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APPLICATION OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE INVENTORY® IN A SHARED LEADERSHIP NONPROFIT

Abstract

Researchers and nonprofit leaders have used a variety of instruments to understand and sometimes manage the culture of organizations. At the same time, nonprofit organizations with shared and distributed leadership structures have grown to respond to the complex needs of marginalized communities. This case study explores whether a traditional organizational culture instrument is a practical assessment for a nonprofit organization with shared leadership. We applied Human Synergistics, Inc.'s Organizational Culture Inventory® (OCI®) to a shared leadership nonprofit organization in the Midwest with 30 members. Findings show that the OCI® assessment reflected the organization's culture in the shared leadership nonprofit. The circumplex results show that the nonprofit has a Constructive current culture. The differences between the current and ideal cultures represent a need to increase the Achievement style and decrease the Avoidance and Power styles. Future directions will include an intervention and retest to determine the changes in the organizational culture.

Keywords: Organizational Culture Inventory, Human Synergistics, nonprofits, shared leadership

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Introduction

Nonprofit organizations were not immune to the lasting repercussions of the global pandemic of 2020–2022. Chary (2022) reviewed three nonprofits in Canada that have experimented with shared leadership (SL) models to overcome traditional nonprofit hurdles as well as to incorporate more diversity into their operational models, appealing to more marginalized populations. The collective stories showed that these models have promise for strengthening the culture and longevity of nonprofit organizations. Often called co-leadership, distributed leadership, or SL, this new way to organize and lead nonprofits has created a need to research how these models impact organizational productivity and culture. This study examined whether the Human Synergistics International (HSI) Organizational Culture Inventory® (OCI®) could validly measure a nonprofit's culture within a single case study.

Background and Literature Review

Organizational Culture

Studies of organizational culture and its importance to organizations have taken place for decades. Arguably, one of the first discussions of organizational culture was by Fayol (1949). In the 1970s, academicians developed the theoretical bases and terminology of organizational culture (Pettigrew, 1979). By the 1980s, thinking of businesses in terms of organizational culture had become common (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). In addition, there is a level of

agreement that organizational culture can have profound positive or negative effects on the success of an organization (Cameron & Quinn, 2011).

People working with organizational culture apply many definitions of organizational culture (Schein, 2016). Some of these definitions are based on observable patterns in the organization, such as behavior. Other definitions include patterns that are not directly observable, such as norms, beliefs, assumptions, and ideas (HSI, 2009). HSI uses Szumal and Cooke's (2019) definition of organizational culture, which is that it is "a system of shared values and beliefs that can lead to behavioral norms that, in turn, guide the way members of an organization approach their work, interact with one another, and solve problems."

The purpose of this case study was to explore the organizational culture of a Midwest nonprofit with SL and shared power. The literature represents multiple definitions and perspectives on SL; however, a widely used definition is a "dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups, for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both" (Pearce & Conger, 2003, p. 1). A substantial body of literature on SL frameworks includes collective impact (Kania & Kramer, 2013). A series of meta-analyses explored the SL context and conditions associated with positive outcomes in nonprofit organizations. One meta-analysis found that SL was related to positive team outcomes, including team performance and group behavior (Wu et al., 2020). Studies have described the SL context and processes that are associated with team trust (Chen et al., 2022), innovation and creativity (Grant et al., 2019), and organizational effectiveness (Chamberlin et al., 2024). Current researchers have sought to understand the challenges and conflicts surrounding SL, including how best to change organizational culture to share power (Whitley & Svensson, 2024).

Problem and Gap in Practice

Organizational culture and ways of measuring organizational culture continue to be matters of research. Although there are numerous instruments for assessing organizational culture, few studies have explored the organizational culture of nonprofits with SL using traditional organizational culture instruments (Denison & Mishra, 1995; Jung et al., 2009). While doctoral dissertation authors have examined the nonprofit organizational culture of colleges (Hayes, 2020) and with respect to employee commitment (Toscano, 2015), a dearth of organizational culture research on nonprofits exists in the scholarly, peer-reviewed realm. What is not known is if or how well current thoughts about traditional organizational culture and ways of measuring it align with emerging organizational practices and SL values and processes of nonprofit organizations. Because SL with important stakeholders has become a pivotal requirement for the sustainability of nonprofit organizations (Chary, 2022), this study attempted to fill this gap in practice for marginalized community nonprofits.

Applied Research Goals and Theory

The study used two applied research goals as its guide.

Applied Research Goal 1:

To investigate whether the OCI®– Current can be used effectively to describe a nonprofit's existing organizational culture profile.

Applied Research Goal 2:

To investigate whether the OCI®– Ideal can be used effectively to describe a nonprofit's desired organizational culture profile.

Case Description

The studied nonprofit has a small leadership team and over 30 collaborative partner organizations representing the nonprofit residents, community health, government, health equity, and well-being. These cross-sector partners work to maintain a collective vision and action to promote racial and economic well-being for community leaders, families, and youth. The nonprofit is in the close-in suburbs of a major midwestern city with a population of 23,500. The two predominant resident racial groups are 60% Black/African American and 30% Hispanic, and the poverty rate is 15.3% (Census Reporter, 2022).

Partnership, accountability, equity, and ownership (Porter-O'Grady, 2001) are key principles represented by shared decision-making, collective responsibility, and the advancement of individual strengths and talents guiding the nonprofit mission and operations. The leadership team and partners share in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the nonprofit's initiatives.

Measures and Method: OCI®–Current and OCI®–Ideal

We selected the OCI®, published by HSI, for this study. The OCI® is the most used cultural assessment instrument and has been in use for over 35 years (HSI, 2023). Testing has demonstrated that its instruments have sufficient reliability (internal consistency, interrater reliability, and test-retest reliability) and validity (construct and criterion-related) to support their use as quantitative measures of organizational culture (Cooke & Szumal, 1993; Scott et al., 2003). Klakovich (1996) found that the instrument's Cronbach α scores ranged from .74 to .92 (p. 31), and Ingersoll et al. (2000) found that Cronbach's α ranged from .79 to .96 in a population of 648 nurses.

The OCI® measures two forms of organizational culture. One form is the current or operating culture, quantified by the OCI®–Current. This is the culture members believe is the culture of the organization at the current time. The other form is the ideal culture, which is the culture organization members believe would allow the organization to be most effective. The prompts for input are the same for the OCI®–Ideal as they are for the OCI®–Current, except for the OCI®–Current members are asked to rate the behaviors that are expected and encouraged in the organization. For the OCI®–Ideal, members are asked to rate the behaviors that should be expected and encouraged in the organization for the organization to be effective.

The inventory for the current culture is typically administered first. To administer the OCI®–Current, organizations select a sample of members who are sent email invitations to complete the inventory. The email contains a link to a personalized web page containing 120 short descriptions of behaviors that could be expected in the organization to “fit in” and succeed. These descriptions include items such as “point out flaws” and “help others to grow and develop.” Participants provide answers by selecting responses on a 5-point Likert-like scale ranging from “1 = not at all to 5 = to a very great extent.

The administration of the inventory for the ideal culture follows. An email with a link to a personalized web page is sent to participants. The prompts for the ideal inventory, as well as the possible answers, are the same as those for the current inventory. For the ideal inventory, participants are instructed to select responses that would describe the organization that would be effective.

All responses to both instruments are confidential and deindividualized. HSI will not reveal to a participating organization or consultant how a particular member answered the questions or whether a given individual has completed the inventory.

HSI tabulates and provides the results to the administering consultant in a comprehensive report containing data and analysis of the organization's current culture, ideal culture, culture by requested demographics, and readiness for change. The OCI provides an organization's results as raw scores with standard deviations as well as percentile scores for the current culture compared to the scores produced by administering the OCI®–Current to 5,685 individuals in 921 different organizational subunits (HSI, 2009).

The signature output for the OCI® is a circumplex (circular graph) divided into three clusters, each composed of four styles of behavioral norms. The three clusters are Constructive, Passive/Defensive, and Aggressive/Defensive¹ (Cooke & Lafferty, 2003, adapted with permission).

Constructive Culture

In a Constructive culture, “members are encouraged to interact with others and approach tasks in ways that will help them meet their higher-order satisfaction needs ... [characterized by] Achievement, Self-Actualizing, Humanistic-Encouraging, and Affiliative norms” (Cooke & Szumal, 1993, p. 1302).

¹ Style names, descriptions and items are copyrighted © and used by permission. From *Organizational Culture Inventory* by R.A. Cooke and J.C. Lafferty, 2003, Plymouth, MI: Human Synergistics. Copyright © 2023 by Human Synergistics©. Adapted by permission.

Some examples of behaviors that may be exhibited by members in Constructive cultures include, but are not limited to:

- Individual goal-setting
- Individual planning
- Choosing quality over quantity
- Thinking independently
- Helping others
- Showing concern for others
- Cooperating with others
- Sharing feelings and thoughts (HSI, 2009).

Passive/Defensive Culture

In a Passive/Defensive culture, “members believe they must interact with people in ways that will not threaten their own security, ...characterized by Approval, Conventional, Dependent, and Avoidance norms” (Cooke & Szumal, 1993, p. 1302).

Some examples of behaviors that may be exhibited by members in Passive/Defensive cultures include, but are not limited to:

- Trying to “fit in”
- Not “rocking the boat”
- Avoiding confrontations
- Favoring rules over ideas
- Being a good follower
- Being predictable
- Depending on superiors to make decisions
- Not taking chances (HSI, 2009).

Aggressive/Defensive Culture

In an Aggressive/Defensive culture, “members are expected to approach tasks in forceful ways to protect [the member’s] status and security...characterized by Oppositional, Power, Competitive, and Perfectionistic norms (Cooke & Szumal, 1993, p.1302).

Some examples of behaviors that may be exhibited by members in Aggressive/Defensive cultures include, but are not limited to:

- Nit-picking
- Being disengaged
- Being “controlling”
- Acting tough
- Choosing to compete rather than cooperate
- Attracting attention to oneself
- Always wanting to be a winner.
- Right-fighting
- Working long hours
- Paying attention to details
- Favoring work over other aspects of life (HSI, 2009).

Data Collection

One of the authors is accredited by HSI to administer and interpret the OCI® and did so for this study. The nonprofit leadership approved the project, and 30 members consented to be sent email invitations asking them to participate in the study. The Loyola University Chicago Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study. Obtaining consent was aligned with the requirements of the IRB.

The nonprofit members completed the OCI®–Current in April 2023 and the OCI®–Ideal in May 2023. Twenty-five members completed each of the surveys.

Analysis

HSI collected and processed the data and generated a comprehensive report which contained, in part, the following results. The circumplex for the OCI®–Current of the studied nonprofit is shown in Figure 1. In this circumplex, as in all OCI® circumplexes, the greater the extension shown for any style, the higher the percentile of that style. The darker circle denotes the 50th percentile. Starting from the origin, the circles represent the 10th, 25th, 50th, 75th and 90th percentiles. Figure 1 displays the SL's OCI-Current behavioral norms and expectations, and Table 1 displays the scores that were used to produce the circumplex.

Table 1

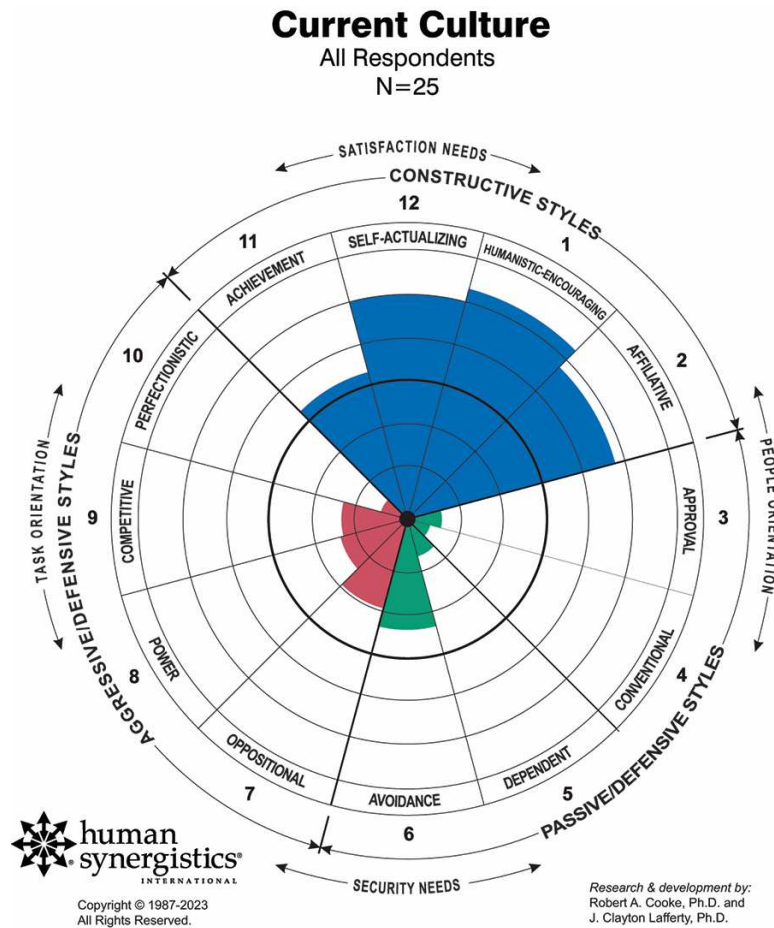
Current Nonprofit Culture

Cultural Style	Current Percentile	Raw Score	Standard Deviation	Intensity (Based on SD)
Constructive Styles				
Humanistic–Encouraging	93	41.80	7.31	Moderate
Affiliative	87	42.52	6.50	Moderate
Achievement	58	37.36	6.26	Moderate
Self-Actualizing	90	37.88	6.52	Moderate
Passive–Defensive Styles				
Approval	8	22.24	7.11	Low
Conventional	5	20.96	7.95	Low
Dependent	8	24.84	5.59	Moderate
Avoidance	37	19.04	6.08	Moderate
Aggressive–Defensive Styles				
Oppositional	24	19.88	3.47	High
Power	16	20.40	6.83	Moderate
Competitive	15	17.76	5.67	Moderate
Perfectionistic	5	20.84	6.43	Moderate

Note: From *Organizational Culture Inventory* by R.A. Cooke and J.C. Lafferty, 2003, Plymouth, MI: Human Synergistics International. Copyright © 2023 by Human Synergistics International. Adapted by permission.

Figure 1

Nonprofit OCI®-Current Circumplex



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The results were better than the team expected. The Current-Circumplex (Figure 1) and the statistics in Table 1 show that the nonprofit has a Constructive current culture. Self-Actualizing and Humanistic-Encouraging are at the 90th percentile or above, with Affiliative close behind at the 87th percentile. The lowest score in the Constructive cluster was that of the Achievement style, which fell into the 50th percentile.

All the Passive/Defensive and Aggressive/Defensive styles were low, with none reaching the 50th percentile. The highest was Avoidance at the 37th percentile. Approval, Conventional, Dependent, and Perfectionistic percentiles were in the single digits.

The intensity shown in the table for each style measures how closely members agree on a given style. Intensities can be Very Low, Low, Moderate, High, or Very High. The given intensity is based on the standard deviation of the raw score of a given style. The Intensities for all styles, except Oppositional, were Low or Moderate. Although the percentile score for Oppositional was well below the 50th percentile, its high intensity indicates there is substantial agreement within the organization about the norms that make up the Oppositional style.

The ideal culture for the nonprofit is shown in the Ideal-Circumplex in Figure 2 and in tabular format in Table 2. In this circumplex, Constructive styles are greatly extended, and Defensive styles are less extended than those of the

typical ideal circumplex. Except for the Oppositional style, all the Defensive styles score in single-digit percentiles. The Oppositional style score is at the 17th percentile.

Table 2

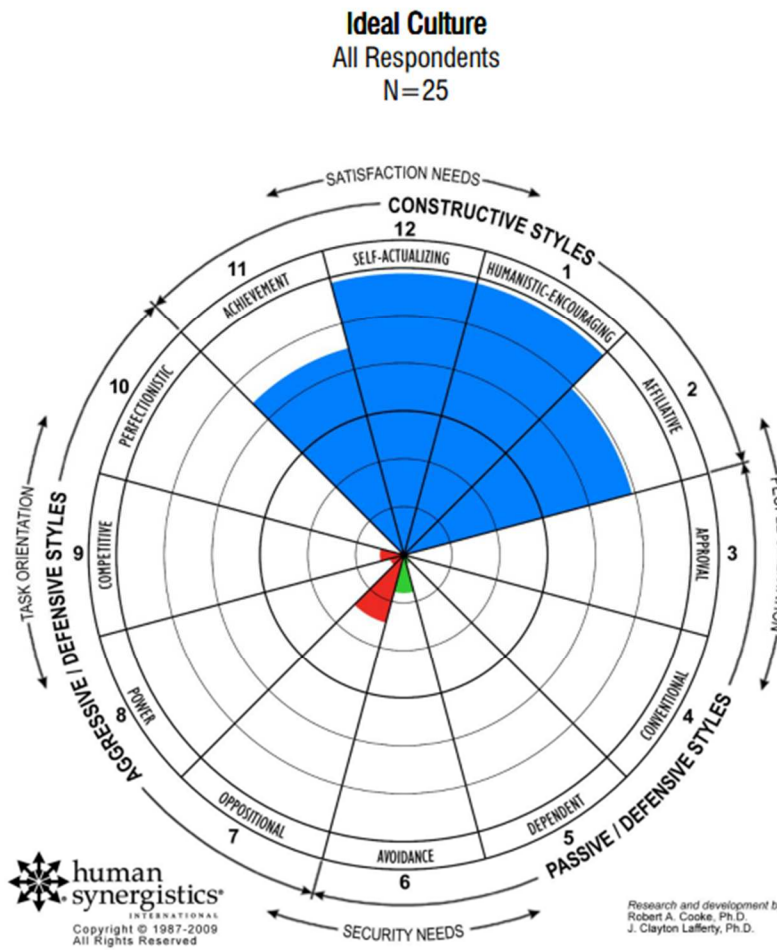
Nonprofit Ideal

Cultural Style	Percentile	Raw Score	SD	Intensity
Constructive Styles				
Humanistic– Encouraging	98.00	45.48	4.98	High
Affiliative	89.00	43.16	4.52	High
Achievement	82.00	39.68	5.41	Moderate
Self-Actualizing	98.00	41.00	4.77	High
Passive–Defensive Styles				
Approval	1.00	18.64	5.82	Moderate
Conventional	1.00	17.16	4.92	High
Dependent	2.00	22.60	4.90	Moderate
Avoidance	8.00	15.68	4.26	High
Aggressive–Defensive Styles				
Oppositional	17.00	19.20	4.35	Moderate
Power	3.00	17.20	5.33	High
Competitive	5.00	15.44	5.40	Moderate
Perfectionistic	1.00	20.40	6.06	Moderate

Note. From *Organizational Culture Inventory* by R.A. Cooke and J.C. Lafferty, 2003, Plymouth, MI: Human Synergetics. Copyright © 2023 by Human Synergetics International. Adapted with permission.

Figure 2

Nonprofit OCI-Ideal Circumplex



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If the leadership of an organization wants to improve its Current culture, one approach is to identify the styles with the greatest differences in percentiles for those styles between the ideal culture and the current culture and concentrate on the behavior norms in those styles. As shown in Table 3, nonprofit has gaps of more than 20 percent only in Avoidance (29) and Achievement (-24). These gaps indicate that nonprofit norms should become less Avoidance and more Achievement-oriented for the organization's culture to move closer to the ideal. A gap of 10 appears for Competitive, and Power has a gap of 13. All other gaps are less than 10.

The percentile gap is the current percentile of a given style minus the ideal percentile for a given culture style. For Constructive Styles, organizations should work to decrease negative gaps and increase positive gaps. For Passive/Defensive and Aggressive/Defensive Styles, organizations should work to increase negative gaps and decrease positive gaps.

Table 3*Current Culture Compared to Nonprofit Ideal Culture with Percentile Gap*

Style	Current Percentile	Ideal Percentile	Percentile Gap
Constructive Styles			
Humanistic-Encouraging	93	98	5
Affiliative	87	89	-2
Achievement	58	82	-24
Self-Actualizing	90	98	-8
Passive/Defensive Styles			
Approval	8	1	7
Conventional	5	1	4
Dependent	8	2	6
Avoidance	37	8	29
Aggressive/Defensive Styles			
Oppositional	24	17	7
Power	16	3	13
Competitive	15	5	10
Perfectionistic	5	1	4

Note. From *Organizational Culture Inventory* by R.A. Cooke and J.C. Lafferty, 2003, *Human Synergistics International*. Copyright © 2023. Adapted with permission.

Discussion

The nonprofit has a very desirable current culture compared to organizations included in the HSI norming database. Constructive styles have greater extensions and Passive/Defensive and Aggressive/Defensive styles are less extended.

The Ideal culture of the nonprofit is similar to typical in that the Constructive styles are more pronounced than Passive/Defensive and Aggressive/Defensive. But the Ideal culture of the nonprofit differs from the usual by having Defensive styles that are markedly lower than those of typical organizations.

We discussed the OCI® results with members of the nonprofit's leadership. They expressed that they felt the circumplexes for both the OCI®-Current and the OCI®-Ideal reflected the reality for nonprofits. Based on these findings, we, as well as the leadership of the nonprofit, believe the OCI® can be used effectively to help adjust the organizational culture of the nonprofit. The OCI® results show an imbalance between the two core dimensions, tasks and people orientation. The current culture is heavily people-oriented. The differences between the current and ideal cultures show the need to increase the Achievement style and decrease Avoidance and Power styles to better balance the organization's norms and expectations.

Limitations

There are limitations to this exploratory study. The sample was small: Only 25 participants were from one organization. Generalizing the results to other organizations would be fraught. Additional surveys of other similar organizations would be beneficial in extending this knowledge.

Practical Application

The practical application for this study is simple yet clear: Other nonprofit organizations could consider the use of HSI's OCI® to measure, compare, and balance their organizational culture. Postpandemic cultural shifts have become apparent to nearly every organizational leader; the ability to use a valid and reliable measurement option to investigate their cultural status and provide the potential for change is a practical option for other nonprofits.

Conclusion and Ideas for Future Research

The survey results revealed the need to increase the achievement norms and decrease Avoidance and Power norms and expectations among members. Using the OCI, we plan to explore individual achievement norms in comparison to collective achievement norms as related to recent research (Chamberlin et al., 2024). Furthermore, we plan to design an intervention and use the OCI[®] data to determine the changes within the organizational culture.

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