

Organizational Culture through Orientations and Metaphors: Some Hints to the Tacit Knowledge

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Abstract

The main goal of our study is to examine the possibilities to lead tacit through a lens of organizational culture assessed by orientations and metaphors. Organizational culture may open important issues because this phenomenon evolves values, assumptions etc which also play significant role in the tacit knowledge transfer. Metaphors intermediate the unconscious levels of organizational culture. Empirical survey among 75 participants was conducted in two industrial enterprises from Saint-Gobain Group in Estonia. The triangulation of different methods was used and a combination of questionnaire and interview was applied for the measurement of organizational culture. Position, education and tenure have important effect on estimations to task orientation. Gender, position and education have important effect on estimations to relationship orientation. The estimations on both orientations are connected to whether the organization is characterized through metaphors to be organic or technocratic. The results are discussed and the consequences for tacit knowledge are proposed.

Keywords: *tacit knowledge, organizational culture, organizational orientations, metaphors*

JEL classification: D23, D83

Introduction and background of research problem

The concept of organisational culture could serve as the framework for the knowledge transfer analysis because researchers as well as practitioners use the term of organisational culture if they want to underline that people may either support or obstruct organisational efforts to bring these people together in order to pursue certain goals. Two kinds of knowledge — explicit and tacit — are differentiated within the sociological perspective of knowledge management. The

tacit knowledge is the scheming topic because it enables to identify possible barriers of co-operation on the organizational level. Due to its nature, tacit knowledge cannot be shared as easily and as consciously as explicit. This is obviously a disadvantage, a complication for communication when we need to organize for induction of newcomers, facilitate conflict resolution or decision-making as well as other processes, which involve knowledge exchange.

Why is it important to study organizational culture to improve effectiveness of knowledge management/sharing? We can suggest a few reasons: firstly, if organizational culture/values are well understood, we can more successfully facilitate building awareness in organization about the tacit knowledge that exist in organization, thus, making it explicit; secondly, explicit knowledge sharing is more effective when peoples' differences are understood and taken into consideration; and, thirdly, organizational culture is shared within organization both consciously and unconsciously for example through every interaction between organizational members. Here we refer on conclusions by Bennet & Bennet (2008) and they admit that tacit knowledge resides beyond ordinary consciousness leads to the search to develop greater sensitivity to information stored in the unconscious to facilitate the management and use of tacit knowledge. Surfacing, embedding and sharing tacit knowledge are approaches for mobilizing tacit knowledge in support of individual and organizational objectives.

We take as our focus the organizational culture and so doing, we argue that organizational culture is an appropriate concept to describe the impact of organizational factors on the tacit knowledge. Thus, the goal of this paper is to find out possibilities to evaluate the unconscious part of organizational culture and to put this understanding into framework of tacit knowledge. This will be done by analyzing organizational culture and its potential impact on tacit knowledge. Idea of the current article stems from the concept of unconscious aspect of organizational culture and how organizational members perceive and express their unconscious thoughts. These general assumptions are created through mutual interaction between the individual and organization and are not easy to capture as they are the unconscious level of the organizational culture. Metaphors provide access to that level. The proposed relationship is explored on the sample of production enterprise located in Estonia.

Theoretical background on tacit knowledge and organizational culture

Knowledge management emerged as a separate theme since Michael Polanyi (1969) described a distinction between distal and proximal knowledge. Distal or, as it is more commonly described now, explicit knowledge, is the knowledge, which can be clearly articulated, written down or defined, while proximal, tacit knowledge is the one that cannot be formalized, turned into description or standard, because it is not as obvious or clear as the explicit knowledge. The need for knowledge management is felt strongly by most of organizations, which try to apply this strategy one way or another. On the

individual level there are technical and cognitive tacit knowledges, while on the organizational level cultural knowledge forms the tacit knowledge. Thus, we can propose that different sources of tacit knowledge are interrelated.

Tell (2000) emphasizes committed interest, trust, shared language and cognitive maps for interpreting information as important elements for building favorable environment for knowledge sharing in networks. Combination of action and reflection in the network, supported by trustful relations, was also shown as important condition in supporting questioning of the norms, values and 'world-views' of the managers and has enabled the learning in the networks to move, over time, towards a higher level learning. It was shown that network participants have been able to consciously change some of their value-level concepts and beliefs as the result. Tell (2000) proves that value differences of network are extremely important element of tacit knowledge and learning environment for knowledge sharing. Other evidence comes from Simonin (2004) who considers organizational culture as the phenomenon having moderating effect in the process of knowledge transfer. All in all, there is a ground to claim that tacit knowledge is related to the organizational culture.

Organizational culture is a complicated phenomenon as it includes several unconscious and emotional mechanisms and consists of many layers, which to a great extent differ from each other by their visibility. The definitions of organisational culture vary from a very short description given by Deal and Kennedy: "It's the way we do things around here" (1982: 13) to more sophisticated ones, for example, as proposed by Schein (1985: 9). Several taxonomies exist in order to capture the variation of mechanisms that form commonly shared but unique combinations of values and behaviour patterns in organisations. The complex nature of culture leads to multidimensional approaches (see for a review Detert, 2000; van der Post et al., 1997; Lau & Ngo, 1996).

Every organisation has its own special organisational culture created collectively by its members and organisational culture gives guidelines for organisational members how to behave and thus it is related to the performance on the organisational and individual level. This is a mutual relationship because the certain type of organisational culture puts impact on the individual's performance on the one hand, on the other, the way how organisational members actually perform influences organisational culture. The term "shared" in the context of organizational culture represents peoples' connectedness through some common process, activity or ritual in the organization, thus referring to common experience but also stressing the value of individual contribution to the overall pattern of organizational culture (Hatch 1997). This knowledge becomes important when the organizational culture is being either characterized or interpreted. Characterizing organizational culture means giving an overall description of the concept and it could be done through the common understandings and assumptions about the phenomenon. Interpreting the culture means going deeper and trying to find the reasons why organizational culture in the current organization can be characterized

accordingly and here the individual contribution of organizational members should be taken into account.

Organizational culture can be characterized through its orientations. They enable to identify to what extent different aspects are considered important by the organization. Several researchers (Schein, 1992; Schultz, 1995; Harrison, 1995) discuss task and relationship orientations, which are considered to be most important orientation features of organizational culture. Task orientation shows estimations towards work and towards the aim of the organization. The orientation of relations shows the human side of the organization and how much the mutual relations are valued in the organization (Vadi, Allik, Realo, 2002). Task and relationship orientations are suitable for researching the organizational culture as they bring forth the most general aspects in the social groups. Same orientations are also analysed in case of the leadership, group processes and conflict management. The way organizational members estimate these orientations in case of a certain organizational culture depends on the extent to which their assumptions overlap with the general assumptions, which the organizational culture is based on.

Symbolic approach gives directions in opening the organizational culture. According to classification of different perspectives on organizational culture, made by Allaire and Firsirotu (1984), symbolic approach sees organizational culture as an ordered system of shared and public symbols and meanings which give shape, direction and particularity to human experience. Symbols are important part of the organization and its culture as they mediate the tacit knowledge. They are the indicators of attitudes and what is considered important in the organization. Still, as the pattern of organizational culture is so multifarious and complicated the symbols must be looked and interpreted in the context of the whole organization. According to Alvesson (2002) several approaches stress the symbols as important auxiliaries through which people express, reproduce and communicate their shared and learned experiences, meanings, values and understandings.

According to Smircich (1983) the metaphoric process, seeing one thing in terms of another, is a fundamental aspect of human thought to become to know the world. The use of particular metaphor is often not a conscious thought, nor made explicit, but organizational members can infer it from the way the subject in the organization is approached, by discerning the underlying assumptions that they make about the subject. Alvesson (1995) also stresses metaphors' power to bring out peoples unconscious ideas and thoughts about the culture in their organization. Davenport (1998) claims that metaphors enable to speak about complicated phenomena in organizations. They are used to characterize culture, because they draw attention, are dense with meaning and interpreting metaphors makes them stay in peoples minds for a longer time. Using metaphors also narrows the concept of culture and there is a clearer distance between culture and organization (Alvesson, 1995).

Metaphorical approach has existed in the theories of management and organization for a considerably long time. In 1873, Herbert Spencer ascribed organism metaphor to the organization. Herewith the biological and organizational

structure was likened (Grant and Oswick, 1996). Applying the machine metaphor on organizational culture was started when the first machines were taken into use. Then it was found that organizations should be treated as machine-like structures (Morgan, 1986). Since then, two metaphors: machine and organism metaphor, have dominated in the theories of management and organization (Grant and Oswick, 1996). According to the machine metaphor, the organization consists of parts, which are assembled in order to function smoothly to fulfil certain assignments. In the case of the organism metaphor organization is perceived to struggle to stay alive in the changing environment (Smircich, 1983).

Data and Method

Methodological remarks

Organizational literature acknowledges the difficulty of measuring and identifying organizational culture, mainly, because the shared assumptions and understandings lie beneath the conscious level for individuals (Lund, 2003). Therefore the selection of research methods is crucial, especially when the aim is to bring out the unconscious thoughts and their influence on characteristics ascribed to organizational culture. The research methods for organizational culture could be chosen among the quantitative or qualitative research methods and use them separately or simultaneously.

There are three different viewpoints in the matter of possibility and usefulness in combining quantitative and qualitative research methods. First, the purists who consider both research methods independent and mutually excluding. Secondly, the situationalists, who consider the combination of two different research methods possible in some circumstances claiming that it enriches the research and brings out new details and interpretations. Thirdly, there are pragmatists who prefer that different aspects from both research methods would be combined to approach the research questions in the most effective way (Niglas, 2004). In current article the choice of research method lays on two last viewpoints as authors believe that combination of different aspects of different methods is the best way to provide interpretations for tacit knowledge in the organization. For that purpose the triangulation of methods is used.

The concept of triangulation mentioned by Denzin (1978) is the most widely known possibility for combining different research methods. In social sciences the concept of triangulation starts with the year 1959 when Campbell and Fiske proposed the term "*multiple operationism*". It was drawn from the necessity to use different research methods for validation so that the variety in the research results would not be elicited by the method (Campbell and Fiske, 1959). The concept of triangulation comes from the strategies of navigation and army, where several methods are used to locate the exact destination of the objects.

Sample

Sample consists of 75 members from two industrial enterprises from the Saint-Gobain Group in Estonia: Saint-Gobain Sekurit in Elva and Saint Gobain Baltiklaas in Tartu. Survey was conducted on the year 2006. SG Group industries SG Sekurit and Baltiklaas have been operating in Estonia for 17 and 12 years respectively. The medium age of the sample was 37.6 years (sd=10.1), varying from 22 to 63 years. The medium tenure was 5.7 years (sd=4.8), varying from 1 to 15 years (table 1). Socio-demographical characteristics are implemented as control variables.

Groups of socio-demographical characteristics

Table 1

Category	Sub-category		
Age	21-40 (A<40)	41- 71 (A>40)	Missing
	39	33	3
Education	High school	Higher	Missing
	37	31	7
Tenure	1-10 years (T<10)	11-... years* (T>10)	Missing
	51	17	7
Position	White-collars	Blue-collars	Missing
	33	41	3
Gender	Females	Males	Missing
	33	40	2
Nationality	Estonian	Other	Missing
	70	2	3

Notes: white-collars are office staff and blue-collars are factory staff.

Source: compiled by the authors on the basis of 75 questionnaires.

The research set is a combination of two methods, quantitative and qualitative. First, the Organizational Culture Questionnaire (Vadi, Allik, Realo, 2002) was applied to the whole sample. It consists of 43 statements about the organization and respondents can indicate their attitudes towards the items on a 10-point scale ranging from “completely disagree” (1 point) to “completely agree” (10 points). Eight statements out of 43 form the task orientation scale (OC1) and the other eight statements form the relationship orientation scale (OC2) (Appendix 2). The reliability coefficients were found to be 0.79 for OC1 and 0.74 for OC2, which can be considered relatively high. The questionnaire provides constant variables, which are implemented as dependent variables.

Secondly, a structured 5-question interview was compiled. Five interview questions were aimed to bring out whether respondents perceive their organization as a machine or organism, which animal, machine, season and color respondents use to characterize their organization. Interviews were conducted with 43 randomly

chosen respondents. Interview provides discrete variables, which are implemented as independent variables.

In order to treat metaphors as independent variables the qualitative analyses was implemented. All metaphors and their explanations that the respondents provided were collected in the database. The explanations to metaphors represented peoples' reasoning as to why they used the respective metaphor to characterize their organization. Authors brought out the core ideas behind each of these explanations and eliminated the rest. This process enabled to concentrate the meanings behind the explanations and make them more fathomable.

All the explanations were repeatedly reviewed until the certain pattern of groups under each interview question started to form. As a result 14 subgroups, each with a numerical value, were formed. Every group was named after the majority of metaphor types in current group (i.e. domestic animals; fast wild animals; vehicles; autumn-winter).

Results

Analyses showed that OC1 and OC2 scores do not differ significantly being 5.27 and 5.51, respectively.

The connections between socio-demographical characteristics and orientations were tested. The results showed that OC1 scores of white-collar workers with higher education and shorter tenure differed significantly ($F=(1,53)=.04$; $p=.01$) from OC1 scores of blue-collar workers with lower education and longer tenure, 5.70 and 4.20 respectively. Here the positive correlation ($r=0,54$; $p.<05$) between age and tenure should be brought out. Analysis showed no significant connections between socio-demographic characteristics and OC2.

Subsequently the connections between metaphors and orientations of organizational culture were tested. *Machine vs. organism* metaphor ($F=(1,40)= 4.58$; $p=.05$) and the *season* metaphor ($F=(2,39)= 3.88$; $p=.05$) had main effects on the OC1 scores. Participants who used *organism* and *spring* metaphor tended to perceive organizational culture more task-oriented, 5.82 and 6.13 respectively, than participants who used *machine* metaphor and *autumn-winter* metaphor, 5.21 and 5.08 respectively. *Season* metaphor also had main effect ($F=(2,38)= 4.73$; $p=.01$) on OC2 scores, which differed significantly between participants who used *spring* metaphor and participants who used *autumn-winter* metaphor, 6.25 and 4.94 respectively. People who used *spring* metaphor tended to perceive organizational culture more task- as well as relationship-oriented than people who used *autumn-winter* metaphor (Figure 1).

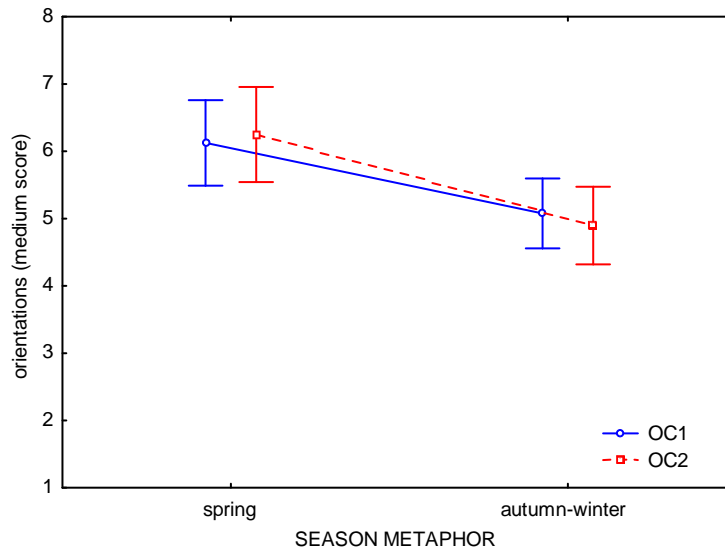


Figure 1 *Season metaphors' main effect on task and relationship orientations*

For OC1, an interaction between age and the *machine vs. organism* metaphor appeared ($F=(1,38)=4,83$; $p=.05$). OC1 scores differed between A<40 group who used *organism* metaphor and A<40 group who used *machine* metaphor, 6.12 and 5.03 ($p<.01$) respectively. OC1 scores also differed between A<40 group who used *organism* metaphor to characterize OC and A>40 group who used *organism* metaphor, 6.12 and 4.72 ($p<.05$) respectively. Younger members who used *organism* metaphor tended to perceive organizational culture more task-oriented than older members who used *organism* metaphor. Here also significant interaction ($p<.02$) between age, tenure and *machine vs. organism* metaphor appeared due to the significant correlation between age and tenure. Under 40 years old employees with short-time tenure who used *organism* metaphor tended to perceive organizational culture more task-oriented than over 40 years old members with long-time tenure who used *organism* metaphor, 4.94 and 4.58 respectively.

Second interaction for OC1 appeared between education and animal metaphor ($F=(5,29)=2.75$; $p=.05$). OC1 scores differed between high-school education group who used quick wild animals' metaphor to characterize OC and high-school education group who used slow and dim-witted animals' metaphor, 6.31 and 4.38 ($p<.01$) respectively. The scores also differed between high-school education group who used slow and dim-witted animals' metaphor to characterize OC and higher education groups who used either laborious domestic animals' metaphor or slow and dim-witted animals' metaphor to characterize OC, 4.38 and 5.97 ($p<.05$) and 6.28 ($p<.01$) respectively. Participants with high-school education who used quick wild animals' metaphor tended to perceive organizational culture more task-oriented than members with high-school education who used slow and dim-witted animals' metaphor.

In similar vain we tried the relationships between different orientations, metaphors, and socio-demographic characteristics. An overview of the previous results and some additional connections that were not presented among the results is presented in table 2.

Socio-demographical characteristics and metaphors that influence perception of OC1 and OC2 in SG Group industries in Estonia

Table 2

	Higher orientation	Lower orientation
OC1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under 10 years tenure, higher education and white-collar workers • Organism metaphor • Spring metaphor • Under 10 years tenure, under 40 years old and organism metaphor • High-school education and quick wild animals' metaphor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over 10 years tenure, high-school education and blue-collar workers • Machine metaphor • Autumn-winter metaphor • Over 10 years tenure, over 40 years old and organism metaphor • High-school education and slow and dim-witted animals' metaphor
OC2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spring metaphor • High-school education and machine metaphor • Blue collar workers and machine metaphor • Under 10 years tenure, under 40 years old and organism metaphor • Women and quick wild animals' metaphor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autumn-winter metaphor • High-school education and organism metaphor • Blue collar workers and organism metaphor • Over 10 years tenure, over 40 years old and organism metaphor • Women and slow and dim-witted animals' metaphor

Source: composed by the authors on the basis of 75 questionnaires and 43 interviews.

The characteristics that influence task and relationship orientations are divided under the categories of lower and higher orientation. In the case of interactions between socio-demographic characteristics and metaphors, only the combinations that elicited two most extreme results are presented.

Discussion

There is a reliable link between understanding of organizational culture orientations and some metaphors. On the one hand the following analysis was addressed towards the relationships between task and relationship orientations and metaphors; and on the other, we hypothesize how these relationships explain tacit knowledge in the organization.

In reference to task orientation, important result was interaction between education, position and tenure. It enabled to connect higher estimations on task orientation with higher education, higher position and shorter tenure. This outcome is logical as generally higher position demands higher education and people who have worked in the organization for shorter time are either optimistic or have not yet got to know the organization and therefore give higher estimations on aspects related to task orientation. Therefore such opportunities should be planned and provided by the organization. Table 3 provides an overview of the pattern of organizational culture in SG Group industries.

Organizational culture in SG Group industries in Estonia through the triangulation between metaphors and orientations of organizational culture

Table 3

	Higher estimations	Lower estimations
Task orientation	Organization is perceived to be... ...developing, growing, considerate towards employees, positive, full of ideas and with good relations. ...flexible, trustworthy, innovative, considerate and accurate.	Organization is perceived to be... ...to have strict rules, constant routine, bad relations, accuracy and coordinated activity. Employees are considered to be flawless and they cannot make their own decisions, any wellbeing and tedious. ...big, slow and with incomprehensible task.
Relationship orientation	Organization is perceived to be... ...developing, positive, full of ideas and with good relations. ...flexible, trustworthy, innovative, considerate and accurate. ...to have strict rules, constant routine, bad relations, accuracy and coordinated activity. Employees are considered to be flawless and they cannot make their own decisions.	Organization is perceived to be... ...developing, growing, considerate towards employees. ...depressive, tiring and with bad relations. ...big, slow and with incomprehensible task.

Source: composed by the authors on the basis of 75 questionnaires and 43 interviews.

The higher and lower estimations to task and relationship orientations are explained through the metaphors. In case of task orientation the similar estimations stem from the similar perception pattern of the organization. In case of relationship orientation members with totally different perception pattern of the organization

give similar estimations. This refers that estimations to relationship orientation are based on a complicated mechanisms, which demand further investigation.

We have defined tacit knowledge as opposed to explicit. One can raise a question why some knowledge holders would choose to share knowledge more often and more willingly than others? Still everyone has his/her own priorities. According to Ipe (2003) knowledge sharing depend on nature on knowledge (i.e. explicit vs. tacit), motivation and opportunities to share, culture and work environment. He has proposed that the latter is the most critical factor in the process (Ipe 2003, p. 354). Understanding the differences in perception of organizational culture can quite likely give a better picture of the reasons for knowledge sharing not working as well as expected. We hypothesize that the tacit knowledge varies due to the different organizational position, which is one of the organizational member's socio-demographic characteristics. The practical importance of these results could be viewed from the perspective of changing and managing organizational culture for the knowledge sharing. Information about which socio-demographical groups are important from the standpoint of organizational culture enables to manage the processes in the organization. For example the extra attention should be paid on certain socio-demographical groups.

Such knowledge enables leaders to manage the organizational processes. When the employees consider organization to be less oriented to task accomplishment, then the organization is aimed at mechanizing the work and organizational processes and at forming strict communication rules. Strictly organized work lessens the synergy between the workers, possibilities to treat every problem according to its individual characteristics, offer new ideas and innovative solutions etc. In this light, the task oriented culture leads to the flexibility of organizational processes. Consideration towards the employees and acceptance of new ideas from every hierarchical level should be implemented.

Based on the current sample it can be said that in the organization where work is organized according to strict rules (i.e. factory) the employees estimate highly the opportunities offered by the organization to relate to each other. Employees who feel that otherwise mechanically operating organization has too many changes, development and unexpectancies, perceive that organization does not value the relationships between the employees highly as the constant changes influence the relationships between the workers. Therefore such organizations should pay more attention in providing the organized social activities to their employees whose mutual communication is otherwise limited due to the job characteristics. Employees should also be more involved in the innovation and decision-making processes. To change the organizational culture to be more oriented to mutual relationships organization should provide more opportunities for employees to communicate with each other.

The results enable to conclude that depending on the concrete organization, the organizational culture should be managed by keeping in mind what are the peoples' assumptions about the organizational culture that they would estimate highly in respect to task and relationship orientations.

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