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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)

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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.

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List of Abbreviations

CI	Continuous Improvement
CVF	Competing Values Framework
I-C	Individualism-Collectivism dimension of cultural variation
JIT	Just-in-Time Production
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
MPB	Case study Multipueblo Barcelona, Spain
NZ	New Zealand
OC	Organisational culture
OM	Operations Management
OS	Organisation studies
QM	Quality Management
SC	Societal culture
SIS	Staff Improvement System (used at work group TTH)
TMD	Case study Toyota Madrid, Spain
TST	Twenty Statements Test
TTH	Case study Toyota Thames, New Zealand
TPN	Case study Toyota Palmerston North, New Zealand
TPS	Toyota Production System
TPM	Total Productive Maintenance
TQM	Total Quality Management
TW	Toyota Way
WAT	Workshop Analytical Tool