Understanding cultures in care

In the previous papers in this series, we looked at the causes and, impact of and strategies for management of stress in the workplace. Perhaps one of the most important means of preventing stress among the work force is to create a workplace culture that is positive, focused on the individual and that actively promotes learning and personal growth. In order for the leader or manager to do this, they must first understand the meaning of culture in the work environment; this paper introduces the reader to some theories about culture.

Organisations quite simply exist as a means of arranging groups of people and resources to get a job done (Seden, 2004). The ways in which organisations work have an impact not only on the people who work there, but also on the outputs of the organisation; in 1998 the Department of Health stated that:

"Achieving meaningful and sustainable quality improvements in the NHS requires a fundamental shift in culture, to focus effort where it is needed and to enable and empower those that work in the NHS to improve quality locally."

What this statement suggests is that it is important for nurse managers to understand and influence the culture where they work.

Cultures are, in essence, 'psychological environments' that exist at team or organisation level. The culture of the team or organisation is manifested in the ways in which staff interact with each other, with other professionals, organisations and patients. One of the most cited theorists on organisational culture is Charles Handy. Handy (1993) identified four cultures within organisations, any or all of which may apply in the care setting.

POWER CULTURE

The power culture can be imagined like a spider's web, where the manager sits at the centre. The manager is surrounded by ever-widening circles of staff (e.g. senior and junior staff nurses and nursing assistants). The nearer a person is to the outer fringes of the web, the less power and influence this individual has. Within the cultural influence of the web, people reflect the personality and undertake the roles ascribed to them by the manager.

There is much trust and respect within the web, with the inspiration for the staff to act as they do — the culture — coming from positive interactions with the manager. In this setting, the manager sells a vision to the staff and enthuses them to work towards common goals. Where values are shared (e.g. high-quality patient care) these cultures can be very rewarding for staff to work in.

Power cultures can adapt quickly to change and effectively deal with crises because lines of communication are short and all emanate from the one place — the centre of the web. Handy (1993) sees these cultures as working best in small teams.

The big danger of the power culture is that it is easily impacted by the behaviours of the manager. Negativity rapidly breeds negativity, and a lack of integrity and unclear values will rapidly shape the culture and impact on the whole team.

ROLE CULTURE

The role culture can be imagined as a pyramid of boxes. Each job within the pyramid is assigned to a person within the box. All of the boxes in the pyramid are joined together in an orderly, logical way that supports the work of the organisation in an effective and efficient manner. Each role, and therefore each person in each box, has a clear job description with their roles and responsibilities well-defined and apparent. The formality of the structure means communication is itself formal and is between roles rather than the people who occupy the roles.

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Box 1. Key points

- There are many work place cultures
- Cultures are, in essence, the psychological environment
- Different cultures of work places suit different organisational tasks
- Managers affect the cultures of the teams they work in
- Managers need to understand their own workplace culture
- Each type of culture has positive and negative points.

Role cultures are predictable in the ways in which they work and their outputs. At their heart are policies and procedures and there is a collective drive to achieve high standards. The reliance on policy and procedures, to make role cultures stable and predictable.

Stability, predictability and reliance on policy and procedures mean teams that operate with role cultures do not adapt well to change or development. Staff within these cultures experience management rather than leadership, they do what is expected of them when it is expected, as what is required is clearly laid out by the person at the top of the pyramid.

TASK CULTURE

Teams that work in task cultures take advantage of, and play to, the strengths, talents and resources available when faced with a specific project or task. This culture is not as individually centred as the power culture, but it is much quicker and better at dealing with change than the role culture.

People who work in task cultures are creative problem-solvers who don't work well with routine tasks, restrictive policies and procedures. Teams that are based on the task culture model are friendly and warm and people tend to work together to solve issues. Team work is of the essence and the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts is truly evident.

The task culture relies on groups of professionals communicating and working together without the need for explicit leadership. Such cultures are usually based around highly professional teams who rely heavily on time spent on communication, which makes them effective but inherently inefficient.

PERSON CULTURE

The person culture is, as the name suggests, person-centric. The reality of these cultures is that the person is all important and that the need for organisational structure is minimal. Professionals within this culture are awarded a high status, which reflects their level of expertise and individual skills. We see this in the healthcare setting where some junior, but highly experienced, staff are given more autonomy in their practice than other staff of the same grade who are deemed to be less skilled.

Within person cultures, people who have no professional status occupy a lesser role and exercise little control over the activities of the professionals. Professionals within person cultures need to be persuaded, influenced or bargained with rather than commanded because their status is high.

LEARNING CULTURE

Learning cultures are not one of Handy's cultures, but, as the term is widely in use, we will discuss it here. Learning cultures describe teams that place development at the centre of what they do (McKenna, 2000). Organisations with learning cultures embrace the challenges that changes bring, as well as being keen to reap the potential rewards of development. Learning cultures grow out of a commitment within an organisation to achieve lifelong learning within the staff group.

Learning cultures are more sustainable than the other cultures in rapidly changing economies of care where there is a need to be responsive to change.

THE ROLE OF THE MANAGER

For any healthcare manager, understanding the culture of the team you work in will help you to exploit its strengths and, perhaps, where there is a need to change the culture to something more suitable.

Changing cultures within the care setting requires the manager to exert influence and power over those that they lead. This requires not only an understanding of what the manager wants to achieve, but also the environment within which this can be achieved. Power, in the sense, used here is the ability to influence the attitudes, values, activities and behaviour of others within the team (Pettinger, 2000). While the power of the nurse manager is legitimised to some extent by their position within the organisation, there are other strategies that the manager, or team leader, can use to ensure that the team work in ways that achieve the goals of healthcare organisations.

CONCLUSION

This paper has introduced the concept of cultures of care *(Box 1)*. It has identified that cultures are characterised in many different ways. We have identified the manager as having a major role in the development of workplace cultures and, therefore, the need for managers to understand what culture is and how it may be influenced. **Wuk**