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Studying Cultures of Continuous Improvement as Shared Meaning Systems

A Comparative Investigation of Group Cultures of Continuous Improvement in Different Societal Contexts

Volume I (Main Title)

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

At Massey University, Manawatu Campus, New Zealand

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May 2011
Abstract

A conducive organisational culture is often assumed to play a key role in the effectiveness of approaches to continuous improvement (CI). Despite substantial research, the understanding of such organisational cultures is still limited. Prevalent research practice is characterised by pre-defined models of culture and data from a single informant per participating organisation. Culture is only viewed in terms of its desired managerial outcomes rather than its origins in the workforce. It is reduced to a de-contextualised variable and studied without consideration of the societal culture in which the organisation is embedded.

To address these shortcomings, this thesis studied organisational cultures of CI in terms of the meanings shared by the workforce. It used multiple, in-depth case studies to attain systematic comparisons between work groups of high CI maturity, with Toyota being the main case organisation. The cases were substantially matched and located in polar Western settings of New Zealand and Spain, pursuing patterns of literal and theoretical replication. The attribution of meaning was analysed both in terms of the individual’s internalised value orientation (social self-concept) and the group contexts.

The results indicate that the meanings individuals ascribe to practices and concepts of CI are aligned with their internalised values. Likewise consistent with cultural theory, CI practices and concepts were perceived as meaningful if they fulfil self-motives of efficacy, enhancement or consistency. Four distinct effects through which meanings become shared were identified; namely self-selection, staff selection, behavioural embedding and socialisation.

The new perspective that this study provides is able to explain the need for practices such as empowerment, involvement and systematic feedback and thus makes a contribution towards understanding the essential features of cultures of CI across cultural boundaries. The findings have immediate implications for organisations: Instead of aiming at abstract ‘cultural change’ towards an allegedly ideal culture profile, organisational leaders should impart CI practices and concepts in ways that
focus on the implicit value for employees; that is, convey a sense of relevance, competence and coherence to them.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the many friends for their help and inspiration, as well as all the participants in this study for showing genuine interest and support for the research.

Particularly I would like to thank Associate Prof. Nigel Grigg for his unobtrusive guidance, Simon Barnett, Jordi Guijarro, Warwick Harvie, Juan Jose Maldonado, Peter Manning, Enoch Ruhigira and Geoff Russell for their dependable support and Ester for her encouragement and help throughout the project.

My grateful thanks also to Mrs. Petra Alefeld, Dr. Mike Bebb, Prof. emerita Marilyn Brewer, Prof. Lawrence Corbett, Dr. Robin Mann, Prof. Joanne Martin, Mr. Musli Mohammad, Prof. Sonja Sackmann, Prof. Maggi Phillips and Prof. Ralph Stablein for their advice.

I gratefully acknowledge Education New Zealand for the financial support provided.

Finally, my grateful thanks to the Massey University Human Ethics Committee for granting human ethics approval for the field work (Southern A - 09/26).
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CI</td>
<td>Continuous Improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CVF</td>
<td>Competing Values Framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I-C</td>
<td>Individualism-Collectivism dimension of cultural variation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JIT</td>
<td>Just-in-Time Production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KPI</td>
<td>Key Performance Indicator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPB</td>
<td>Case study Multipueblo Barcelona, Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NZ</td>
<td>New Zealand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OC</td>
<td>Organisational culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OM</td>
<td>Operations Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OS</td>
<td>Organisation studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QM</td>
<td>Quality Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Societal culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIS</td>
<td>Staff Improvement System (used at work group TTH)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TMD</td>
<td>Case study Toyota Madrid, Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TST</td>
<td>Twenty Statements Test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TTH</td>
<td>Case study Toyota Thames, New Zealand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPN</td>
<td>Case study Toyota Palmerston North, New Zealand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPS</td>
<td>Toyota Production System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPM</td>
<td>Total Productive Maintenance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TQM</td>
<td>Total Quality Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TW</td>
<td>Toyota Way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WAT</td>
<td>Workshop Analytical Tool</td>
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