



MIDDLE MANAGERS' STORIES: UNDERSTANDING
CULTURE IN A MALAYSIAN ORGANISATION

BY

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ABSTRACT

This is a study of using middle managers' stories to understand the culture of a Malaysian organisation. Using Schein's (2010) organisational culture theory, a qualitative methodology using semi-structured in-depth interviews was conducted to obtain the stories of middle managers from XYZ organisation about their organisation and its livelihoods. There were 18 middle managers altogether, however only 14 respondents agreed to participate until the end of the study. The researcher prepared verbatim transcripts of the in-depth interviews and analysis of the data generated to seven main themes which portrayed the culture established at XYZ organisation. The themes were (1) the three leaders, (2) work routines and relationships, (3) the puppet master, (4) the cold fish, (5) stingy management, (6) heroes and (7) hopes and dreams. The themes built from the respondents' stories also exposed XYZ organisational culture dimensions. From the respondents' stories, it is found that XYZ organisation has a miasmatic and toxic culture. This study suggests XYZ organisation can cure its miasmatic and toxic culture by hiring a consultant to help XYZ management to cure their organisation's culture, use confrontation and survey assessment to deal with toxic employers or employees, eliminate toxic employees from organisation, and lastly report to a person that has higher authority in the organisation. This study shows the importance of Malaysian organisations to listen to their middle managers' stories because it can help to improve leadership skills and employees' productivity which in turn cause the organisation to be more prosperous and healthy. This research also contributes to the enrichment of the existing body of knowledge in the area of organisational communication. Lastly, this work can serve as future reference for Malaysian organisational practitioners and academic researchers on the subjects of organisational culture, organisational stories and the relationship between these two areas.

ملخص البحث

تبحث هذه الدراسة في استخدام قصص المديرين المتوسطين لفهم ثقافة منظمة ماليزية ما، وباستخدام نظرية الثقافة التنظيمية ل: (شاين ٢٠١٠)، تم إجراء منهجية نوعية باستخدام مقابلات متعمقة شبه منظمة للحصول على قصص مدراء متوسطين من منظمة شيز حول منظماتهم وسبل معيشتهم. كان هناك (١٨) مديرا متوسطين، لكن (١٤) مشاركا فقط وافقوا على المشاركة حتى نهاية الدراسة. أعد الباحث محاضر حرفية للمقابلات المتعمقة وتحليل البيانات التي تم إنشاؤها لسبعة مواضيع رئيسة، والتي صورت الثقافة التي أنشئت في منظمة شيز. وكانت موضوعات الدراسة كما يأتي: القادة الثلاثة، والعمل الروتيني والعلاقات، وسيد العرائس، والأسمك الباردة، وإدارة البخيل، والأبطال والآمال والأحلام. والموضوعات التي بنيت من قصص المستطلعين أيضاً كشف أبعاد الثقافة التنظيمية لمنظمة شيز، ووجدت الدراسة أيضا من قصص المستطلعين أن لدى منظمة شيز ثقافة ميسمية ومخرية. تقترح هذه الدراسة أن منظمة شيز يمكن علاج ثقافتها الميسمية والمخرية من خلال توظيف مستشار لمساعدة إدارة منظمة شيز لعلاج الثقافة في مؤسستهم، واستخدام المواجهة وتقييم المسح للتعامل مع أصحاب العمل المخربين أو الموظفين، والقضاء على الموظفين السمخريين في المنظمة، وأخيرا تقدم تقريرا إلى الشخص الذي لديه أعلى سلطة في المنظمة. وتبين هذه الدراسة أهمية المنظمات الماليزية للاستماع إلى قصص مدرائها الوسطيين؛ لأنها يمكن أن تساعد على تحسين المهارات القيادية وإنتاجية الموظفين؛ ما يؤدي بدوره إلى جعل المنظمة أكثر ازدهارا وصحة. ويسهم هذا البحث أيضا في إثراء مجموعة المعارف الموجودة في مجال الاتصالات التنظيمية. وأخيرا، يمكن أن يكون هذا العمل بمثابة مرجعية مستقبلية للممارسين الماليزيين والباحثين الأكاديميين حول مواضيع الثقافة التنظيمية، والقصص التنظيمية والعلاقة بين هذين المجالين.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion; it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (Communication).

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigation, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Noor Khairin Nawwarah Binti Khalid

Signature.....

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Every challenging work needs self-efforts as well as guidance from people who were very close to our heart. My humble effort I dedicate to my sweet and loving Father, Khalid bin Abdullah and Mother, Che Mek Kamariah binti Che Yem, Husband, Muhammad Saffuan bin Sahat Whose affection, love, encouragement and prays of day and night that make me able to get such success and honour.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The first chapter of this work discusses the background of the study, statement of the problem, significance of the study, research objectives as well as research questions of this study.

Organisational communication is a broad and continuously growing branch of study in the field of communication. There are four main perspectives on how to study organisational communication, namely mechanistic, psychological, interpretive-symbolic and system-interaction perspective (Jensen, 2003). This work emphasizes on the interpretive-symbolic perspective because it intends to explore and understand organisational communication from the organisational members' point of view. The main idea of interpretive-symbolic perspective lies in the premise that an individual's social reality can be learned through his or her communication behaviour.

One of the areas of concern in organisational communication is organisational culture. The term 'organisational culture' has been defined from numerous perspectives but the most common definition is "the way things are done around here" (Lundy & Cowling, 1996, p. 19). Schein (2010) provides a longer definition of organisational culture in which it is referred to as a set of basic assumptions learned by members of an organisation and it guides them to speak and behave in a certain way at their organisation. Practically, culture plays a vital role in organisations because it is one of the key organisation's stable factors (Sun, 2008). Indeed, studies on organisational culture have been continuously proven to be important in helping

organisational efficiency and productivity (Edwinah Amah, 2012; Fakhar Shahzad, Rana Adeel Luqman, Ayesha Rashid Khan & Lalarukh Shabbir, 2012).

The culture of an organisation can be studied through several approaches, but one of the preferred is via stories told by organisational members. Gabriel (2011b) and Rhodes and Brown (2005) note that stories told by organisational members contain clues about organisational realities and reveal how organisational members understand their environment, the culture of the organisation and the complexities in that organisation. Spiker, Daniels and Papa (2008) observe that stories told by members about their organisation have the ability to shape, make or remake an organisation's culture. In addition, stories told by organisational members are also known to help initiate the process of organisational change (Gabriel, 2011a, 2011d) and revitalize organisational culture (Blair, 2006; Ferraz, 2012; Spiker, Daniels & Papa, 2008).

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Since the 1990s, the importance of stories told by organisational members in exposing the culture of an organisation has been discussed significantly (Gabriel, 2011a). Studies using stories to explore organisational culture are mostly conducted within the Western organisational contexts (Gabriel, 2015a; Allcorn & Stein, 2016).

Gabriel (2011b) notes stories told by organisational members can guide researchers to learn deeply about an organisation and trigger the process of organisational change such as from poor organisation management to a better and professional management. However to date, there are only a few studies that have been done in this area in the Malaysian setting. The most recent work on stories and organisational communication area is the work of Khairul Shafee and Ahmad Kamil (2010, 2012) in which they focus on the role of stories as a form to teach

organisational knowledge to members. However, their work does not focus on the power of stories to define organisational culture. In this regard, the lack of studies on the role of stories in making or remaking organisational culture has left a gap to be addressed by Malaysian organisational practitioners and academic researchers. If this problem is unresolved, it can lead to the lack of the concerted efforts in many Malaysian organisations to listen to their employees' stories. If the management keep on neglecting employees' stories such as employees' needs and work problems, it can indirectly affect the condition and quality of their organisations' well-being. Therefore, it is a must for the researcher to conduct this study.

Since it is believed stories told by employees help to understand and learn the cultural dimensions practised by an organisation (Ferraz, 2012), the researcher would like to identify how stories told by middle managers in a Malaysian organisation (anonymously known as XYZ organisation) reflect the organisation's culture and reality. The focus is on middle managers because they understand an organisation better as they possess rich knowledge and experience about their organisation and its occupants (Osterman, 2009). Middle managers' stories also can help the researcher understand and expose their organisation's culture (Heidrich, 2014). In support of this, Hames (2015) concludes that the amount of activities performed by middle managers, along with their in-depth knowledge about their respective organisation, position them on the most influential hierarchy compared to other levels of management.

Having said all of the above, the problem statement of this study reads as follows: Middle managers construct and shape the reality of their organisations, and thus, what cultural dimensions practices are reflected in the stories of middle managers who construct and shape the reality of organisations?

1.2 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In recent years, a vast number of organisations have hired consultants to listen to and study stories told by employees as they are determined to reflect the state of the organisation (Gabriel, 2008d; Schein, 2010).

Stories are believed to have helped increase the organisations' health, state of communication and performance (Gabriel, 2015b) because stories told by organisational members help to understand the cultural values of organisations; organisational members' stories reflect the behaviours, norms and values practised or not practised in an organisation. By listening to organisational members' stories, organisations can improve their organisation's work culture such as improve the dynamics of leadership, bolster organising emotions process and enable organisational members to learn from each other's experience and later strive to be better employees or employers.

This study can be a case study for other organisations to recognise the importance of stories told by middle managers that is with the belief that stories act as a source of intelligence in creating a prosperous and healthy organisation; a prosperous and healthy organisation has elements such as open communication, effective and creative management, positive working climate, while organisational members and leaders support each other mentally, emotionally, and physically (Lowe, 2010). Indeed, by studying stories one can understand the current culture of an organisation and can use the stories told to enhance the working practices and productivity. Specifically, the output of this study can help XYZ employees to understand their leaders' construction of organisational reality. Similarly it provides XYZ leaders the intelligence to understand their employees' life-world; life-world means the organisational life of the employees which is made up from their working

experiences, beliefs, activities, and feelings and how all these govern their behaviours and actions while at work (Kraus, 2015).

This present work also contributes to the enrichment of the existing body of knowledge in the area of organisational communication. In addition, the output of this present study can help serve as future reference for Malaysian organisational practitioners and academic researchers on the subject of organisational culture.

1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

There are four objectives for this study and it aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify XYZ middle managers' constructed reality on the life-world of their organisation.
2. To analyse how XYZ middle managers' stories reflect the organisation's culture.
3. To identify the organisational culture dimensions practised at XYZ organisation.
4. To determine whether XYZ is a toxic organisation.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do XYZ middle managers construct the reality of their organisational life-world?
2. In what ways do the stories told by XYZ middle managers reflect the culture of XYZ organisation?
3. From the stories told by XYZ middle managers, what are the organisational culture dimensions practised at XYZ organisation?
4. Is XYZ a toxic organisation?

1.5 OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

The terms that are used and mentioned in this research are defined as below:

- **Organisational culture:** Organisational culture is a set of values, beliefs and shared assumptions that guide members in an organisation to do things in a certain way (Schein, 2010).
- **Organisational stories:** Organisational stories refer to the stories produced by members of an organisation through spoken communication, non-verbal communication such as body language, gestures and behaviours (Fisher, 1999). The types of stories include organisation's history, founders of the organisation, organisation's environment, mission and vision, events and celebrations and organisation's rituals.
- **Organisational miasma:** Organisational miasma refers to the state of an organisation's culture in which this type of culture can cause members of an organisation to be constantly depressed, fragile, miserable and traumatised (Gabriel, 2008a).
- **Top management level:** Leaders at XYZ organisation in a position with a title of Board of Directors, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Vice Presidents (VP) to the CEO.
- **Middle management level:** Employees at XYZ organisation in a position with a title Head of Department or Supervisor. They are in charge in supervising supporting staff group one and two.

1.6 SUMMARY

The first chapter discusses the background information that is important to the study, statement of the problem, significance of the present study, research objectives and

also research questions. The terms that are used in this study are also defined at the end of the chapter. In the second chapter, the researcher discusses the literature and theory that are related to this research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter is divided into several parts. The first part focuses on the theory that underpins the present study which is Edgar Schein's (2010) organisational culture theory. This part also specifically addresses the definitions and components of organisational culture. The second part consists of the discussion on organisational stories, the relationship between organisational stories and organisational culture, organisational stories and organisational miasma, themes of organisational stories, and organisational culture dimensions that exist across organisations.

2.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1.1 Edgar Schein's (2010) Organisational Culture Theory

Organisational culture theory developed by Edgar Schein (2010) is used to guide the researcher in this study. According to Schein (2010), organisational culture refers to "the patterns of shared basic assumptions that a group learned as it solved its problem of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and, therefore taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems" (p. 18). Thus, it can be understood that organisational culture is a shared basic assumption that is learned and accepted by organisational members through joint-learning experiences, as their organisation learns how to deal with internal and external organisational issues (Schein, 2010).

Schein (2010) describes that the culture of an organisation can be studied from three levels which are artifacts, norms and values, and beliefs and assumptions. Artifacts are any symbols of culture that exist in the physical and social work environment at any organisation. It consists of what a researcher sees, hears, and feels while conducting the study at the organisation (Hatch, 1997).

The second level of culture is norms and values. Norms and values represent the underlying beliefs of organisational members. It signifies the social principles, goals, and standards of an organisation, and how the norms and values are being used by employees to make judgements and decisions (Schein, 2009). Norms underline the goals or principles that are important to an organisation. Values act as the basis for establishing what is acceptable and unacceptable to be practised in the organisation. Values are further divided into two which are espoused values and enacted values (Schein, 2009). Espoused values are the beliefs or code of conducts that organisational members say they value and enacted values are the real values performed by organisational members; how employees and employer actually behave. From norms and values, Schein (2009) maintains that the researcher can understand and see the culture of an organisation.

Due to the weaknesses in artifacts, the meaning behind each artifacts is difficult to interpret, while for norms and values, most of the time, organisational members often do things differently from what they say they value. Schein (2009) claims the culture of an organisation is best learned by getting to the deepest level of culture, which is by studying the beliefs and assumptions of the organisational members. In other words, it is suggested that the culture of an organisation and the reasons for this culture to occur can be understood easier by listening to organisational members' stories of their working experiences. Those stories can guide researchers to

understand what, why and how certain things happen in an organisation. Schein (2010) notes that after listening and analysing stories on the shared beliefs and assumptions of organisational members, a researcher can clearly identify and recognise the cultural practices of an organisation. Hatch (1997) and Miller (2009) in support of that notion, note that listening to respondents' beliefs and assumptions offers researchers the path to determine the reasons behind the way organisation members talk, act and behave, which later help them identify the cultural patterns of the organisation.

Moving on, the works of Ferraz (2012) and Porter (2013) are among recent studies that employ Schein's organisational culture theory. These two works demonstrate the attempt by researchers to uncover organisational culture using stories told by organisational members. They maintain that the culture of the organisation can be learned by analysing stories or beliefs and assumptions of the respondents. In their studies, they asked their respondents a number of questions related to several aspects of the organisation including how the respondents do their work, their organisation's background, how they perceive their organisation, and also how the members perceive their colleagues and superiors in the organisation. All of the stories told by the respondents were later analysed and identified as reflecting the culture of the respondents' organisation.

2.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, the researcher discusses the literature that is related to the area of study.

2.2.1 Organisational Stories

2.2.1.1 *What are stories?*

Stories have a central role in human life and culture. Indeed, humans are “homo narrans” (Fisher, 1999, p. 270) or storytellers because people communicate and tell stories to each other every day. Stories are related to culture because they symbolize and represent the cultural values and practices embedded in the storytellers’ life.

Gabriel (2008d) simply defines stories as meaningful and narratives twisted with plots that people tell to share their experiences, entertain or influence others. In the work of Fisher (1999), stories are defined as information that results from verbal and non-verbal communication concerning the organisation’s identity and development that employees or employer in an organisation share with each other or to the people outside their organisation. Contextually, stories offer information covering an array of cultural significance established in the organisation and the role(s) every individual has in the organisation (Stovall, 2007). Boje (1991) suggests that stories are bits and pieces of information that together account for the past history or present experiences of an organisation.

In addition to the above viewpoints on definition of stories, Gabriel (1991) describes stories as symbolic or meaningful constructions of the organisation’s history and future, organisational life and events that are being told by the organisational members. He explains further by saying that stories can be in the form of short and long conversations, jokes, nicknames, or any other sorts of information that are being shared using words or body language. Another prominent scholar, Czarniawska (1997), defines stories as the simple information or detailed information on chronologies or reports of events happening inside an organisation and experienced by the organisation’s members. In retrospective, stories are all types of information told

by organisational members about their organisation's background, events and activities, people inside the organisation ranging from leaders to supporting staff, about the storyteller's work, and also about the past and future of the organisation.

Stories have certain defining characteristics and in one of the scholarly work such as by Brown (1990), she remarks that stories have four characteristics. First, stories have sense of temporality which means past experiences are brought forward to the present. Second, stories have a story grammar which means it has an introduction, lead-in stories, recounting events, and closing. Third, stories have a ring of truth to organisational members and fourth, stories told are relevant to the members of an organisation.

2.2.1.2 Storytelling in organisations

Storytelling has been part of every organisation and it occurs every single day. For example, in an organisation, storytelling is when a worker briefs the duties to his colleagues, when a staff shares on the disagreement he witnesses in a meeting, when a boss shares the vision of their organisation to the employees and also when a manager suggests to his staff the idea on how to solve a problem.

Gabriel (2011a) narrates that storytelling in organisations can help top management to manage their organisation. This is because with storytelling, it helps organisational members to tell their feelings about their workplace to their leaders such as their happiness, sadness, ambitions and hopes. He also identifies that storytelling in organisations helps to expose the cultural and political lives of the organisation since stories told by an employee, employer or group of employees represent the collective and meaningful memories of the organisation. In addition to that, organisations have been using storytelling to mend relationships, brainstorm new