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Understanding the cultural dimension of career development

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Abstract

Does culture set boundaries which restrain the occupational growth among members of an organization? A career is according to general theory a set of occupational experiences and roles that makes up a persons' working life. The aim of the paper is to discuss how the cultural dimension could be used to understand the low mobility in many organizations which means that people getting "locked in" during decades even if they do not view it that way by themselves.

Cultures are anchored in the organizational collective and exercise influence without the direct involvement of particular key actors. Here the culture-as-root-metaphor according to Smircich (1983) has been applied. The cultural dimension is viewed as a guide to interpret what goes on in organizations. Culture is not seen as a variable but more as a fundamental dimension which permeates the system of occupational positions in an organization.

The focus in the paper is on understanding the cultural dimension in a person's occupational position. New innovative measures or cultivating activities have to be tested and evaluated to break the old boundaries of careers. The paper is based on empirical material from a project for career development program in a Swedish agency.

Different aspects of career development

Everyone who works has a career. Career is a way to describe that people move from one position to another. They are "carried" and that is happening in different directions. Career means the unfolding sequence of a person's work experience over time. (Arthur, Hall and Lawrence, 1989)

A *career*, according to Schein (1992), is a set of occupational experiences and roles that make up a person's work life (p. 207). Everyone has a career anchor even if many occupations means few opportunities for the anchor to be expressed at work. Thus, production workers have career anchors though such anchors may exhibit themselves more readily outside work as hobbies and other activities. In general, Schein means that all career occupants have to resolve the balance between autonomy and security. The career anchors could according to Schein be described by the following eight dimensions.

1) Security/Stability. You are primarily concerned about jobs and work that will make you feel economically secure and stable.

- 2) Autonomy/Independence. You primarily want your working-life to be under your control.
- 3) Technical and functional competence. You seek higher levels of challenge within your area of expertise, and you resist general management because that would require you to drop the exercise of your skill.
- 4) General management competence. Your anchor is to rise to a high level within the organization.
- 5) Entrepreneurial creativity. You have always wanted to create a business or product or service of your own, where your success was entirely due to your own creative effort.
- 6) Service/dedication to cause. You will only remain in a job or organization if it allows you to fulfill the values you hold.
- 7) Pure challenge. If this were your anchor, you require the kind of work that will always permit you to feel that you are overcoming "impossible" barriers, meeting very difficult challenges.
- 8) Life style. If this were your anchor, you would feel that your work and career life must be integrated with other aspects of your total life, including your family situation and your personal growth needs.

Career has a traditional *vertical direction* in peoples mind. People work to become a supervisor, a middle manager or finally a CEO. That is the traditional way of thinking around career. Career has primarily *a time dimension*. People are expected to develop their skills and become more competitive during time. They start as an errand boy and become after several years a manager. It has also a *geographical or physical dimension*. People see themselves as moving from one position to another in the organisation - from one room to another or from one company to another company. Somebody make a career by being sent around in the world to different locations of subsidiaries.

In the traditional company management is usually more interested in getting people to recruit for higher positions than for going in a horizontal direction. The company view is natural as it is expensive to find people to higher positions from outside. This means that in the traditional company context people are expected to go vertical and to be interested in doing so, the vertical career movement is by tradition stimulated by economic incentives. Most people would gain from getting an opportunity to move from one position to another vertically. The time dimension is important as people are probably more content over time if they get an opportunity to see and learn new things. It is even here natural to think about that it also is a dimension of growing socially with new contacts and especially with the challenge to learn new things in the job.

Organizational career is by tradition the term for describing that people are expected to go vertical.

The *boundaryless careers* is opposed to the "organizational careers" which are the "bounded" or organisational career. The later view saw people in orderly employment arrangements achieved through vertical coordination in mainly large, stable firms (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). The specifics of boundaryless careers are that careers moves across boundaries of separate employers. Another meaning is that the career

actors perceive a boundaryless future regardless of the structural constraints. And another meaning of the concept is when traditional organizational boundaries involving hierarchical reporting and advancement principles are broken (Ibid, p.) Here we are using boundaryless in the meaning of the latter definition.

The aim of the paper is to discuss how the cultural dimension could be used to understand the low mobility in many organizations which means that people getting “locked in” during decades even if they do not view it that way by themselves.

The problem background

About 43 % of the workforce in Sweden has been employed by the same employer the last 10 years and about 30 % has been employed by the same employer the last 30 years (SCB).

Some of those who have been employed for a long period by the same employer have not been aware of their situation and some of them should not even move. But some of them feel by themselves that they should move ifIt is sometimes interpreted as people have got “*locked in*” in their positions/occupations. They can not come further as they do not see the possibilities or dare to move. In a study by Aronsson (2000) it was found that 36% of the permanent employed workers and 62 % of the temporary employed were in some for of negative employment situation. They were in employment positions or situations which they should have left for long time ago but they had not for some reason done so. Aronsson name them as being in a non-preferred working place or non-preferred occupation. Those who were in a non-preferred occupation as well as in a non-preferred working-place had small opportunities for development and got weak support from their supervisor. They also reported more symptoms like stomach trouble, discomfort and fatigue than the other employment groups. Finally they recommend that stress and health studies should consider even to employment situation and work environment aspects when interpreting data.

The research question

The data from Aronsson(2000) shows that a negative employment situation is more common among blue-collar workers and low educated. Could the phenomenon of “locked in” be interpreted as that people from different classes has different views of moving around in an organisation? Does career has different symbol meaning to people from different class and different contexts?

The attitudes of being “locked in” could mean that the organisation and its structure do not fit for those are not acquainted with thinking in terms of career. As organisations are formed by those who are not “locked in” and they put up the norms and the rules the company do not get the results of the organisational structure as it wish. People do not feel the expectations. Maybe they do not see it as a favour to make a career. Maybe those who tell that they are locked in feel so because they do not look upon themselves as a multiple resource with different opportunities. As they are often low educated they do not know their potential. The literature on careers is relatively silent about the ways in which career development affects the structure and

functioning of organizations. According to Weick (1996) "to capture how career development shapes organizational form requires that one pay attention to organizational properties that are often invisible when people examine organizations as independent variables" (p. 42)

Symbolic interactionism

Culture is a system of shared symbols and meanings. Symbolic action needs to be interpreted in order to be understood. According to Smircich(1983) Organizational Symbolism is as a method for interpreting suitable for those who looks at culture as a root metaphor. According to the symbolic interactionist, society is always developing as people interact. A society is said to have the following qualities:

1. It is characterised by social symbolic interaction. Actors take one another into account as they act, they intentionally communicate, and they interpret one another's acts.
2. It is characterised by certain type of interaction: cooperation. Society is cooperative problem solving.
3. It possesses culture, a shared perspective and a body of rules that facilitate social interaction and cooperation. (Charon, 1998, p. 189)

If we see an organization or a company as a little society the theory above could be used to analyze why people are staying so long with the same employer in Sweden, let us call it that they are bounded by the same employer even if they of course are voluntary employed. In U.S. and in many other countries the careers are less bounded. In US median employment tenure for all U.S. workers is just four-and-a half years and for managers and professionals just six years.

The root metaphor - the fundamental dimension

Cultures are anchored in the organizational collective and exercise influence without the direct involvement of particular key actors. Here the culture-as-root-metaphor according to Smircich (1983) has been applied. The cultural is here viewed as a guide to interpret what goes on in organizations. Culture is not seen as a variable but more as a fundamental dimension which permeates the system of occupational positions in an organization.

According to Smircich (1983) culture is an epistemological device which could be used to frame the study of organization as social phenomenon. She has done a review of the different ways by which researchers has held varying conceptions of culture. The different conceptions give rise to different research questions and interests. The differences in approach to the organization-culture relationship are derived from differences in the basic assumptions that researchers make about "organization" and "culture".

Smircich (1983) summarizes five different programs of research that flow out of linking the terms culture and organization and examines their underlying assumptions and metaphors. In the first two, culture is either an independent or dependent, external or internal, organizational variable. In the final three, culture is not available at all, but

is a root metaphor for conceptualizing organization. "When culture is a root metaphor, the researcher's attention shifts from concerns about what do organizations accomplish and how may they accomplish it more efficiently, to how be organization accomplished and what does it mean to be organized?"

The question is what does career mean for the individual employee but here we focus on what does career means for the organization. What does career means for the organisational rationality and for efficiency? Does the general meaning of career as a symbol set bounds to what people really do? Is the symbolism in career very strongly linked to vertical movement? Does that mean that people see themselves as restricted to do a career in vertical direction? Would it be fruitful to try to give career a broader meaning? If organisations want to get more horizontal movements by their employees would it be possible to reach that goal by trying to change the symbolic value of career? Undoubtedly career also has a negative tone to many people. "You should be satisfied with what you can get and not think that you are better than others". Could that strong and symbolic of the word career be changed?

To summarize, culture is not seen as a variable but more as a fundamental dimension which permeates the system of occupational positions in an organization.

The perspective

The boundaryless career perspective suggests that people take responsibility for their own career futures. To stimulate people to take more responsibility for their own careers employers could try "cultivating" activities to encourage people to move. Another perspective is that it is good for the organization as well as for people that people have access to their own capability and learn how they can improve their knowledge by moving around and learn new things.

According to Becker (1964) learning over the course of a career adds to a person's employment value, or human capital. As people move around and do not just make a vertical but even make a horizontal career the effect will be that the more they learn the more employable they will be. That means, as I see it, that the horizontal career must be acknowledged and more encouraged from a societal point of view. More of horizontal career development could increase the strength of the work force and makes it more flexible.

The Propeller project as a cultivating activity

Many companies need to acquire a higher awareness among their employees about the latter's own possibilities inside and outside the organization. Organizations can facilitate this by improving the process by which work is matched to the people performing the work tasks. They can initiate a dialogue with their employees and help people develop their own anchor.

The Propeller project was initiated in 1998 as a joint adventure among three agencies: the Swedish National Tax Board, The Regional Stockholm Tax Office and the Enforcement Authority. The intention was to create a common micro labor market to

help employees become more aware of their own development and to create competence exchange in the organization. It was assumed that the project could facilitate the mobility within and between the agencies.

A follow-up study was performed in 2000, the results of which are reported in Olsson (2002).

The aims of the Propeller project could be summarized as follows:

- increase the mobility among employees, both within a given agency between agencies,
- reach a "competence exchange" in the agencies where people should start their training and education,
- increase the "degree of employability" of the employees,
- protect the agency from having to take radical changes later in cases where knowledge among employees has become obsolete, and
- develop the agencies to more attractive employers on the labor market.

Additionally, one should stress that through the project a common micro labor market was created. Some managers had the following to say about the project "It should make people become more aware and responsible for their own development." The managers' felt that the project should be an asset in the effort to make people more employable. They also reported, "This would be a way to pick people out from their comfort zones." Propeller should be seen as a unique opportunity and considered something "extra" "with the golden edge" for those employed in these three agencies. This implies that they become more attractive as an employer and makes the burden of recruiting people in the future much easier.

The executives also stressed that Propeller should be seen as complementary to the already practiced (in use) planning dialogue with the employees.

The model used by Propeller: a career counseling program

The process of career counseling begins whereby the employee discusses with his or her boss about the possibility to become a customer in Propeller. The boss has to make a decision whether to allow his or her employee to participate in the program. The program for career development contained at the most eight hours of consultation with the external consultant over a period of six weeks to three months when the employee or Propellers "customer", i.e. met with a consultant. Through these contacts, employees will be provided with help to determine where they are in their career and in relation to their expectations and goals, as well as their strengths and weaknesses. The consultation should end with an action and time schedule with concrete steps to be taken to reach the stated goals.

The interviews with the consultants show that they have found that it is positive that the employees have started with discussions on the need for career counseling with their chiefs. It makes it more natural to link it to the ordinary planning dialogues. The consultants have detected a risk in this process, which is related to the chief's desire to

retain their employees, i.e. once they discover their employees' potential, they are not so willing to let release them to another department or to another employer. According to the consultants, the reason might be that the chiefs are in the habit of thinking only from their own narrow perspective. Consequently, the organization's goals tend to be less important relative to the chief's personal goals.

Job/role planning reveals that many people will become obsolete within their own career span. To protect the organization from becoming superannuated some organizations try to start a dialogue with the employees to protect both themselves and the employees from becoming outdated. In a matching process the company will be dependent on having career occupants being interested in discovering more about their own capacity and their career anchors. The implication is that a good model for career planning is in the interest of both the organization and the individual. The results of this follow-up study indicate that the Propeller model for career planning used by the Swedish National Tax Board and the two sister organizations was exceedingly effective and that all the goals of the project were successfully completed. In summary, the model was found to increase the mobility among employees in the three agencies included in this project.

In the beginning of August 2000, 46 persons had terminated their participation in Propeller's career counseling program. These individuals were contacted and an interview with each was conducted. The purpose of the interview was to determine if the program had had any impact on their career development. Only 6 persons (or 13%) were not available for the interview.

Table 1: How did the career for the respondent develop during the first half-year in the Propeller counseling program?

	Number	%
1. Changed job position or location		
Changed externally	3	6,5%
Changed internally/same agency	12	26
Already changed before Propeller	1	2,2
Job applicant	4	8,7
Totally	20	43,4%
2. Planning for change		
Planning for change	7	15,2
"Is interested in moving"	4	8,6
Totally	11	24%
3. Studies	2	6,5
4. "Got confirmation"	3	6,5
5. Wrong expectations	4	8,6
6. Do not know/Not contact	6	13,0
Totally	46	100%

The results indicated that, by the end of the study, more than 43% (20 of 46) of those persons who used the program during the first year had already moved to another position within the same agency, to one of the three external agencies described earlier, or to an agency outside the three. Twelve of 46 persons (or 26%) had moved internally between departments. Six of 46 persons (or 13%) had changed from one agency to another. Three persons (or 6.5%) moved externally to employers outside the three agencies. Four persons were job applicants. Additionally, 11 persons (or 9%) planned to change or move from their position to another sometime in the next few years. This rate of changing position or location implies that the mobility effect could be expected to become as high as 67%. It is also worthwhile to note that two of the respondents had become students. Only three persons reported that they received confirmation from the counseling program that they were in the right job/job position.

The result of a career counseling project such as Propeller could be easier to understand if we return to the concept **career anchors** as used by Schein (1992). The concept of career anchor grew out of Schein's research on how career occupants define themselves in relation to their work. A person's career anchor is the evolving self-concept of what an individual is good at, the individual's needs and motives, and what values govern ones work-related choices (Schein, 1992). According to Schein, a career anchor evolves over a relatively long time. But let's argue that the employee is recruited on the grounds that he or she should be satisfied with a good and stable situation, as well as a situation that is economically secure. When the content of the job changes very little, you have to be satisfied with what you have and are expected more or less to fit in with the description of the career anchor "Security/Stability. You are primarily concerned about jobs and works that will make you feel economically secure and stable". However, in a fast changing environment the organization needs people with other types of career anchor. Further, people need to be truly aware of their own career anchors and the possibility to match them against the organization's needs. Career anchors could be determined by a self-diagnostic exercise (Ibid, p. 213). Therefore, the idea underlying a career program is primarily to motivate people to become more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. At the same time, it becomes easier for the organization to get the right people at the right place in that the matching procedure presumes that the two parties know what they want and need.

As we saw in the present study of the tax agencies career could involve going from one **position** to another, **geographical or physical movement**, inside an organization (i.e. internal movement) or it could involve going from one organization to another (i.e. external movement). Sometimes it involves moving from down to up in the same organization (**vertical career development**), or from one **location** to another, maintaining the same level of responsibility (**horizontal career development**). It also includes the movement from one position to another **over time**.

The probability to find individuals who are willing to move horizontally is probably greater if the employer use a **cultivating activity** like career development programs than if you do not. This is because people are expecting to move vertically (moving up the ladder) rather than horizontally (maintaining the same position but moving to, e.g., a new department or another organization). In the present case the Propeller program was the answer regarding the need for a diagnostic exercise with the help of

external consultants. It made it easier for the employees to see the various possibilities in the three agencies at the same time. And it made it easier for the employer to market the idea that these three agencies jointly constituted one common **micro labor market**. The boundaries of an organization are sometimes not set by marked borders and legal rules but by people's expectations and traditions. Even concerning career development, there are invisible boundaries set by traditions and by people's thoughts about themselves and their role in an organization. The present study has shown that old boundaries often summarized as "culture" could be broken by a new order and new ways of working with career development.

Why people do not move vertically by themselves to a larger extent than they do could be interpreted both by the tendency among people to trust their career anchor and that they are not being asked to go horizontally. It makes it possible to understand that the career program opens their eyes and makes that happen. The culture does not expect them earlier to move horizontally so why should they. And as one person told me from the interviews: "I see that I am best at doing this and I am afraid that I am nearly married to the work. To let someone else do it means to take the risk that it should not be done at all. I have until now looked at the work as a punishment command to myself!"

The managers in the Propeller project were aware of that they did not encourage people to do career if they could lose those persons to other departments. They told me that they have to change attitudes themselves if they should be able to work for the organization's best. People in the organization are not used to see their best employees go to the colleague in another department or in another agency. Their main and cultural grounded standpoint is that they should keep the best people for themselves.

Conclusion

The focus in this paper has been on the career development program as a cultivating measure or activity. Why are not people moving around in a larger extent in an organization and is it possible to learn more about that by studying the process going on during a program for career development? In the paper is discussed how the cultural dimension could be used to understand the low mobility in many organizations which means that people getting "locked in" during decades even if they do not view it that way by themselves. As the culture is seen as root-metaphor the culture is seen as part of the process and not as an independent variable.

To protect the organization from becoming superannuated some organizations try to start a dialogue with the employees to protect both themselves and the employees from becoming outdated. In a matching process the company will be dependent on having career occupants being interested in discovering more about their own capacity and their career anchors. The implication is that a good model for career planning is in the interest of both the organization and the individual.

The results of this follow-up study indicate that the Propeller model for career planning used by the Swedish National Tax Board and the two sister organizations was exceedingly effective and that all the goals of the project were successfully

completed. In summary, the model was found to increase the mobility among the three agencies included in this project.

The hypothesis that career development or lack of mobility or that people get locked in in their jobs or situations could be understood by the culture of the organization. It has to do with employees who have their view of what a career stand for and to whom it belongs. It also has to do with the work and the educational status among employees. That has through this study been demonstrated and discussed. Through different activities like a career development program it is possible to facilitate and overcome the boundaries which could be found in the organizational culture.

Litterature

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