**A Scaffolded Approach to Teaching about Organizational Culture: The Texas A&M Culture Exercise**

**ABSTRACT**

Organizational culture is a popular topic in introductory management and organizational behavior classes, but teaching about culture in a way to which undergraduate students can relate is a challenge. Furthermore, undergraduate students who are used to lectures and unaccustomed to active learning methodologies may initially be reluctant to actively participate in class exercises. In this session, I describe the Texas A&M culture exercise for teaching about organizational culture in undergraduate, face-to-face classes. The exercise enables students to learn how to diagnose an unfamiliar organizational culture and to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of a strong culture.

**Keywords**: organizational culture; active learning; scaffolding

**INTRODUCTION**

Organizational culture is a popular topic in introductory management and organizational behavior courses (Bisel, Messersmith, & Keyton, 2010; Lundberg, 1996). As the distinctive “personality” of the organization (Chatman & Barsade, 1995), organizational culture is not only a potentially engaging topic, but the fit between distinctive organizational cultures and firms’ competitive environment helps to explain differences in collective performance (e.g., Bezrukova, Thatcher, Jehn, & Spell, 2012). Relating organizational culture in a way that undergraduate students can relate to and appreciate is a challenge for which researchers have suggested active learning methodologies (Colakoglu & Littlefield, 2011).

Undergraduate students, however, often come into introductory management or organizational behavior classes with psychosocial concerns about active learning methodologies (Auster & Wylie, 2006). It is easy to forget just how disorienting and socially risky experiential exercises, games, role-plays, and other tools of active learning can appear to students (Lund Dean & Jolly, 2012). Chickering (1969) memorably compares the bewilderment of students negotiating the risks and uncertainties of higher education to “a hog on ice” (p. 12).

In this proposal, I describe a 60-minute Activity/Exercise session that teaches about organizational culture using an extended example to which most students relate – a university – using a volunteer read-aloud protocol that enables full-class involvement while mitigating potential psychosocial barriers that some students may face. The “Texas A&M Culture Activity” is an original interactive case study in which student volunteers read clues aloud to the rest of the class about the distinctive culture of Texas A&M University. The class as a whole serves as “detectives” who seek to identify concrete examples from the clues of the three layers of organizational culture: observable artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions (Schein, 2009). This activity is most appropriate for face-to-face classes of early or late undergraduate students, although the activity has been run successfully with executive Masters of Business Administration students. The activity works well for traditional and non-traditional student populations, although the activity may not be as effective with international students who are not as familiar with American university culture. Also, I have run this activity at schools in multiple regions of the United States (e.g., Intermountain West, Northeast) but not in Texas or the Southeastern United States, where students may already be familiar with Texas A&M’s culture. For faculty in those locations, the exercise could be adapted and customized using another school with a distinctive organizational culture.

**THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS/TEACHING IMPLICATIONS**

This exercise draws from Edgar Schein’s (2009) framework for diagnosing organizational culture. Schein suggests that individuals from outside an organization may be well-positioned to diagnose organization’s culture because a strong culture, by definition, involves taken-for-granted assumptions about “how things are done here,” of which long-term insiders may no longer be aware (Schein, 2009). Thus, Schein suggests that outsiders can diagnose an organization’s culture by starting with visible artifacts (the practices that can be seen), proceeding to espoused values (what organizational members say about themselves and the extent to which what they say aligns with what they actually do), and finally to inferring underlying assumptions.

This exercise also draws from evolutionary scaffolding theory (Holton & Clarke, 2006) as a framework for progressively introducing the norms of active learning methodologies in the introductory management classroom. Some students, particularly those coming from outside of business schools, may be used to traditional “chalk and talk” lecture methods; despite their liabilities in generating student engagement (Becker & Watts, 1996), lectures do tend to provide students with comfortable, familiar behavioral routines. Evolutionary scaffolding theory suggests that students, particularly those who are unaccustomed to active learning methods, are likely to benefit from instructional scaffolds (Venne & Coleman, 2010). Instructional scaffolds are temporary tools or learning semi-structures that are used to support students as they move from an external, instructor-centered locus of learning (i.e., lectures) to more student-centered methods such as active learning methodologies (Holton & Thomas, 2001).

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

From participating in this activity, students should be able to:

1. Diagnose an unfamiliar organizational culture by applying Schein’s three layers of culture framework;
2. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of a strong organizational culture;
3. Understand tactics for socializing newcomers into a strong organizational culture;
4. Analyze the challenges of changing a strong organizational culture.

Organizational culture and socialization are the teaching topics that are most relevant to this session.

**EXERCISE OVERVIEW**

The materials necessary for this exercise include a series of PowerPoint slides, 10 printed pages with written clues that are handed out to volunteer readers, and a chalkboard/whiteboard to record student responses (I will provide copies of the materials during the session). This exercise is scalable and has been run with classes ranging in size from nine students to 85, but classes of 20 to 40 students may be more manageable. All told, the exercise takes between 35 to 50 minutes, depending on the extent of student participation in the discussion and the length of the instructor’s debrief.

I start by introducing the topic of organizational culture as something that can be somewhat intangible. I describe culture as something that you can't necessarily smell or taste or see in its entirety, but when you encounter an organization with a strong culture, you know it. I then tell the students that they are going to be taking on the role of managerial consultants. Much like detectives, their job is to diagnose A&M's organizational culture based on 10 clues that they receive. Specifically, I ask them to listen to 10 clues (i.e., short write-ups describing elements of Texas A&M’s culture) and think about the observable artifacts and espoused values that are described or implied by the descriptions, as well as infererences about assumptions that organizational members might take for granted.

I ask for volunteers who are willing to read one of the 10 clues (each is usually one or two paragraphs in length) aloud to the rest of the class. I remind them that participation is a big part of their grade and this is a first opportunity to get in-class participation points. I usually have plenty of takers. I then pass out the 10 clues, one per student (see an example clue in Figure 1) and have them read each clue aloud while that slide is on the screen. I may add a comment from my experience at Texas A&M to supplement what each student has read.

After each of the clues has been read aloud, I begin the debrief by drawing three columns on the whiteboard: one for “Observable Artifacts,” one for “Espoused Values,” and one for “Underlying Assumptions.” I ask students to list the observable artifacts - things like the school’s mascot Reveille, the Midnight Yell, and the Bonfire - that symbolize important parts of A&M's culture. Second, I ask students to talk about some of the espoused values (i.e., what students, faculty, and alumni would likely say) they identify from what has been read. Finally, I ask students to consider inferences they could draw from the clues about A&M's taken-for-granted values (e.g., a school that is politically conservative, a "closed" system where you are either an Aggie or not included, an organization that may exalt military service as an ideal, etc.).

We then pivot to discussing the strengths and weaknesses of a strong organizational culture. From my experience in running this exercise, students tend to pick up quickly on the advantages of A&M's culture (e.g., extraordinary retention rates, extreme student and alumni loyalty, sense of belonging like a "family"). However, they really like to talk about the disadvantages (e.g., what if I don't agree with the dominant political point of view? or what if A&M really needs to make changes for the sake of safety, such as with bonfire or fish camp?). I conclude the debrief by discussing how Texas A&M socializes new members (i.e., incoming students) with tactics such as “fish camp” and sharing information about traditions.

I run this activity within the first two weeks of my Introduction to Organizational Behavior. Based on the principles of evolutionary scaffolding theory, this activity serves several psychosocial goals. It provides a preliminary active learning activity that allows all students to be engaged (i.e., as “detectives”) with relatively low risk. Specifically, the students who are more outgoing and confident can volunteer to read aloud, which benefits their participation grades, while the students who are more socially reticent can vicariously participate and see that participation is both normative and not as scary as they might believe. Thus, the read-aloud methodology serves as an instructional scaffold that allows students to acclimate to my expectations for their participation in active learning without being thrown into the deep end at the risk of increasing their defensiveness (Lund Dean & Jolly, 2012).

**SESSION DESCRIPTION**

**5 minutes**: Introduction. Brief orientation to the purposes of the Texas A&M exercise and its learning objectives.

**40 Minutes**: Demonstration of the activity. We will run the full exercise, with participants serving in the role of students. This segment will be very interactive, with volunteers enlisted to read aloud the 10 clues while others take notes as “detectives” of Texas A&M’s culture, followed by the full debrief.

**15 Minutes**: Debrief and discussion. Following the activity, we will have time for participants to describe their reactions to the exercise, ask specific questions about facilitating it, and share their ideas for modifying this activity or other exercises and activities they have used for teaching about organizational culture.

**Total Time**: 60 Minutes.

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**FIGURE 1: Example “Clue” in the Texas A&M Culture Exercise**

## Reveille

Reveille is the official mascot of Texas A&M University. This dog is the highest-ranking member of the Corps (“Core”) of Cadets, and she is a Five-Star General. Reveille came to Texas A&M in 1931 after a group of cadets hit a small dog on their way back from Houston. They picked up the dog and brought her back to school so they could care for her. The next morning, when "Reveille" was blown by a bugler, she started barking.

The following football season she was named the official mascot when she led the band onto the field during their half-time performance. When the first Reveille died in 1944, she was given a formal military funeral on the football field. Each Reveille is buried facing the scoreboard so that she can always watch the Aggies outscore their opponents.

Reveille is the most revered dog on campus. If she is sleeping on a cadet's bed, that cadet must sleep on the floor. If she is in class and barks while the professor is teaching, the class is to be immediately dismissed. Reveille is a highly cherished mascot and receives only the best.

