

Extending the Scope of Organisational Culture: The External Perception of an Internal Phenomenon

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KEYWORDS: corporate values, corporate image, fitness industry

Organisational culture is known as the values, beliefs and basic assumptions that are guided by leaders and shared by employees, and that explain “how things are done around here.” Organisational culture has primarily been viewed as an internal phenomenon, having an impact on staff behaviour and attitudes, and ultimately influencing organisational performance. Yet, it has more recently been conceptualised as a factor in shaping a company’s image in the marketplace. This study examined the external perception of organisational culture according to clients of one company in the Canadian fitness industry. Findings showed that clients’ perception of organisational culture was significantly associated with their satisfaction and intent to stay with that fitness organisation.

There continues to be interest in, and support for, the concept of organisational culture as an important entity in a variety of corporations and institutions (e.g., Carmeli & Tishler, 2004; Chan, Shaffer, & Snape, 2004; Hoogervorst, van der Flier, & Koopman, 2004; Hoye & Kappelides, 2004; Lok & Crawford, 1999; MacIntosh & Doherty, 2005; McAleese & Hargie, 2004; Sadri & Lees, 2001; Scott, Manion, Davies, & Marshall, 2003; Smith & Shilbury, 2004). According to Boyd and Begley (2002), “with the decline of bureaucracy and hierarchical control, corporate culture has in recent years been touted as a major mechanism for behavioural conformity” (p. 14). Research continues to demonstrate that organisational culture impacts directly

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on important factors such as staff satisfaction and commitment (Lok & Crawford, 1999), turnover intentions (MacIntosh & Doherty, 2005), morale and teamwork (Goffee & Jones, 1996), and organisational performance (Carmeli & Tishler, 2004; Chan et al., 2004).

Clearly, organisational culture is a key factor in understanding the dynamics of today's daily work environment. It is known as the basic assumptions, values and beliefs that are invented, discovered and developed over time by a group as it learns to deal with internal and external influences (Schein, 1992). To the extent that organisational members understand and accept the values and beliefs about how things are done in the organisation, organisational culture serves to create a social order and coordinate member behaviour (Deal & Kennedy, 1999; McAleese & Hargie, 2004). Deal and Kennedy argue that building a business without paying attention to organisational culture is detrimental to the long-term success of any organisation.

The growing body of research in this area has traditionally discussed organisational culture with respect to the internal confines of the organisational unit. However, it has been suggested that what goes on inside the organisation (i.e., organisational culture) can have a meaningful influence on what is perceived outside the organisation; specifically, the corporation's image (Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Kowalczyk & Pawlish, 2002). It is contended that the external perception of an organisation's culture—the values, beliefs and underlying assumptions that are manifested in organisational processes and staff member behaviour—will be a key factor in shaping corporate image (Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Kowalczyk & Pawlish, 2002). Corporate image is defined as “the total impression that the entity makes on the minds of individuals” (Dichter, 1985, p. 75); it is “the overall estimation in which a company is held by its constituents” (Fombrun, 1996, p. 37). According to Dichter, corporate image “is a most powerful influence in the way people perceive things, and should be a crucial concept in shaping our marketing, advertising, and communications efforts” (p. 85). Dowling (1993) concurs that image can be an influential factor in how people respond to a given company. A positive or negative impression can have important consequences with respect to an individual's attitude and behaviour toward an organisation, its products and services (Robinson, 2006). In the sport setting, corporate image has been shown to be a factor in consumer intention to purchase (Pope & Voges, 2000).

Knowledge of how a firm is performing in the marketplace may be the most common, but certainly not the only, element in the development of corporate image (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Other universal correlates of image include perceived advertising intensity, social responsibility in terms of charitable contributions, quality of products and services, and employee talent (Davies, Chun, da Silva, & Roper, 2004; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Another approach to determining corporate image has been to assess the “corporate character” or “personality” of organisations

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