

Handy's four types of organisational cultures

Another model of culture, popularised by Charles Handy (1999) – and following work by Harrison (1972) – also presents organisational cultures as classified into four major types: the power culture, the role culture, the task culture, and the person or support culture. Handy's approach may help you understand why you have been more comfortable in some organisations than others. Interestingly, although Handy chooses to talk about culture, he shows the structures associated with his culture types. This may be because of the difficulty of drawing something as diffuse as culture, but it also reinforces the fact that culture and structure are interrelated.

Person culture

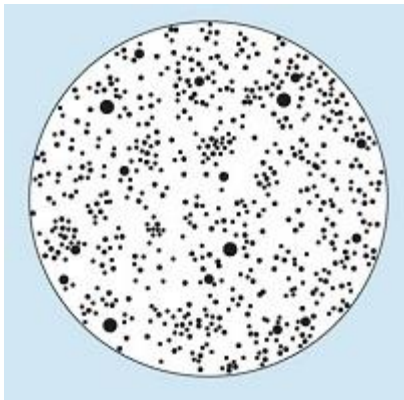


Figure 21 Person culture

Long description

Person culture is an unusual culture. It is not found in many organisations, yet many people espouse some of its values. This type of culture is illustrated by a loose cluster or a constellation of stars (see Figure 1.10). In this culture the individual is the focal point; if there is a structure or an organisation, it exists only to serve and assist the individuals within it, to further their own interests without any overriding objective.

Clearly, not many organisations can exist with this sort of culture, or produce it, since organisations tend to have some form of corporate objective over and above the personal objectives of those who comprise them. Furthermore, control mechanisms, and even management hierarchies, are impossible in these cultures except by mutual consent. An individual can leave the organisation, but the organisation seldom has the power to evict an individual. Influence is shared and the power base, if needed, is usually expert; that is, people do what they are good at and are listened to for their expertise.

Consultants – both within organisations and freelance workers – and architects' partnerships often have this person-orientation. So do some universities. A cooperative may strive for the person culture in organisational form, but as it

develops it often becomes, at best, a task culture, or often a power or role culture.

Although it would be rare to find an organisation in which the person culture predominated, you will often encounter people whose personal preferences are for this type of culture, but who find themselves operating in more orthodox organisations. Specialists in organisations, such as computer people in a business organisation, consultants in a hospital, architects in local government and university teachers benefit from the power of their professions. Such people are not easy to manage. Being specialists, alternative employment is often easy to obtain, and they may not acknowledge anyone as being in a position to exercise expert power greater than their own. Position power not backed up by resource power means nothing to such people, and coercive power is not usually available. They may not be influenced by group norms or relationships with colleagues, which might be expected to moderate their personal preferences. This leaves only personal power – and such people are often not easily impressed by personality.

Stop and reflect

By signing in and enrolling on this course you can view and complete all activities within the course, track your progress in My OpenLearn. and when you have completed a course, you can download and print a free **Statement of Participation** - which you can use to demonstrate your learning.

Click on '**SIGN IN to enrol**' to get started.

You can find out more about registering and OpenLearn in our [FAQs](#).

There are limitations to Handy's approach. There is a tendency to take Handy's four cultures as fixed or 'given' styles – something an organisation has, rather than something that is created, negotiated and shared by everyone involved in the organisation and which may evolve over time. None of the four types can claim to be better or superior; they are each suited to different types of circumstances. Most real-life organisations tend to involve a mixture of cultures, and in Handy's view each is suited to different types of circumstances, including different types of personalities.

Theories of types of culture offer caricatures and simplifications of complex phenomena; the real world is always richer and more subtle. One way of gaining an insight into these complexities has been to explore the link between national culture and organisational culture. Before you consider this approach, you may find it helpful to reflect upon the two models you have considered so far.

Stop and reflect

By signing in and enrolling on this course you can view and complete all activities within the course, track your progress in My OpenLearn. and when you have completed a course, you can download and print a free **Statement of Participation** - which you can use to demonstrate your learning.

Click on '**SIGN IN to enrol**' to get started.

You can find out more about registering and OpenLearn in our [FAQs](#).