COMMENTARY

The importance of culture in the era of COVID-19

Diane L. Daum* and Catherine C. Maraist

CultureIQ
*Corresponding author. Email: diane.daum@cultureiq.com

Rudolph et al. (2021) present several topic areas that warrant renewed attention through the lens of life with COVID-19. They mention organizational culture in passing, and we present here several reasons to urgently bring it to the forefront of research and practice. Our early research suggests several important implications and questions for further study. There are many different definitions of culture in the literature, but they tend to share common threads such as shared experiences of employees, rich traditions, and that culture is a source of information on how things are done (e.g., unwritten rules) and of collective identity (Ehrhart, Schneider, & Macey, 2014). As we discuss with our clients, "culture is often thought of as an organization's personality, influencing how people react to adversity, conflict, change, failure, and success" (Young & Maraist, 2020). The pandemic that we are currently experiencing has certainly resulted in organizations needing to address adversity and change, with some succeeding and others failing. The study of culture has many important implications both during the shut-down period of the pandemic and the return to work. Here, we explore just a few.

Purpose

One of the hallmarks of a strong and effective culture is a compelling, shared sense of purpose that employees can rally around. When we speak of purpose, we are not talking about a strategy or goal, such as "doubling revenue in the next decade," but rather some commitment to making a contribution to customers or society as a whole. An event such as a pandemic may strengthen or weaken that shared sense of purpose. For example, we have seen how the pandemic has had different effects across industries. Employees of emergency health care facilities, grocery stores, or manufacturers of health care equipment likely experienced an increased sense of purpose as the demand for their services and products exploded. Those working in other retail environments, such as clothing stores, may have had a diminished sense of purpose, as their places of work were deemed "nonessential" and closed for long periods.

Other organizations used this moment to redefine or expand their purpose. For example, some restaurants donated meals to health care workers on the front lines and some manufacturers retooled their machinery to make masks, face shields, and ventilators. Some stepped up to provide emergency assistance to their communities by allowing employees to volunteer in food pantries or donating goods or money to community organizations.

Some important questions for research include how organizations maintain their sense of purpose during a period of closure and how redefining or expanding their purpose influences the long-term engagement and commitment of employees after the pandemic subsides.

Dignity

Dignity refers to the organization's beliefs about how people (including employees and customers) should be treated and valued. This includes a commitment to providing a healthy and safe work environment, and demonstrating respect and trust toward employees and customers.

One indicator of dignity that has been on full display during the pandemic is the extent to which organizations have demonstrated a commitment to employee safety, versus sacrificing safety for profits. Although some organizations were quick to take measures such as installing Plexiglas in front of cash registers or between work stations, limiting the number of customers or employees in a shared space, or requiring employees and customers to wear masks, others have still not implemented these measures, leaving their employees feeling "expendable" rather than "essential." In our own benchmark study of culture during the pandemic, we saw that those who continued to be exposed to the virus through work were significantly less favorable on items such as "I believe that senior leadership will act with integrity when they have to choose between getting business results and doing the right thing" than those who were safely at home (Daum & Mastrangelo, 2020, p. 8).

Another area in which dignity comes into play is the trust that workers must have in each other and in their leadership to feel safe going to work. In addition to any reorganization of the work-space, changes to policies, and personal protective equipment provided to keep employees safe, each employee must rely on their coworkers to prioritize the safety of others. To the extent that one's coworkers refuse to wear masks, hover near their workstation without keeping a safe distance, or engage in risky behavior (e.g., going to crowded venues) while away from work, employees may not feel safe.

Research questions regarding dignity include how safety measures implemented (or not implemented) are related to longer term commitment and/or turnover and the relationships between safety perceptions and trust of leaders and coworkers. In addition, the link between customer perceptions of how employees were treated at work during the pandemic and their future willingness to purchase is an important topic.

Agility

The pandemic required many organizations to radically shift their way of doing business in a short amount of time. Some of these shifts were minor, such as making the determination that many employees could and should work from home. Others were more challenging such as the move from "dine in" to takeout or delivery that many restaurants made. Some organizations made major shifts to their business models to survive. One example is a small restaurant chain that leveraged its suppliers and existing employees to create a "grocery delivery service" where they sold and delivered items that they would have used in their dine-in restaurant directly to customers (including the toilet paper!).

Some researchers have suggested that having a strong culture is a disadvantage for organizations attempting a change (Sorenson, 2002), whereas others (Flynn & Chatman, 2001) have noted that a strong culture can include cultural elements such as creativity and risk taking that can be leveraged in changing environments. Because the pandemic has forced a need for businesses to be agile, it provides many opportunities to advance our knowledge about why some organizations are better able to identify and quickly act on the opportunities in front of them and ways that the culture may help (such as focusing on creativity/risk taking) or hinder (such as having many layers of bureaucratic decision making) their progress.

Second, employees' perceptions of the organization's ability to quickly adapt to the changing landscape is likely related to their sense of optimism about the future of the organization, leading to increased (or decreased) feelings of job security.

A third area for research is the relationship between organizational agility and individual flexibility. We often think of agility being higher when people are empowered to make their own decisions and move quickly, but in our own research, we found that many who lost flexibility as a result of the crisis still rated their organizations' agility highly (Daum & Mastrangelo, 2020). In some cases, for the organization as a whole to move quickly, employees may need to take on very specific and prescribed roles that lack individual flexibility.

A call to action

We have expanded on just three areas of organizational culture as they relate to the pandemic, but there are certainly many more. We encourage academicians and practitioners alike to consider organizational culture as a fertile area of research both during and following the pandemic. Organizational culture has been a well-researched and important area for industrial-organizational psychologists and has been gaining even more importance with business leaders, including CEOs. The pandemic has made culture even more important for organizations to address so that they can effectively and successfully react to adversity, conflict, and change.

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