



## Book essay on “leadership & cultural webs in organizations: Weaver's tales”



Hugh M. Pattinson \*

University of Western Sydney, Australia

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 1 April 2015

Received in revised form 1 April 2015

Accepted 1 April 2015

Available online 10 June 2015

#### Keywords:

Organization culture

Change

Webs

Weaving

Weaver

Leadership

### ABSTRACT

Changing organizational culture is a top priority for new senior managers but several obvious and hidden cultural elements interconnect to hinder and even entrap them. McLean (2013) draws from social anthropology with strong tribute to Clifford Geertz for defining organizational culture as sets of webs. Managers as weavers of organizational cultural webs attempt to understand threads made up of semiotics, semantics, structure and people – and to change them. Researchers as weavers become deeply immersed ethnographically within an organization to develop an overall storyline or fabric (meta-conversation) on examples of leadership seeking to effect change in organization culture. McLean encourages leaders to apply a cognitive rather than mechanistic approach to understanding and attempting to change organization culture. His approach is based on managers driving and researchers exploring thinking (framing), estrangement, rethinking (reframing), enactment and exemplification. Managers seek to stimulate organization cultural change collectively through being a weaver among weavers.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Changing organization culture – facing the web and its host

Changing corporate or organizational culture is often on the top of the leadership agenda for new senior managers. The newcomer is walking straight into the equivalent of an organizational spider web. The new manager is ensnared by an overwhelming spider web absorbing and resisting change. The change agent faces strangulation from the web itself and paralysis or poisoning from the spider's venom – but the mission is to change the web and the spider. How then can the new manager design and spin the strands of corporate culture and change the mind and direction of the spider – and the organization?

Setting aside the spider as a central controller of a spider web, the strands and yarns are analogous to an underlying pattern or system containing common reinforcing values, norms, semantics and semiotics capable of absorbing, withstanding or repelling intruders. The spider web is an analogy for organization cultural webs

## 2. Cultural webs in organizations

Defining organization culture as a web is an established perspective in organization studies. Johnson (1992) defined a “cultural web” of an organization as a paradigm (“a core set of beliefs and assumptions

which fashion an organization's view of itself and its environment”) (p. 30) supported by power structures, organizational structures, control systems, rituals and routines, stories and myths, and symbols (p. 31). Johnson's perspective built on Schein's (1985, p. 36) definition of group culture as:

A pattern of shared 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.

Johnson (1992) presented three summary cases on how managers define cultural webs including a menswear clothing retailer, a consultancy partnership, and a regional newspaper (p. 32). He advocates a positivist approach to strategic organizational change where it is “the social, political, cultural and cognitive dimensions of managerial activities which both give rise to the sort of incremental strategic change typical in organizations: but which can also be employed to galvanize more fundamental strategic change” (Johnson, 1992, p. 36).

McLean outlines an account of his academic and consulting journey through organization Culture and change over more than thirty years – but does not mention Johnson's work on cultural webs. Clifford Geertz is nominated as the strongest influence on the development of his thinking and consulting in this field. “Leadership & Cultural Webs In Organizations: Weaver's Tales” represents a tribute to Geertz both with respect to his view of cultures as webs of signification, and his approach to ethnographic research through thick description.

McLean supports Geertz's view of culture as “interpretations that members of a culture place on their experience – to understand how

\* Marketing and International Business, School of Business, University of Western Sydney, Locked Bag 1797, Penrith NSW 2751 Australia. Tel./fax: +61 2 9685 9626, +61 425 204069 (mobile).

E-mail address: H.Pattinson@uws.edu.au.

they make sense of things” (McLean, 2013, p. 21), and his definition of cultural webs – “Man is an animal suspended in webs of signification he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning” (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). McLean expresses cultural webs as a form of fabric:

Through the phrase “webs of signification” Geertz is suggesting that, as members of social groups, communities and societies we acquire a complex interconnected conceptual fabric through which we interpret and give meaning to our experience. This is a fabric formed and affirmed over generations through everyday interactions and exchanges and is characterized by an unquestioned and taken for granted sense of normality.

[McLean, 2013, p. 26]

Cultural webs help individuals and groups to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity – but they shape and are shaped by them. McLean highlights similarities between spiders' and cultural webs:

Webs are hard to see, they are durable and resilient. Their elaborate patterns enable rapid passage for those familiar with the network of preformed pathways. They entrap the unwary, entangle strangers who blunder into them and disable adventurers who would ignore them. If ruptured or torn they are quickly repaired.

[McLean, 2013, p. 27]

McLean develops his book around characteristics of spiders' and cultural webs in organization contexts. Managers seeking substantial change to organization culture need to see the underlying cultural webs and their combinations of threads – and intervene to produce cultural change.

### 3. Objective versus cognitive views of organization change

In Chapter 1.1, McLean discusses shortcomings of an objective mechanistic view of leading organizational change, suggesting rejection or relinquishing of concern for objectivity, the search for universal truths, thinking that flows from seeing organizations as machines or structures, and participants not as engineers or architects. He leans toward a perceptual or cognitive view of an organization basing the book around an organizational anthropology perspective of human actors knowing and perceiving their world through the medium of culturally specific terms of reference (Smircich, 1983).

### 4. Organization cultural webs: a framework

In Chapter 2, McLean takes the reader on a definitional journey through key concepts associated with culture and meaning derived largely from Geertz's views. He supports Geertz's argument that “achieving an understanding of a culture called for deep familiarity based on living in or alongside a society or community” (McLean, 2013, p. 21), and extends this application to managers and researchers within organizations.

McLean explores organization culture through semiotics, semantics, sensemaking, learning, embodiment, enactment and intervention. He develops a framework for discussion on cultural webs based on interpretive schema, systems of belief and explanation in an organizational context. Language and physical settings within an organization express signs, symbols, rituals, artifacts and shared values that are important for identifying and mapping cultural webs.

McLean uses a thick-description case study to highlight issues associated with a large organization identifying and responding to competition, where management attempted to transform the organization to a customer-focused culture. Language and symbols are identified and discussed as key cultural elements in the study; managers play a

key role in creating and maintaining language and key symbols within an organization – but cannot do this on their own.

### 5. Revealing organization culture through symbols

In Chapter 3, McLean develops a working definition for symbols in organization culture: “[Symbols] embody and express meaning and serve as vehicles that carry meaning. An understanding of symbols in organizational life is therefore an essential; part of any understanding of culture and processes of cultural change” (McLean, 2013, p. 41).

Formal Symbols including messages conveyed by the organization through advertising, promotion, publicity and mission statements can be readily viewed by an incoming or prospective manager as their first impressions. Informal symbols are harder to discern but convey deeper insights on prevailing organization cultures. Office settings, design, furnishings and layouts combined with internal interpretations of them are important symbols of culture.

Although viewing the symbols of an organization and drawing initial conclusions about associated culture is useful, deep understanding of acculturation over time is essential. McLean outlines socialization into an organization based on phased acculturation for an incoming manager including encountering formal symbols; early socialization, secondary deeper socialization and deep familiarity with the culture. McLean explores symbols that managers seeking change are able to use as interventions. Artifacts associated with high-profile symbols such as CEO speeches, corporate publicity, corporate logos and promotions can be carefully crafted and manipulated by managers to convey changes in formal external and internal meaning associated with the organization. Low profile symbols are “seemingly irrelevant and mundane phenomena that form part of a pervasive context of organizational life” (McLean, 2013, p. 51) – but some of them may be consciously controlled to motivate people to think positively (or otherwise) about the organization. The manager's main task is interweaving high and low profile symbols into form and pattern that is organization culture – is at this point of the book that McLean introduces the manager seeking cultural change as a ‘weaver’.

### 6. Managers weaving their meaning of cultural change

In Chapter 4, McLean explores challenges for managers to weave their meaning of cultural change not just into an organization with usually strong and established culture, but with other weavers maintaining that culture. He highlights a key paradox that while leaders will try weaving their preferred meaning for cultural change, they are facing multiple interpretations and meanings of the same organization's culture. The manager in effect becomes a weaver among weavers (McLean, 2013, p. 64). McLean supports this view through differentiating between a Cartesian worldview and a semiotic perspective: “If the Cartesian worldwide casts culture as an object or phenomenon that is separate from us and leads us to think of it as some ‘thing’ that can be managed or manipulated, the semiotic perspective holds that we are participants in a culture and are continuously influenced by it while, simultaneously, shaping it. We are all cultural weavers” (McLean, 2013, p. 66).

McLean uses a thick description case study to highlight how an incoming manager and their management sought to identify key organization culture values (in this book, effectively part of cultural threads) – and then to weave change in them through embodying changes to values through language, key planning activities and by personal example. McLean then explores development of meaning – weaving – through asking questions about symbols, and then reframing the symbols through asking or answering the questions differently. Turning reframed symbols into metaphors can be vital for managers seeking change. McLean draws on a Social Constructionist view that “Language does not describe action, but is itself a form of action” (Gergen, 1991, as cited in McLean, 2013, p. 79).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1017059>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1017059>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)