# What is the Cultural Web?

In business, we are constantly talking and thinking about the culture of the organisation. This post looks at what we mean by 'culture' and particularly, how it can be analysed and understood by reference to the cultural web.

Organisational Culture

Schein defines organisational culture as the 'basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organisation, that operate unconsciously and define in a basic taken-for-granted fashion an organisation's view of itself and its environment'. It is about the collective behaviours in an organisation. It tends to consist of four layers.
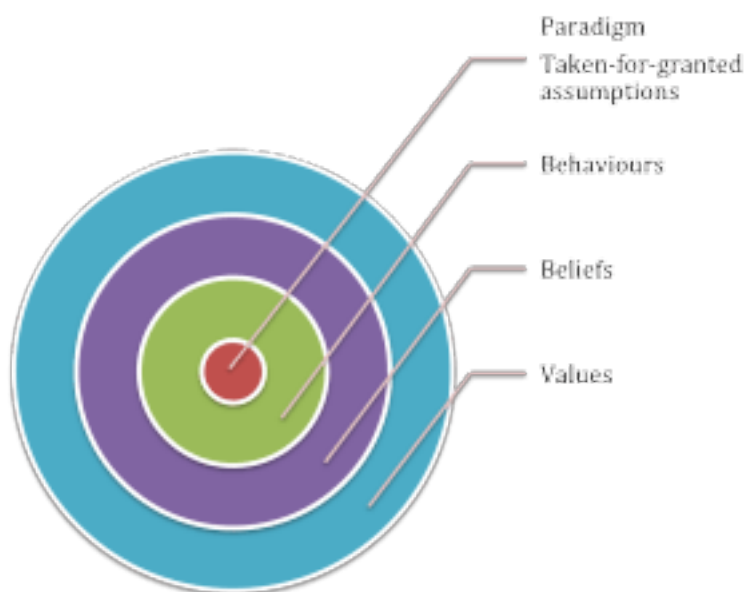
Values – often easy to identify within an organisation as they tend to be written down as statements about the organisation's mission, objectives or strategies. They can often be vague.

Beliefs – are more specific, but still are evident from corporate statements.

Behaviours – these are the day-to-day way in which the organisation operates. These include work routines and organisational structure.

Taken-for-granted assumptions – are the core of an organisation's culture. They are often difficult to identify and explain. They are often referred to as the organisational paradigm, where the paradigm is the set of assumptions held in common and taken for granted. They represent collective experience without which, members of the organisation would have to 'reinvent their world' for different circumstances that they face.

Trying to understand the culture at all these levels is clearly important, but is not straightforward.

The Cultural Web

The cultural web is a representation of the taken-for-granted assumptions, or paradigm, of an organisation and the physical manifestations of organisational culture.

The routine behaviours that members of the organisation display both internally and towards those outside the organisation make up 'the way we do things around here' on a day-to-day

basis. It may provide a distinctive organisational competence, but can also represent a taken-for-grantedness which can be difficult to change.

The rituals of the organisational life are particular activities or special events through which the organisation emphasises what is particularly important and reinforces 'the way we do things around here'.

The stories told by members of the organisation to each other, to outsiders, etc, embed the present in its organisational history and also highlight important events and personalities. They tend to cover successes, disasters, heroes, villains and mavericks.

Symbols such as logos, offices, cars and titles can be a shorthand representation of the nature of the organisation.

Power structures are also likely to influence the key assumptions. The most powerful groupings are likely to be closely associated with the core assumptions and beliefs.

The control systems. measurements and reward systems emphasise what is important to monitor in the organisation. Reward systems are important influences on

behaviours, but can also prove to be a barrier to success of new strategies.

Organisational structure is likely to reflect power and show important roles and relationships. Formal, hierarchical, mechanistic structures may emphasise that strategy is the province of top managers and everyone else is 'working to orders'. Highly devolved structures may signify that collaboration is less important than competition, for example.

The paradigm of the organisation encapsulates and reinforces the behaviours observed in the other elements of the cultural web.

So What?

This article outlines organisational culture and the cultural web.