

Understanding a Successful System from the Inside-Out

By Barb Spice

Tales from the Field, a monthly column, consists of reports of evidence-based performance improvement practice and advice, presented by graduate students, alumni, and faculty of Boise State University's Instructional and Performance Technology department.

Introduction and Field Setting

This report describes a project conducted in Professor Don Winiiecki's "ethnographic research in organizations" class, which sought to study and understand, from the point of view of its members (the *emic* perspective), how an organization has succeeded in connecting diverse members of an Amish and 'English' community. The setting was Vic's Hardware, a fifth generation establishment in a rural Midwestern town in Amish country. The research question was: "How does the culture of a store's staff facilitate sustainable links with diverse groups in its community?"

Isolating Patterns

An initial conceptual formative model of potential factors comprising staff culture was constructed through a review of related literature, and subsequently used to plan data gathering. This formative model was intentionally broad and was actively refined through the project to gradually create a model that mapped the dynamics linking the organization and community (Schensul & LeCompte, 1999).

Data from interviews, observations, and archived documents were analyzed inductively to identify patterns or networks of influences which created and sustained organizational and community links. Triangulation of data showed systemic links to the community throughout the organization.

Dynamics of a System

Analysis identified patterns made up of three factors in staff culture which facilitate connections within the community: values, management influences, and staff interaction. A definition of each factor and sub-factors follows:

- Values – internal guiding principles for decision making when interacting with the community;
 - Service – orientation to the 'other' in interactions
 - Relationships – maintaining links between community members and the store
 - Trust – following through on what is promised, regardless of short term costs
 - History – building a personal and organizational legacy maintaining the above
- Management Influences – organization of the physical and social environment that influences the direction and success of the business;
 - Work structure – providing social and physical environment and supports allowing individuals to customize actions in response to immediate conditions
 - Rules/policies – avoiding overspecification of processes in favor of flexible orientations to immediate conditions and stable values
 - Staffing -- hiring people who have earned the trust of others in the community

- Staff Interaction – influence on one another in the presence of other staff members;
 - Context – act in ways that attend to immediate conditions and satisfy values of the organization and its environment
 - Tenure – staff members’ experience with each other permit functioning in support of each other, the store and values of community members
 - Style – familiarity with the community and each other supports distinct communication styles which serve to maintain values of the store and community.

The systemic interrelationships between factors in staff culture and the community are diagrammed in Figure 1.

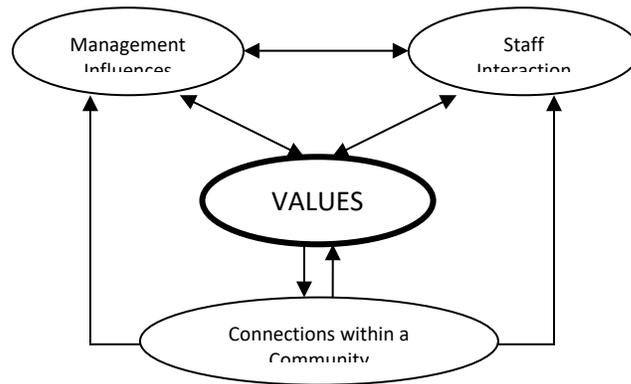


Figure 1. Systemic interrelationships of staff culture and factors with the community

The three factors in staff culture are experienced by the community through the primary factor of *values*. How those values are expressed and demonstrated by the staff is thought to be the primary means of facilitating connections within the community. These connections are made and maintained by more than simply performing with efficiency or speed or compliance against some externally defined rule system. Members of Vic’s Hardware succeed by acting in ways that fit into and maintain the local culture, its social systems, personal desires and requirements of its clientele. It’s not simply *what they do* but *how they do it* that matters.

Values have been embedded into the cultural fabric of the store and are experienced as a reinforcing loop between the staff and the community. Connections with the community link with management influences and staff interaction, which serve as inputs to the three factors of staff culture, thereby strengthening and reinforcing the system.

Values are maintained and adapted by continually adjusting to changes such as technology, economic influences, and competition from large retailers. Adapting to change has been influenced by management in a seemingly ‘light’ but robust manner through simple processes and policies, and by careful attention to staffing. The staff interacts by using mechanisms to obtain information and provide services that reflect established values.

Discipline-Grounded Advice

Ethnographic methods allow for identification and description of factors which constitute success from an internal or *emic* perspective rather than studying them simply from an external

or *etic* perspective (Winiecki, 2007). Use of ethnographic methods in the practice of performance improvement can provide unique perspectives from a top-down approach based on rationalized or external rules. For practitioners of human performance technology (HPT), ethnography can seem unstructured and unorganized; however, when the practice of HPT incorporates an ethnographic approach, the findings can provide a deeper and more granular understanding of functioning of a system within its unique contexts.

References

LeCompte, M., & Schensul, J. (Eds.). (1999). *The ethnographer's toolkit*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

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Author Bio

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