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An examination of organisational culture — the Regent Hotel, Sydney

Sharon Kemp^{a,*}, Larry Dwyer^b

^aCentre for Tourism and Hospitality Research, School of Employment Relations and Work, University of Western Sydney, Nepean Parramatta Campus, PO Box 10, Kingswood, NSW 2747, Australia

^bCentre for Tourism and Hospitality Research, Faculty of Business, University of Western Sydney, Macarthur, PO Box 555, Campbelltown, NSW 2560, Australia

Abstract

The traditional approaches to strategy that are adopted by managers do not recognise the importance and power of culture as an integrating and unifying “driver” of action within organisations. Culture and its main elements can be defined using Johnson’s (Long Range Planning 25 (1) (1992) 28) cultural web as a framework. The cultural web has been applied to The Regent Hotel, Sydney in order to explain how cultural influences on behaviour within an organisation come about and their impact on the organisation. Conclusions are drawn regarding the use of culture to increase organisational performance, and particular reference is made to the web’s usefulness in respect of strategic analysis of hospitality organisations. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The choice of strategies that are utilised by hospitality organisations can have a significant impact on their performance. Organisation culture has an important influence on strategies and their success. Managers often overlook or ignore organisation culture as a tool in their strategic armory (Dwyer et al., 1999, 2000).

The utilisation of strategic management and planning is useful to organisations in general in that it provides an identified direction in which the organisation is heading. Such directions are often expressed in the strategic plans, mission,

*Corresponding author. Tel.: +61-2-9685-9660; fax: +61-2-9685-9593.

E-mail addresses: s.kemp@uws.edu.au (S. Kemp), l.dwyer@uws.edu.au (L. Dwyer).

objectives, vision statement and goals. These expressed directions are highly visible to employees, customers/clients and to the public. The expectation is that “good” valued employees will adhere to management’s expressed directives. Strategic management operationalised in this way (from this perspective) is very mechanistic (Morgan, 1997).

This style of strategic management relies on power and decision-making residing at the top level of the organisation. There is a reliance on the legitimate authority that goes with positions to reinforce decisions. The use of policies, procedures and rules ensures that action in the organisation goes according to the “grand master plan”. In such a regulated environment, organisation members are more doers than thinkers. The advantage of such a structured way of managing an organisation is that organisation members’ actions are controlled and predictable. Employee roles and, therefore, appropriate responses and actions, are defined by their position in the organisation. Those who crave additional responsibility and avenues of growth are shut out of what is considered to be the province of senior management.

However, this approach to strategically managing has clear consequences for employee motivation and commitment to the organisation (Lorsch, 1986). Employees are likely to be more motivated and more productive if they feel they can make a valuable contribution to the organisation through either contribution of new ideas, better ways of doing things and participation in decision-making. Employees are more receptive to change in the organisation if they feel they have had their views taken into consideration, even if the organisation does not implement employees’ preferred options.

In particular, this traditional approach to strategy ignores an important and powerful element of organisations, that of culture. Not only do organisations operate within a cultural/social context, but they are also culture-bearing entities. There is no one, uncontested, definition of culture. Sathe (1983, p. 6) suggests that it is a set of important understandings that members of a community share in common. Culture here is viewed as an integrating, unifying phenomenon, in the sense that it is shared by all organisational members and in the sense that various cultural phenomena are consistent with each other. Culture integrates and binds; it is a normative glue — “the way we do things around here” (Deal and Kennedy, 1982). While this view has its critics (Nord, 1985; Uttal, 1983), most organisation researchers agree that an analysis and recognition of the surface culture should be the initial step in strategy formulation and implementation, and is a crucial element in an evaluation of organisation performance (Brown, 1998).

It is the authors’ conviction that the existence of a “strong”¹ culture can be a powerful enabling force in strategy formulation. The positive effects of increased employee identification and commitment highlight the importance of linking culture and strategy to achieve heightened organisation performance. Culture can be used

¹ A strong culture is where the core values are intensely held and widely shared. The more members who accept the core values and the greater their commitment to those values, the stronger the culture is. Strong cultures have a greater impact on employee behaviour and are more directly related to reduced turnover, increased loyalty and cohesiveness.

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