Work Culture: An Exposition in the Indian Context

Bikash Bhaduiy

The impact of work culture on productivity, profits and organizational effectiveness has, in recent years, drawn the attention of top management of Indian industrial organizations. The author makes an attempt to discuss this phenomenon.

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The purpose of this paper is (1) to analyse the manifestation of some of the important characteristics of work ethos on work culture, (2) to delineate the principal traits of the Indian employee, (3) to discuss the contrasting social and cultural factors relevant to work culture in Japan and India, and (4) to discuss the effects of leadership, work innovation, organizational structure and other elements of the organizational climate on work culture. An attempt has also been made to explain in some detail the important factors and their effects in the context of the Indian social milieu and also the internal environment and organizational structure prevalent in the Indian industries.

Work Ethos, Work Ethics and Work Culture

The terms work ethos and work ethics, in the context of behaviour patterns, human interaction and work culture, have been used interchangeably, implying synonymity. The fundamental difference between the two terms stems from the basic difference between the two words ethos and ethics—whereas ethos implies 'what is/ ethics stresses 'what ought to be.' Thus, while work ethos is the prevalent disposition to/fundamental outlook towards work, or the value system with regard to work, whether it be of an individual, a group, informal or hierarchical, a profession or a community (Webster's Third New International Dictionary, 1966), work ethics consists of the set of attitudes and the value systems which would be appropriate for achieving the goals of the system; in this case, the industrial organization (Churchman, 1979, pp 21-23). Culture, in the context of human civilization, is the way of life of a human group and it includes all the learned and standardized forms of behaviour which one uses and which others in one's group expect and recognize (Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol.5,1970, p 831). An organization is composed of groups while groups, in turn, are composed of individuals. Individuals, in their psychological make up or from the point of view of their behaviour patterns, are very different from one another, and there is really 'no average man' (Koontz and CXDonnell, 1972, pp 508-511). The behaviour of an individual at work may be explained by Lewin's Field Theory, which says that human behaviour, B, is a function of the person, P, and
his or her environment, \( E \), or using mathematical notations, \( B = f(P, E) \) (Koontz and CXDonnell, 1976, p 581). An individual, whether he is a workman, an office employee, a supervisor or a professional, like an engineer, accountant, etc., joins an industrial organization somewhere between the age of 18 and 23. At that point in time, he comes into the organization as an individual with his own fundamental behaviour pattern. In the context of human behaviour at work, \( P \), of Lewin’s Field Theory, is this fundamental or basic behaviour pattern which characterizes an individual from others in the group and the organization. Once he joins the organization, he interacts with the organizational environment, which consists of the structural group to which he is attached or the informal group to which he is drawn, and the organizational climate pertaining to his area of work. The fundamental or basic behaviour pattern of the individual is tempered by this interaction and the result obtained is the work ethos of the individual and the group. The dynamics of human behaviour at work is shown in Figure 1. The fact to remember here is that whereas individual behaviour is affected by the organizational climate, individual behaviour also affects group behaviour. Therefore, the work ethos of an individual is a function of his fundamental behaviour pattern or the value system he has brought to work. The work ethos of the group, whether structured or informal, is, in turn, affected by the work ethos of its constituent individuals. Moreover, even while in the group, the fundamental behaviour pattern or value system of the individual is largely retained.

Ethos is a subset of culture and as such, work ethos/work ethics is one of the important constituents of work culture. This is shown in Figure 2. Work culture has been defined by Walton (1979) as ‘the combination of attitudes, relationships, developed capabilities, habits and other behavioural patterns that characterize the dynamics of the organization’. Therefore, work culture characterizes the dynamics of human relationships of an organization, and, quite logically, is the result of the interaction of the work ethos of the various structural, hierarchical and professional groups with the organizational climate. This will be discussed in some detail in the next section.

**Effect of Organizational Climate and Dynamics of Work Culture**

The explanation of the terms work ethos, work ethics and culture and the subsequent discussion of the dynamics of human behaviour at work of the preceding section clearly brings out the fact that it is in the context of individuals—men and women—working in organized enterprises that we have the concept of work culture and also perceive the effect of prevailing work culture on the indices of organizational effectiveness. The index of performance of an industrial or business organization is productivity since higher productivity leads to improved profitability and growth. The individuals who man the organization form parts of different structural groups. These groups, in turn, have to carry out various tasks which are necessary to achieve the goals of the organization. These tasks have to be both result-oriented and time-bound and in the performance of these tasks, such groups must also interact with other groups. However, the task or the job has to be performed in the given organizational climate, which, as far as the individual or the group of which he forms a part is concerned, consists primarily of the following elements:

- the content, responsibilities and challenges of the job
- the prevailing group atmosphere and climate of team work

**Figure 1: Human Behaviour at Work: A Function of the Person and the Environment**
The organizational structure and rules, regulations and procedures
- the trust and support received from superiors
- leadership and the example set by superiors in the form of their actions and deeds
- methods of goal-setting and evaluation of performance
- use of fear, threats and rewards to activate employees towards better/higher performance.

The individuals in a group bring with them their individual levels of skills, education and training, as well as their personal traits and acquired social values. As explained earlier, from the work ethos of the individuals, the work ethos of the group is derived, and these structural groups interact with each other (that is, within themselves in the organization) to attain given organization objectives, all the while interacting with the organizational climate and its various elements. The work culture of the organization is obtained through this interaction of individuals and groups with the organization. This interaction is a continuous process which means that the derived work culture is not static but dynamic in nature.

Organizational work culture can either be good or bad, in the sense that through the improvement of any or some of these, one can improve organizational performance through improved teamwork and cooperation, effective communication and greater consultation, flexibility, work innovation, and sustained work on the activation levels of individuals and groups. Such efforts are oriented to achieve the objectives of (1) removal of barriers to individual satisfaction and organizational effectiveness, (2) development of new and creative organizational solutions, and (3) development of individual and organizational capacity for self-renewal (Beer and Huse, 1972, pp 79-101). At the same time, these variables are also characteristics of the organizational climate in as much as they individually and interactively characterize the organizational climate (Taguiri, 1986). Accordingly, there are some distinctive features or attributes of an organizational culture which can also be used for the evaluation of the prevailing work culture. This may be done by devising either a single performance index, or where necessary, multiple indices for each of these attributes or characteristics. It is necessary, therefore, to identify all such variables which not only can serve as indicators of the existing work culture but also can be used as mechanisms of organizational development. Likert's and Walton's lists are not complete since work culture pertains to an organization and order and discipline are prime requisites for organizational success (Koontz and CXDonnell, 1972, pp 508-511). Based on the author's observations, some characteristics of organizational work culture which are important in the Indian context are as follows:
- discipline
- teamwork and cooperation
- communication and consultation
• delegation of authority
• activation levels of individuals and groups
• identity, a sense of belonging and the response of individuals and groups to challenges of responsibility
• flexibility and work innovation
• role of unions and associations.

The interaction of the above elements of organizational climate with the constituents in the organization produces the prevalent work culture with its various attributes or characteristics. Thus, an increase in level or an improvement in one or some of the elements of the organizational climate will produce a corresponding improvement in one or several characteristics of work culture. At the same time, such an improvement should, in all likelihood, produce an improvement in the work ethos of the individual(s) which in turn will create an environment for further improvement in one or several of the work culture characteristics. This is the dynamics of work culture which has been illustrated in Figure 3. This points to the fact that the management can and should make suitable changes, amendments and improvements to create a new work culture—a work culture which is likely to foster both productive job contributions and human job satisfaction (Fiegengbaum, 1986, p 207).

Contrasting Social and Cultural Factors — India vs Japan

Indian industries are now looking to Japan to provide not only technology but also management skills. Also, interestingly, some public sector organizations are actively considering the possibility of imbibing some of the characteristics of the Japanese work culture. When one thinks of Japanese industry and management techniques, the factors that come to mind immediately are the protection provided by the government to corpora-

![Figure 3: Dynamics of Work Culture]
tions and groups in Japan and the role of MITI (Ministry of International Trade and Industry), decisions by consensus, job security and life time employment (Abegglen and Stalk, 1985, pp 4-5). These are not so much characteristics of Japanese industries or management style but are more derivatives of Japanese history, including recent post second world-war history as well as the social and cultural ethos which characterizes Japanese society. Thus, to be able to predict the feasibility of imbibing Japanese work ethos and work culture, it is necessary to compare the social and cultural factors which characterize Indian and Japanese societies.

The social factors which have given inherent advantages to the Japanese are as follows:

- homogeneity of society
- non-confrontational mode of conflict resolution
- a mature sense of purpose based on vision and planning for the future.

These traits of the Japanese society have been responsible for the generation of helpful government bureaucracies, paternalistic corporate cultures and a growth bias that characterizes the Japanese corporation. The strong bias towards growth is based on the desire to survive by growing and brings about the expectation of continued growth as well as decisions and plans formulated to produce growth. Also, employees of Japanese industrial organizations have a greater commitment to their jobs and, therefore, a much higher productivity than their counterparts even in Western countries (Abegglen and Stalk, 1985, pp 4-5).

The cultural factors which complement these social factors and result in the development of positive and goal-oriented characteristics of work culture (goals being higher productivity, profitability and continued growth) are as follows (Saha, 1981, pp 44-62):

- Principles of government as expounded by Confucius and the influence of Confucianism on government.
- Stress on honesty and on behaviour characterized by conformity to the rules of propriety.
- Mutual trust based on acceptance of the Confucian assumption of the basic goodness of human nature.
- Group harmony.
- Emphasis on education.

These traits result in Japanese organizations being characterized by the need for minimum control from above and minimization of bureaucratic procedures within the firm resulting in improved communication and increased efficiency, as well as the creation of a sense of belonging to the organization, a sense of mutuality and an absence of servility in superior-subordinate relationships. Another significant result of these cultural traits is the highly cooperative attitude of the labour unions in Japan. Group harmony and the strong attachment of the Japanese employee to his structural group results in emphasis on hard work, a positive attitude towards workmanship and quality, an effective style of leadership by the formal leader and decision-making by consensus.

In sharp contrast, young persons in the Indian context are growing up in a society plagued by the erosion of values. There are some residues of our social milieu which affect the Indian employees' fundamental disposition towards work. More important among these are the following:

- Whereas our business and political leaders glorify the work ethic of the West which preaches that 'all work is service and a contribution to society and thus equally deserving of respect' (Drucker, 1973, p 184), Indian society still upholds a hierarchical approach to work and looks down upon manual work. Added to this is the fact that a large number of young people from the middle classes are now being forced to seek employment as workmen in factories or in other lower rung jobs in business establishments. The result of this is that a large number of workmen in the factories are not too happy (and neither too proud) about ending up as workmen.

- The arrogance of the educated elite has been discussed at length by Nirad C Chaudhuri (1965) in his much denigrated book, The Continent of Circe.' Many may not agree with him but it is a fact that we tend to be arrogant in our dealings with subordinates and servile when we confront our superiors. The author has heard some business leaders and technocrats talk about the 'fragile self-esteem of Indians.' This fragile self-esteem is due mainly to the age-old arrogance of the superiors and the powerful, whether they be in society, business or government.

- A general apathy towards work and a lack of belief in the importance of their own work. Further, very few of our young people sincerely believe that hard work alone leads to recognition, professional advancement and material success.

- A general lack of trust in seniors and superiors and as such, a lack of trust in supervisors and managers.
leading to the perception that they are being ex-
exploited by management.

Thus, although young people joining industries
and business organizations are better educated and
better trained, these characteristics result in certain un-
derirable personal traits which make them less
amenable to discipline, and simultaneously raise (that
is, worsen) their activation levels and substantially
lower their response to challenges of responsibility.

This state of affairs and the overriding sense of
apathy to work and lack of faith in oneself and one's
capabilities is compounded by the following factors:

- Heterogeneity of Indian society and persisting as
  sumption of inequality of human beings handed
down to us from antiquity.
- Nagging suspicion of fellow beings and the as
  sumption that human nature is evil.
- An excessive dependence on the powerful on the
  one hand and the absence of gratitude on the other.
- An intrinsic reluctance to punish.

Taken together, it seems that the Japanese and In-
dian social and cultural milieu are different (Table 1).
The atmosphere in the Indian industrial organizations
today is characterized by a sense of apathy towards
work, rampant indiscipline, excessive use of bureau-
cratic methods, lack of teamwork and cooperation and
noncooperative and disruptive attitude of unions/ass-
ociations resulting in low productivity, inefficiency,
high manufacturing costs and delayed deliveries.

The correction of this situation will require im-
aginative, radically different and properly coordinated
efforts on many fronts—the government, the education
system, managements of industrial organizations and
trade union leaders.

Guidelines to Create a Conducive Climate

The moulding of a new work culture will have to focus
on the creation of loyalty and discipline at all hierarchi-
cal levels, promotion of cooperative effort or teamwork,
motivation to improve the activation levels of all
employees and also to make them more responsive to

Table 1: Contrasting Social and Cultural Factors — India vs Japan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social/Cultural Factor</th>
<th>Japan</th>
<th>India</th>
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<tr>
<td>Principles of government/administration</td>
<td>Emphasis on government by the virtuous and abrogation of coercion, mutual trust between employer and employee and acceptance of basic goodness of human nature. Results in minimum control from above, high level of delegation, highly motivated workforce</td>
<td>Prevalence of impersonal bureaucratic social relations, mistrust of fellow beings based on the assumption of human nature as evil. Results in highly centralized administration, overemphasis of hierarchical status in decision-making, bureaucratic delays, low level of delegation, dissatisfied workforce and accentuation of apathy in individuals and groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude towards work and goals</td>
<td>Highly result-oriented and directed towards perfection and growth through dedicated effort</td>
<td>General and deep-seated apathy, dissociation of work from its results based on the belief that the results are pre-ordained. Tasks are performed without any interest, dedication or pride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline and order</td>
<td>Highly disciplined, respect for superiors and respect for authority</td>
<td>Lack of discipline at all levels, basic mistrust of authority, poor superior-subordinate relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group harmony</td>
<td>Very high based on informal affiliative pattern of behaviour</td>
<td>Assumption of inequality of human beings, nagging suspicion of fellow beings and highly self-centered behaviour resulting in a lack of cooperation and teamwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on education</td>
<td>Very high</td>
<td>Generally indifferent and highly ambivalent</td>
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the challenges of responsibility. The three action fronts, namely, organizational structure, leadership and work innovation, are discussed in some detail in the following paragraphs.

Structural Changes

Organizational structure should not be taken to mean only the hierarchical tree or the chain of command of the organization. It includes rules, regulations and procedures of the organization as well as decision-making, delegation and levels of operational discretion in the context of organizational objectives. A formal organization is always better than an informal one since an informal organization leads to continuous bickering and chaos and, contrary to common belief, does not lead to improved understanding and teamwork (Flamholtz, 1972, pp 241-242). As Wilfred Brown says: "the more formalisation that exists, the more clearly we will know the bounds of discretion which we are authorised to use and will be held responsible for and prescribed policies make clear to people the area in which they have freedom to act. Without a clearly defined area of freedom there is no freedom ... there is no real freedom without laws" (Koontz and O'Donnell, 1972, pp 241-242).

However, formalization does not mean merely getting out policies, orders and circulars on every detail and making a bound ‘Administrative Manual.’ Real formalization means believing in the rules and procedures framed and implementing them. In India, there is formalization but at every opportunity, the application of management discretion leads invariably to a perceived partial treatment of employees. This causes a great amount of dissatisfaction and erosion of loyalty down the line. Moreover, in many of the Indian organizations, there is overemphasis on hierarchical status in decision-making. The SAIL report on work culture states that most papers are scrutinized at no fewer than eight to nine levels before a decision is taken (Steel Authority of India Limited, 1986, p 3) and lists the removal of overemphasis on hierarchical status as one of its priorities for action. There must be greater delegation to exercise responsibility and it must go hand-in-hand with accountability for actions and evaluation against performance. A person must be made accountable only for things which are really under his control and evaluated against goals set through participation. Managements must be realistic and must not set unattainable goals. Moreover, too often, we have the superior holding all the ropes and pointing the finger at the subordinate at times of poor performance. Such an atmosphere cannot lead to teamwork and motivation.

While on the point of delegation or decentralization of authority, however, it is best to remember that whereas 'there is much greater need for cooperation and participation (today) in managing the enterprise than when the technologies were simple and the chief possessed all the technical knowledge needed' (Likert, 1961, pp 2-3), at the same time 'decentralization is becoming an inadequate solution as technologies become more complex and even more functionalization becomes essential' (Likert, 1961; Koontz and O'Donnell, 1976). Therefore, the organizational structure should be reconstructed so that:

- decentralization of operations and authority must take into account technological and operational constraints
- hierarchy in the organization should be based on responsibility levels (rather than seniority, span of control, etc.)
- within divisions/departments, delegation should be linked to responsibility and accountability
- as far as possible, broad and general policy decisions should only be made at the top and more specific decisions made at lower levels in the organizational structure
- the structure should ensure free flow of information among all departments and levels in the organization.

Before closing the discussion on organizational structure and rules, regulations and procedures, two specific points which are peculiar to Indian organizations and probably to our subcontinent need to be mentioned. As already discussed, to make an organization viable, it is necessary to establish (a) rules concerning attendance, hours and place of work, behaviour on the job, and (b) regulations and procedures with regard to leave, travelling on duty, travelling and daily allowances, and medical and other fringe benefits. These regulations and procedures must be based on trust. As against this, it seems that we take our employees to be basically dishonest and ready to cheat the company at every step. There are many checks and counterchecks and this not only results in a considerable waste of time but also causes widespread dissatisfaction among employees. Secondly, in our organizations, different people and departments have different hours of work. The offices work for lesser number of hours than the production departments and shops. This operational inconsistency not only delays decisions and causes unnecessary production delays in some cases, but also, more importantly, causes heartburn.
Leadership

Leadership is the single most important factor in motivation since subordinates want to be led and led effectively. Individuals work just hard enough to get by if there is little or no leadership. But with effective leadership they will work with zeal and confidence toward the peak of their capabilities (Koontz and O'Donnell, 1972, pp 508-511). An effective leader is a 'vehicle of change' especially in the context of technological innovation and in effective management (Bhadury, 1987; 1989). Moreover, much has been written on leadership by management consultants, effective executives and social scientists (Likert, 1961; Brown, 1971; Koontz and O'Donnell, 1972; Drucker, 1975; Barnard, 1982), and this paper will only concentrate on a few of the leadership qualities which are most fundamental in nature and also have the greatest effect on individual and group activation levels.

The primary task of the leader, whether he be a supervisor or a manager, is to get the subordinates to work hard at the tasks assigned to them. For this, he has to make available to them the wherewithal—whether it is a machine in good working order, or tools, fixtures and drawings, or measuring instruments, or materials, or necessary information, or adequate instructions. Non-availability of the required resources is a major source of demotivation and even the most competent and otherwise committed employees are often dissatisfied due to reasons like poor communication, poor design, poor materials, shortages, delays and inadequate tooling. In such cases, the employees feel that their responsibility is only to the extent of mechanically doing the job. For this reason, every department/section head should keep some time aside for (a) daily check on vital equipment to identify defects and to work out plans of rectification with maintenance/services, (b) periodic meetings with purchase, finance and personnel departments for sorting out outstanding issues. Secondly, in today's business environment, nothing of any significance can be achieved without teamwork and cooperative effort. To promote teamwork, a leader has to be committed to the job and set an example by deeds and actions (and not through periodic exhortations alone), be sincere and honest in his dealings with his subordinates, recognize the performers and reward them adequately, and actively promote teamwork by encouraging people in the group (department/division) who are always reaching out to the people they work with and help them do their job better. The supervisor or the manager must solve individual grievances, however small they may seem at first. For this, he should give some time during the day for meeting his people and solving grievances, outside the formal grievance procedure, to the extent possible. Thirdly, the leader must also be a teacher to his men. Finally, an effective manager must seek out informal group leaders among the employees in his department. Informal group leaders are often unobtrusive and not necessarily spokesmen. If they can be discovered, they often provide a most useful guide to group objectives and thinking (Scott, 1970, p 145). Such informal group leaders can facilitate the molding of group thinking which in turn can help in improving activation levels as well as the responsiveness of individuals in the department.

Job Enrichment

Motivation through work innovation or job enrichment is not only possible but also desirable from the point of view of both job performance and human satisfaction, since 'work becomes more challenging and interesting for employees as their knowledge and skills improve and as they are increasingly able to influence decisions affecting their jobs' (Fiegenbaum, 1986, p 207). However, the results of job enrichment studies carried out on laboratory technicians, design engineers, salesmen and factory supervisors in British companies point out that not all people welcome having their jobs enriched and also the resultant variations in task responsibility in otherwise identical jobs may not be acceptable to all (Scott, 1970, p 149). This is also true for workmen and clerical staff. Changes of job content will only be acceptable to employees if they are treated as opportunities by the employees rather than unreasonable demands imposed by management. Therefore, for work innovation to be effective, it must only be brought about through participation.

Work innovation has not only been attempted by the Japanese and the industrialized West but by a few Indian companies as well, albeit in a small way. This progressive trend must be taken forward but the companies, however, have to take a long-term perspective since there will always be a conflict between the views of those seeking the time-saving benefits of job simplification and those seeking to reinforce the powerful achievement motivation of employees through job enrichment (Scott, 1970, p 149). There are some more important measures to be taken for developing a positive work culture:

- Be fair but firm in dealings with subordinates.
- Take active interest in the personal and family needs/problems of subordinates.
• Take immediate action in cases of indiscipline and do not condone indiscipline in any form and at any level.
• Discourage overemphasis on hierarchical status and 'pulling of rank' in day-to-day dealings.
• Promote information sharing and communication through periodical departmental meetings, production committees and small group activities/quality circles.
• Promote setting of goals/targets and decision-making through consultation and participative forums and ensure consistency in decision-making.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, it is stressed again that the development of a positive work culture is the most vital issue which must be tackled if the Indian organized sector wants to reverse the current trend of erosion of productivity, lack of innovativeness and the rising cost of end products (Ganguly, 1987). However, there is no single course of action, no panacea to ensure that human effort will be applied when and where required (Scott, 1970, p 143). Human motivation is a complex phenomenon, differing from individual to individual, and reacting in different ways to different stimuli since the employee must be convinced that what is proposed is good for him as well as for the group to which he belongs. Moreover, bad organization, lack of leadership and non-availability of necessary infrastructure, equipment and work flow inhibits the individual's efforts and causes widespread disillusionment. Under these circumstances, the mature, achievement-oriented individual may transfer his achievement drive to areas in which it might have some scope such as fighting the system or organization which frustrates him (Scott, 1970, p 149). Moreover, an individual's fundamental disposition to work, his sense of discipline and attitude towards regulated hours of work, rules, regulations and procedures, his activation level and intrinsic drive and his responses to challenges of responsibility are to a very large extent dependent on his fundamental outlook and his overall attitude towards life. This, in turn, is derived from the social and cultural environment. India is a very large country with a wide heterogeneity of languages, ethnicity, cultures, attitudes, ideologies, preferences and economic status. These diversities must be recognized and honoured because close-knit human groups and communities who take pride in their own distinct entities dislike both being taken for granted and being told from above as to what is good for them. Thus, the development of a national work ethos requires coordinated efforts on many fronts and by many agencies, such as the government, schools and colleges, technical institutes and professional institutions, and management of industrial and business organizations. This is a complex and difficult task but a task which must be pursued relentlessly and with sincerity of purpose.

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Ganguly, A S (1987), Speech delivered at the Annual General Meeting held in Bombay on May 15, Telegraph, Calcutta, May 18.


manages

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