Case Study: Forming Dennison

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The case study Forming Dennison (Shockley-Zalabak, 2015) examines the understanding of strong organizational culture by determining whether discrepancies in perception (cultural dimensions) exist across organizations and, to the extent they can be identified, and the extent to which organizational member agreement or disagreement with these dimensions and perception are solved. The case study revolves around Bob, Dan, Chet, and David, the founders of Dennison, and their desire to have the personnel manager build the culture at Dennison. The personnel manager was recruited to Dennison specifically because of his past employment in a firm known to have a strong and generally positive culture. A tenuous relationship between the employee and the managers develop because Bob, the company president wants the personnel manager to bring in outside consultants to assist in building the culture at Dennison. The personnel manager objected because he believed that culture could not be bought, therefore no outside help was needed. The personnel manager was charged with building the culture at Dennison or leaving the company.

Schein (2010) theorized that organizational culture is a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. In the case study, the organizational culture evolved out of the founders not wanting to have a culture similar to the culture as their former employer. The personnel manager perceives that the culture at Dennison has become detrimental to the employees' mentality. Morley and Shockley-Zalabak (1991) suggested that individuals hold personal values, beliefs, and assumptions about ideal organizational life that they continually contrast with their perceptions of organizational reality as expressed in culture themes. This contrast between members' own ideal and their perceived

organizational reality was related to organizational communication processes, to organizational

satisfaction, and to estimations of organizational quality and effectiveness.

Groupthink describes the emerging culture at Dennison. Janis (1972) coined the term

Groupthink as a negative feature of people in groups. Janis (1983) later theorized that

Groupthink is essentially a psychological phenomenon wherein a group of people is

looking for common harmony and desire. If the purpose is positive and the result is

positive, it is called a positive groupthink, but if the outcome is negative, it becomes a

negative groupthink. By pooling their intellectual resources to develop rationalizations, the

members build up each other's confidence and feel reassured about unfamiliar risks, which, if

taken seriously, would be dealt with by applying standard operating procedures to obtain

additional information and to carry out careful planning (Janis, 1983).

The assumptions about culture exhibited by the founders at Dennison are tri-leveled.

Schein (2010) opines that organizational culture can be thought of as consisting of three

interrelated levels. At the deepest level, below our awareness, lie basic assumptions. These

assumptions are taken for granted and reflect beliefs about human nature and reality. At the

second level, values exist. Values are shared principles, standards, and goals. Finally, at the

surface, we have artifacts, or visible, tangible aspects of organizational culture. For example, in

an organization, a basic assumption employees and managers share might be that happy

employees benefit their organizations. This might be translated into values such as

egalitarianism, high-quality relationships, and having fun. The artifacts reflecting such values

might be an executive open door policy, an office layout that includes open spaces and gathering

areas equipped with pool tables, and frequent company picnics (2010).

Arguably, at first glance, a strong culture exists at Dennison (Shockley-Zalabak). Some research by Sorenson (2002) looked into the relationship between the strength of culture and business performance. The research found that strong cultures were best able to deliver a successful strategy in fairly stable operating conditions. Although organizations with strong cultures experience less turnover, he posited, it does not mean that a strong culture is better than a weak culture in every instance. One of the pitfalls of a strong culture, Sorenson opined, is that a strong culture is difficult to change in an organization and can stifle innovation because members of the organization continue their jobs the same way. While independent thought at Dennison might suggest a weakness in organizational circles, Sorenson's thoughts are that weak cultures can be advantageous for organizations that benefit from independent thought and innovation by their members (Sorenson, 2002). The reasoning is that in an unstable environment, organizations with weak cultures often function better than organizations with strong cultures because they are much more adaptable to change. In order for an organization to succeed, the culture of that organization must fit the environment in which it operates (Sorenson, 2002).

Shockley-Zalabak (2015) theorizes that decision making is the process of choosing from among several alternatives, while problem- solving is a multi-stage process for moving an issue, situation, or state from an undesirable to a more desirable condition. Groups make decisions and solve problems through a variety of methods including leader mandate, majority rule, powerful minority influence, and consensus. Problem-solving processes include the Standard Agenda, brainstorming, the Decision Tree, and a variety of experientially-based processes.

The personnel manager should continue the problem- solving task with the help of outside consultants, employing the Standard Agenda process. Developed by Dewey (1933), reflective thinking involves a careful, systematic approach to a problem. Groups who use

reflective thinking to make their decisions make use of a six-step guide called the Standard Agenda. Reflective thinking explores different reasons for, and considers the potential implications influenced by an individual's attitudes or practices. It is a process that allows individuals to make meaning of an experience, involves analytic and critiquing elements, articulation through spoken, written or other forms of expression. The analysis in this context is the process of breaking a complex topic into smaller parts to gain a better understanding of it, and critiquing involves a questioning approach to knowledge, checking assumptions. An individual who engages in reflective thinking will question their assumptions and understanding, and think about issues from a variety of perspectives. This type of thinking develops through practice, but it involves understanding, internalizing and applying some key concepts to evaluate learning. The steps include problem identification, problem analysis, criteria selection, solution generation, solution evaluation and selection, solution implementation (Dewey, 1933, p.9).

In the case of Dennison, external consultants should be a part of the decision- making and problem-solving process. Their role to evaluate the information needed in the process to determine the criteria needed to build the culture at Dennison is critical. Gouran (1979) suggested three characteristics of information needed in the process of building organizational culture: relevancy, sufficiency, and plausibility. The volume of information necessary in the fact-finding process makes the consultants job a valuable addition to the process of locating and evaluating data of increasing importance to the decision-making process at Dennison. Employing the steps outlined in the research assists in solving the discrepancies between management and employee on the perception of what determines strong organizational culture.

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