, low context (Hall, 1966) engineering functional culture, evident in strong preferences for autonomy and individual communication rather than group meetings, had the effect of dampening some of the other cultural differences and providing common ground for engineers who came from disparate parts of the globe. Due to the nature of their work, which consisted largely of exchanging technical code, the engineers had a strong preference for email and engaged in very little social communication with their co-workers. This helped to overcome the national cultural differences among team members by reducing the possibility for cultural misunderstanding to occur. Outside of work, assignees from different centers formed social bonds to some extent through discussion of their work and projects. Overall, the shared software development engineering culture served as a unifying force that brought the team together. This was evident in the following quote from one of the Indian assignees, when asked about the impact of cultural difference within the team:

Professionally speaking, it shouldn't make any difference. [As long as the work that's given or handed to you is proper, systematic, it's a good CMM level. If that's how it follows, then...it's not going to make much difference. Because you know what sort of work you have to do and he knows what he needs to do. And it's basically, if everyone is professional enough and they do their work properly, work flow is proper, without any interruption. (India Assignee)]

In summary, when viewed through the integration lens the GSO team appears to be unified through consensus on core corporate values such as placing the customer first, a sense of pride in the uniqueness and flexibility of the GSO team and its work, and a
common engineering background defined by preferences for autonomy, minimal social communication, and heavy email use.

**Differentiation Perspective**

When examined through the lens of differentiation, conflicts and rifts between distinct subcultures are illuminated. The GSO team was divided by national rivalry and strong allegiances to home centers, as national cultures coalesced along home software center lines. Another significant dividing line separated the foreign assignees as temporary workers from permanent co-workers in their software development project teams.

Observed from a differentiation perspective, strong organizational affiliations with the local software center were apparent among assignees, revealing the silencing of national culture. In fact, assignees who came to the U.S. on assignment kept their home center badge and identified as employees of their local center (Singapore Center, Brazil Center, etc.), rather than as PrintTech or GSO employees. In fact, they tended to eschew PrintTech with the U.S. operation rather than their home country organization. Indeed, PrintTech's corporate culture was strongly influenced by American cultural values, and regional differences were evident in corporate culture between its North America, Europe, and Asia regional divisions, not just in norms and values but very real differences in organizational structure and policy as well. While in the U.S., assignees tended to form social subcultures along ethnic lines, having very little social interaction with Americans or with assignees from other centers. When questioned, most assignees asserted that they wished they had more intercultural contact, but many felt hindered by the lack of social support and gravitated toward members of their own center out of comfort and familiarity.

Further evidence of distinct national subcultures within the team was evident in the lack of communication and cooperation among the software centers. Differences in location have been identified as creating challenges to communication in distributed teams, as team members in different locales have access to different kinds of situated knowledge which is difficult to share (Sole & Edmondson, 2002), and this was apparent within GSO. Rather than being characterized by knowledge sharing and collaboration, relationships among the software centers were hindered by national rivalry and competition for work. Despite the team leader's vision for GSO to be one cohesive team rather than a collection of individual centers, very little inter-center collaboration was evident. Managers mentioned facing problems with competition between the local software centers for work, reflecting allegiance to their local center rather than the GSO team as a whole.

Singapore worries that India will start getting all the work. India worries that China will start getting all the work. Brazil worries that everybody will get it other than them, etc., etc. And a lot of that is driven by nationalism and it's very understandable, so it's tough to get everybody to be as cooperative as I'd like. The behavior I want to see is when I send a request out and someone can't fulfill it, instead of just saying I can't, I'd like them to be calling the other centers to see if they can. So we're not quite there yet. (GSO Team Leader)

Another cultural schism was apparent between the assignees as non-permanent employees and their permanent co-workers. GSO assignees often took on the somewhat contradictory identity of a non-permanent employee due to the short-term nature of their assignments. Many foreign assignees reported feeling that they were treated like temporary contractors or "cheap labor" rather than legitimate members of their customer project teams. This perception created feelings of a lack of belonging, low morale, and inequality among assignees, who were in fact permanent employees of PrintTech just like their U.S.-based colleagues. Assignees complained about being left out of meetings, not having needed resources such as computers and phones, and not getting certain benefits such as training because of their non-permanent status. This status was further underscored by the lack of nameplates above their cubicles, and they were often physically separated from permanent colleagues in their office arrangements. Indeed, customers often viewed assignees as contractors and it was strategic for them to induce lower identification among these temporary workers (Gossett, 2002). In their eyes, it was not worth it to the customers to pay for training and invest in assignees who were only there short-term. In addition, customers were often reluctant to integrate assignees into their teams due to perceptions among their local employees that their outsourced lower-cost (and often higher-performing) assignee co-workers posed a threat to their jobs.

Perhaps the biggest source of contention among assignees was the lack of training they received while on assignment, which they considered vital to their career growth. Whereas the customers were unwilling to invest in this training, the center managers (the assignees' permanent managers) were usually unwilling to pay for training in the U.S. as well, since it cost several times more than it would in their home country. As a result, assignees often felt that foreign assignments resulted in putting their career on hold until they returned to their home centers. Although the team leader envisioned GSO to be one unified team and a good place for a career, this vision was not communicated to the other centers or to the assignees and was contradicted by their non-permanent status.

You always feel like you are just a contract staff, you are not part of the company. There won't be any career development for you, and you always ask yourself, what will happen to me in 2 years time? Where will this current situation bring you to in 2 years time? (Singapore Assignee)

Thus the differentiation lens revealed schisms within GSO culture along the fault lines of national culture and locale, as well as temporary versus permanent employee status. These subcultural differences resulted in rivalry, competition, and perceptions of inequality among team members.

**Fragmentation Perspective**

Viewing GSO culture through the lens of fragmentation portrays a culture fraught with ambiguity, disjunctions, and contradictions. These ambiguities can be classified into several themes: 1) allegiances to multiple identities resulting in lack of identification with the GSO team as a whole; 2) different goals and interpretations, and 3) irresolvable tensions within the team culture.
The fragmentation lens reveals that rather than being members of clearly defined subcultures, individuals within GSO negotiated multiple competing identities and allegiances, resulting in a lack of identification with the GSO team as a whole. Assignees in particular were faced with simultaneously managing at least four different organizational identities, as members of their local software centers (India, Singapore, Brazil, U.K., etc.), the customer project team for which they were temporarily working, GSO, and Print-Tech. Given the often confusing nature of juggling so many identities, it is perhaps not surprising that assignees’ loyalties were bifurcated and that the GSO identity would not be particularly salient to them. When asked about their relationship to GSO, many assignees were hazy at best about what GSO was, and most did not identify with GSO. Their primary allegiance tended to be to their home software center and secondarily to their temporary project team, rather than GSO, which they distinguished as a separate organization that was contracting with their home organization and a temporary identity as well. The confusion experienced by assignees in negotiating among competing identifications while on assignment is evident in this quote from one of the customer managers of a U.S.-based development team employing several assignees:

They feel they’re fully integrated, but they’re dealing half the time with the rest of the team back there, so they have—I think if you were to ask them who would you vote for? If you had to vote, who would you vote for? They’d probably not be sure—I don’t think at the moment they know which side they’re on, because they’re so involved in what’s going on. (GSO Customer)

Ambiguities were evident within the GSO management team as well, manifested in the form of lack of consensus on goals and processes. While the managers valued the informal, flexible structure of the team and the autonomy this provided them in their daily work, their lack of defined and formalized processes also resulted in differences of opinion among the U.S.-based headquarters management team and the software center managers about team goals, priorities, and assumptions about work process, which were never resolved. Different interpretations of team goals and processes were perpetuated by the geographically distributed nature of the team (the headquarters managers were split between the East and West coasts, and the center managers were globally dispersed) and by limited communication between locations, as they held no full team meetings at all during the time I observed them, and only one meeting of the U.S. management team. They also did not use videoconferencing, teleconferencing, or other collaborative technologies, and team communication was primarily limited to sporadic one-on-one e-mails or phone conversations when a problem or issue came up. Their work was divided so as to allow for high autonomy and limited need for team interaction.

As an example of the differing goals and interpretations within the team, some of the managers viewed GSO’s goal as eventually outsourcing all of the software work off-shore, a lower-cost solution that would eliminate the need for on-shore assignees completely. For these managers, providing assignee benefits, training, and other on-shore human resource support was less important. By contrast, other managers felt that on-shore work would always be necessary due to the customers’ desire to train assignees locally in a collocated setting before trusting them to perform the work remotely. These managers undertook efforts to prepare training manuals, orientation seminars, and appraisal processes for the assignees to ensure their on-shore job support. However, these efforts were either ignored or resisted by the managers who did not share these goals, resulting in wasted and inefficient work and delays in implementing new processes. The loosely coupled structure and communication within the management team allowed for issues such as this to go unresolved and even unnoticed, as underlying goals and assumptions were rarely discussed and surfaced.

Finally, ambiguity was apparent within GSO though the existence of irresolvable tensions and paradoxes. One such tension was observed in GSO’s model of the “internal customer.” When on assignment, the person assigns was considered simultaneously their customer and their manager. Negotiating this paradoxical relationship caused a great deal of confusion and role strain for the assignees, who were faced with conflicting expectations of the relationship they should have with this person. On one hand, they expected guidance and support from their temporary project manager, but on the other, they were hesitant to ask questions or raise problems that might displease their customer, given the strong “customer first” value in the company. For GSO managers, it was necessary to maintain a certain degree of ambiguity in customer expectations, since they were faced with managing conflicting needs of the customers (i.e., desire for low investment and accountability to these temporary workers) and assignees (i.e., management support to perform their work properly). There was another related tension due to the dual reporting structure within GSO in terms of role ambiguity between the GSO and home center management. GSO felt that since assignees were permanent employees of their home center, the line of authority should stay with their center manager, but while on assignment, assignees needed a local point of contact as well. To manage this tension, GSO managers tried to take care of certain assignee needs while directing other requests to their center managers. Although this inconsistent approach caused confusion for the assignees, preserving some ambiguity and overlap in reporting structure was essential in allowing for flexibility in addressing assignee needs. These tensions were built into the GSO business model and managers were never fully able to resolve them.

In summary, the fragmentation approach helps to surface ambiguities and tensions in the team culture, in terms of multiple allegiances and identities, different co-existing goals and interpretations, and irresolvable tensions within the team culture.

Conclusion

This paper has applied Martin’s (2002) tripartite cultural framework to illustrate the co-existence of integration, differentiation, and fragmentation in the complex culture of a global team. The analysis revealed an organizational culture at once unified through shared corporate and a common engineering background, differentiated by conflicting subcultures defined by nationality, location, and temporary versus permanent status, and
fragmented by ambiguities due to multiple conflicting allegiances, different goals and interpretations, and irreparable tensions in roles and reporting structure. This study has presented three main theoretical approaches to the study of organizational culture and shown how each approach illuminates different aspects of culture. As Martin argues, there are benefits to utilizing all three perspectives, as each one is like a lens that inevitably calls attention to some aspects of an organization’s culture while blurring or overlooking other important facets (Martin, 2002). Each lens paints a valid but partial picture of the culture; together they can offer a fuller, more nuanced cultural understanding. Global teams represent an exciting new area of study that challenges traditional notions of culture and pushes the limits of theory on organizational culture. Given the rising prevalence of multicultural, computer-mediated work environments in today’s organizations, there are many potentially interesting new research settings in which organizational culture theory can be applied.

References


