STEPPING OUT: RHETORICAL DEVICES AND CULTURE CHANGE MANAGEMENT IN THE UK CIVIL SERVICE

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Organizational culture is the pattern of values and beliefs held by members of an organization and the management of culture is now one of the most frequently discussed of all organizational concepts. The excitement associated with culture is attributable to two factors. First, it is argued that culture is the key to organizational performance; simply stated, a strong organizational culture can be a source of competitive advantage. Second, culture is perceived as an alternative method of control to traditional and technocratic forms of management and can be manipulated to ensure that employees are enthusiastic and committed to organizational objectives.

Despite the extensive interest in this topic, culture remains an elusive concept. This paper investigates the nature of culture and considers strategies for introducing cultural change. Specifically, the aims of the paper are threefold. First, to locate and explain the interests and significance of culture change for the public sector. Second, using a case study of a newly created agency, to investigate the problems and issues affecting cultural change in the civil service. Third, to reassess and critically evaluate the claims for culture management made in the literature. Finally, this paper questions some of the assumptions in the literature, which with few exceptions are biased toward top management and the unitary conception of organization, an ideological frame of reference which is particularly problematic in the public sector.

INTRODUCTION

Organizational culture, and its transformation, has become central to the lexicon of popular management theory. In order to refocus business orientation, organizations had to change to more customer-focused, service focused, flexible cultures. In short, it became both a panacea for many organizations and their key to competitive advantage and as such became a cornerstone of the approaches to managing people and particularly the new human resource management model.

Emanating from the USA, and to a lesser extent from Japan, culture arose out of the 'excellence' literature and was quickly disseminated to the UK and embraced by some large UK private sector organizations where it resonated with notions of the enterprise culture. Unsurprisingly, it was also embraced by public service reformists who saw it as a vehicle, via the 'new public management', to shift public service provision from a stable bureaucratic-hierarchy form to a more fluid customer-orientated one.

Despite the fervour for organizational culture and its transformational

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quality in the popular literature, the reality is more ambivalent. Organizational culture is a contested terrain in that not only are definitions of what it is somewhat fuzzy, but the ability to easily change it is extremely debatable. To this end, this paper analyses the concept of organizational culture and attempts to transform it in individual settings before discussing its application to the public sector in the UK and, specifically, to the civil service. It then proceeds to a case study of organizational culture change in a 'Next Steps' civil service group, 'Steppers'.

CULTURE CHANGE

The management of culture has dominated the attention of senior executives in both private and public sector organizations, particularly since the mid-1980s (Anthony 1994). As Storey (1992, p. 13) notes: 'the near ubiquity of managing a culture change is surely one of the most remarkable features of management thinking in the 1980's and early 1990's'.

Culture is believed to provide the key to a commitment to excellence from which will follow organizational success, survival and profit. Management of culture and cultural transformation of large-scale businesses is the skill, purportedly, on which modern management rests (Reed 1996, p. 149). As Ferlie *et al*. (1996) note, much of the literature suggests that, in a situation of major organizational change (for example, public sector shifts to a more market and commercial-based orientation), such change is problematic or unsustainable unless the underlying values and belief systems of the organizational members (i.e. the culture) undergo a similar change.

Moreover, while the literature has diminished somewhat (perhaps reflecting a change in management 'fashion'), it is nevertheless an important part of the transformational change literature (Harris 1996; Harris and Ogbonna 1999; Ogbonna and Harris 1998). One writer, Armstrong (1992, p. 19) has gone so far as to suggest that: 'the acceptance of HRM in the UK and elsewhere has been accelerated by the message on the significance of corporate culture and the need to manage change delivered by American gurus'. While Ogbonna (1992) contends: 'one of the key aspects of HRM is its association with the creation and maintenance of a strong organizational culture'. Culture, it is argued, is a fundamental determinant of employee behaviour and commitment.

As Ogbonna and Harris (1998) indicate, the culture literature is broadly subdivided into three streams. First, there is a literature which argues that culture can be managed and thus directed and controlled. This is typified by the 'excellence' authors (Deal and Kennedy 1982; Ouchi 1981; Peters 1993), but also by a wider literature of cultural change (Bate 1994; Brown 1995; Bowman and Faulkner 1997; Kotter 1995; Kotter and Hesketh 1992). Second, there is a stream of literature which argues against culture management, suggesting that culture may possibly be manipulated (Martin 1985). Third, and closely related to the second, are those who argue that while

culture exists and changes, such change is beyond management or manipulation. Pettigrew (1990), for example, questions not only the utility of the concept but the extent to which management can influence culture, while Handy (1995) also argues that while culture change is routine in organizations, it is impossible to manipulate (see also Anthony 1994; Du Gay and Salaman 1992; Hope and Hendry 1995; Legge 1994; Ogbonna 1992; Watson 1994). One argument to emerge from this 'critical' stream of literature, and one which is relevant to the later case study, is that organizations are attempting to introduce culture management as a substitute for traditional technocratic forms of bureaucratic control (Anthony 1994; Hoggett 1996; Hope and Hendry 1995; Legge 1994).

While not immersing the argument in the depths of the culture literature, it is worth, in the context of the later case study, viewing organizational culture as stratified and segmented in two different ways. The first level of segmentation was addressed by both Schein (1985) and Kotter and Hesketh (1992). Both approaches identify two operational levels of culture as being 'behaviour and artefacts' and 'beliefs and values'. Artefacts and behaviour are fairly tangible – for example, job titles, dress, rules and language – and can be changed with relative ease. Beliefs and values can be harder to access but are explicit enough to be discussed and changed, part of the 'cognitive superstructure'. Values relate to moral and ethical codes whereas beliefs relate to what people think – both may be based on prejudice and stereotype. Schein, however, adds a third level, which is often the hardest to discern and deal with as it concerns issues such as human nature, human activity and human relationships which are shared unconsciously in a taken-for-granted fashion and are therefore not readily recognized by those who hold them; nor are they easily changed. Such 'underlying' assumptions are deep rooted and implicit (Brown 1995).

A second level of segmentation is put forward by Schein (1995) and Ogbonna and Harris (1998). Schein argues that three broad subcultures emerge within organizations which follow, broadly, hierarchical and functional lines. Again this is relevant to the case study in this paper in that a central argument will be that the culture change management programme at 'Steppers' has not permeated much below the senior management level. Schein identifies three 'occupational' cultures as the sub-cultures of chief executive officers, of engineers and of operators. Furthermore, Schein argues that each is 'valid' from its own viewpoint and that in order to create 'alignment', mutual understanding is necessary through integration. As he contests (see also Kotter 1995): 'Instead of superficially manipulating a few priorities and calling that culture change, we must recognise and accept how deeply embedded the shared, tacit, assumptions of executives, engineers and employees are'.

Ferlie *et al*. (1996) have addressed the issue of culture change in two segments of the public sector, health and education. Despite considerable, government-led efforts to effect cultural change in the two sectors, they

conclude that the impact has been minimal. In health, for example, while they acknowledge that some changes are evident, driven by the contract system and an acceptance by both professionals and managers that change was necessary, they argue that competition and the market ethos are not greatly valued and as such the new culture is not well embedded. In education, Ferlie *et al*. conclude that the situation is somewhat different. There have been significant changes, including an increase in 'reputation management', a power shift from LEAs to schools (and hence to head teachers), an exercise of choice by parents and corresponding response from schools, an increased role for governors and a growing managerialism involving contract management. However, they also conclude that there are marked differences in attitudes to change between head teachers and the rest of the staff.

More recently, and of particular relevance to this paper, Foster and Hoggett (1999) published a study of change in The Benefits Agency. Within this group they found a managerial regime which clearly embodies the principles of the new public management, but operators who were prone to an intensification of labour and for whom the cultural messages sent by the new public management were contradictory and confusing. The twin messages of 'valuing your staff' and 'market testing' are one example.

The public sector: a need for cultural reform?

If behavioural change requires a change in organizational culture (Lundy and Cowling 1996) then the public sector might be in need of a 'cultural revolution'. The election in 1979 of the Thatcher government marked a turning point in the debate about the role of government, how to run the public services, how to reduce expenditure, and how to reduce bureaucracy (Drewry and Butcher 1988).

Underlying these aims were a number of assumptions and ideological beliefs which influenced the decisions that governments subsequently took. These included the notion that public sector organizations were unresponsive bureaucracies; that the public sector was too large; that management is superior to administration; that management in the private sector is superior to the public sector and should thus be the model and the belief that the culture of the public sector had to be changed to an entrepreneurial one (Hoggett 1996; Hood 1991; Lawton and Rose 1991; Metcalfe and Richards 1990; Pollitt 1990). Moreover, while the New Labour administration has changed some of the tenor of the debate, the trajectory is broadly similar (Gray and Jenkins 2000).

That there has been considerable change in the way in which public services have been organized and managed since 1979 is uncontested (Flynn 1990; Stewart and Walsh 1992), although what is contested is the extent (Farrell and Morris 2001). First, the landscape of government has changed in an attempt to 'hollow-out' the state (Rhodes 1997) through privatization, quasi privatization and contracting-out services. Second, a wide range of

methods and techniques have been used to reform the provision of public services, ensure greater efficiency, value for money and responsiveness to public needs (Butler 1993; Lawton and Rose 1991; Power 1997; Walsh *et al*. 1997).

The main culture shift can be described as an attempt to make public sector organizations less bureaucratic and more entrepreneurial. The rationale for this was the enterprise culture and the discourse of enterprise which permeated organizations and management during the 1980s and which suggested that there was a serious misalignment between the cultural imperatives of enterprise and bureaucratic administration (Legge 1995). As Osborne and Gaebler (1992, p. 15) explain: 'in this environment bureaucratic institutions, public and private, increasingly fail us'.

The *modus operandi* to achieve the cultural transformation was found in the new public management (NPM), providing dynamic organization cultures (Hogwood and Peters 1995; Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Sadler 1988). This was not, however, about the more prosaic technological or structural reforms. The discourse of enterprise called for a radical process of attitudinal and behavioural restructuring too (Reed 1996).

Attempts were made to shift the public sector from an administrative to a managerial culture within which public services would be re-orientated towards either a marketplace or a client culture (Bryman 1989; Colville and Packman 1996; Wilson and Doig 1996), to form the heart of both rhetoric and practice of transforming the public sector (Newman 1994). However, the prevailing culture of the public sector might well neutralize and frustrate such reforms (Mabey and Salaman 1995) and recent organizational studies have questioned if corporate culture change is relevant for the organizations of the 1990s (Hope and Hendry 1995).

The civil service has not been immune from the forces of change since 1979, and although there are differences of opinion whether these changes can be described as incrementalist or revolutionary, there is no doubt they have had a major impact on both the nature and organization of the service (Corby 1998; Fry 1988; Hood 1998; Horton 1993, 1997; Talbot 1997).

A range of initiatives and structural changes have been embraced, with varying degrees of success, under the broad motif of 'entrepreneurial government' or NPM (Hoggett 1996; Rhodes 1997). These were designed to imbue the civil service with private sector values. Such private sector values would thus induce more consumer-friendly attitudes and greater accountability, regulation and efficiency. They would be driven by culture change management programmes, by decentralization and by changes to human resource management policies (Richards and Rodrigues 1993). While a variety of initiatives were introduced within the UKCS between 1980 and the mid-1990s, five are prominent:

1. the Rayner scrutinies, aimed at improving efficiency via small teams;

2. the Financial Management Initiative (1982), aimed at decentralizing bureaucratic administration via accountable cost centres;
3. Next Steps, which led to certain civil service functions becoming 'agencies' within departments with a purchaser-provider split;
4. the 1991 Citizen's Charter with output orientation;
5. the Competing for Quality Initiative (Market Testing), which required departments to competitively tender for certain services.

While the lexicon of civil service reform has changed somewhat post-1997, the trajectory is broadly similar (Gray and Jenkins 2000), albeit that 'joined-up' administration/government became the new clarion call. That these measures have impacted upon the working of civil service departments and individual civil servants is undisputed. However, while certain commentators have viewed the changes as revolutionary (Horton 1997), others are more cautionary, arguing for a more critical analysis of the rhetoric of change (Corby 1998; Talbot 1997). Moreover, change does not necessarily permeate below top management levels (Brooks and Bate 1994; Corby 1997; Foster and Hoggett 1999).

Much of the change taking place in the civil service can be understood as an attempt to move beyond the principles of classical Weberian bureaucracy on which central government departments were based (Colville and Packman 1996). Initially this was by means of targeting efficiency gains and value for money, but later by changing the culture of Whitehall (Dynes and Walker 1995; Richards and Rodrigues 1993). Early initiatives such as the Rayner scrutinies and the Financial Management Initiative suffered a patchiness and slowness of implementation and did not produce the degree of change required (Bryman 1989; Gray *et al*. 1991; Wilson and Doig 1996). Indeed, the impact of these innovations on the culture of the civil service appear to have been very limited (Carter and Greer 1993; Horton 1993).

However, the 'sea change' associated with Next Steps did bring about a change in culture (Brooks and Bate 1994; Richard and Rodrigues 1993; Lawton and Rose 1991). As a result of this initiative, entrepreneurial norms and techniques were definitely introduced into the civil service (Dynes and Walker 1995). Purportedly, the bureaucratic ethos of the civil service has been changed, decaying bureaucracies have been dismantled and the organizational staff have been remoulded and reborn by the cultural revolution, although this scenario is contested (Corby 1998; Hood 1998; Talbot 1996, 1997).

A change in central government in 1997 did little to alter the trajectory of change. Indeed, if anything, there was a renewed attempt to change management culture in the civil service and, arising from the *Modernising Government* White Paper, reinforcing performance measurement and regulation and promoting 'joined-up' government (Gray and Jenkins 2000).

CULTURE CHANGE MANAGEMENT AT 'STEPPERS'

Research background

In order to address the type of culture change in the civil service and its nature, depth and outcomes, this section describes and analyses such issues through an examination of 'Steppers', a Next Step Agency. Smircich (1983) argues that for the study of organizational culture, three types of research methodologies are appropriate, including interviews, participation and observation. All three were utilized in this study. First, mission statements, official reports, staff attitude surveys and external management consultants' reports were analysed. Second, a total of 40 detailed interviews were conducted with a variety of employees, picked on a stratified sample basis, from each level of the organization. The interviews, which averaged one-and-a-half hours, were semi-structured. The use of interviews within a case study methodology provides the rich data necessary for a study of organizational change (Eisenhardt, 1989; Hartley, 1994). Finally, detailed observation was undertaken of meetings, internal presentations and training programmes (see Watson 1995). A principal aim of this research was to consider whether structural change via the creation of decentralized 'agencies', as recommended by the Ibbs Report (1987), has delivered the expected cultural change seen as necessary to improving the management and performance of government business.

'Steppers' was created as a separate government department in 1989 and became an executive agency two years later with a budget of £42 million and 1300 staff. Split between two sites, one in London and one in the provinces, 71 per cent of staff are employed in the latter. The age profile of staff is relatively young, with 65 per cent in the 25–44 age group. Staff at the London location, however, tend to be better educated (over a half are degree-level educated). Although 50 per cent are female, males are over-represented at higher grades (executive officer and above). Nine percent of staff are employed on part-time contracts and these are overwhelmingly female and predominantly found in the provincial location.

Culturally, Steppers is hierarchical and bureaucratic, and fits Handy's (1985) 'role culture' with strong functional areas, a high degree of formalization and standardization, work activities are governed by procedures, rules and regulations together with job descriptions allocated to posts with commensurate authority and positional power. The organization has defined roles, centralized control, and administrative management with an emphasis on procedures: 'There was little scope for personal initiative in the work, we were a paper factory following rigid rules on how the job had to be done' (Senior Manager).

Another interviewee confirmed this: 'We were conditioned to look inward, conditioned to be cautious, we conformed to the procedures and just got on with our jobs'. Adherence to formalized procedure, technicism

and conservatism was the order of the day, the culture was bureaucratic and administrative.

Steppers was exposed to 'new managerialism' and the enterprise culture as part of a drive for efficiency, effectiveness and economy. Along with a range of changes to structures and systems and attempts to change the culture, the organization shifted: 'to a more flexible, organic structure, more customer rather than producer oriented with a more open attitude to controlled risk taking' (Senior Manager).

Aspects of a cultural change which have been put in place at Steppers included new information technology, a flatter management structure, human resource management (HRM) developments, such as empowerment, individual performance-related pay (linked to staff appraisal), teamworking and changes in work processes together with a specific programme known as the leadership and management programme (LMP) intended to implement and embed changing culture and values.

In addition to the authors' interviews, two Steppers surveys were commissioned; a survey of senior staff, by consultants in 1993, assessed the organizational climate and concluded that Steppers was essentially non-adaptive, mechanistic and inflexible, and lacked commercial-orientation. Many senior managers described the organization as 'the machine'. In 1994, an annual Steppers Staff Perception Survey was conducted in order to provide information about staff perceptions of the organization and to measure changes over time. The 1995 survey results showed the biggest 'positive' change for the organization as a whole and in individual work areas had been improvement in communications.

During interviews with staff it was felt that the stimulus for change had come from two different sources, one external and one internal. The dominant external change agent, identified by staff interviewed, was seen to be government with its aim to drive down costs and at the same time increase efficiency and effectiveness in service provision. It was generally felt that these changes were being imposed on Steppers and its staff in a number of areas, for example, the introduction of performance-related pay, decentralized pay delegation, devolved personnel management, market testing and an increased customer focus. Many of these were in line with the changes that have occurred throughout the public sector, with an approach to change which was top/down, and focused on the basis of structural and system changes. This concurs with other evidence conducted elsewhere into the civil service (Brook and Bate 1994; Foster and Hoggett 1999; Talbot 1994).

The primary internal change agent was provided by the new LMP training programme designed to 'achieve major changes in (Steppers) organizational culture, and to move away from the traditional hierarchical structure to a more participative and interactive culture' (LMP Document). This training programme emphasized the need to create effective leadership and management at all levels with a commitment to teamwork, personal and

organizational learning and a quality service. LMP was implemented in two stages. Stage One, which took two years, commenced in October 1993 and scheduled all staff at senior level to have completed their first-five day module (presented by external training consultants) by October 1994. A corresponding middle management programme began in April 1994 with a view to completing the initial phase for existing staff within two years. Coverage of EOs and below was envisaged with an appropriately modified course content. It was to begin in late 1994 and be operating fully by early 1996. Assessment of the effectiveness of LMP is judged by line managers; data are collected in the Staff Perception Survey and the LMP Advisory Group at Steppers.

A CHANGE OF CULTURE?

Senior managers, largely technical professionals, cited the following areas of change: improved communication, improved service quality, greater customer focus, widespread IT use, delayering and empowerment. Negatively, IT developments were seen to isolate staff and mediate against co-operation and teamworking. Delayering, with 'real' empowerment, would produce a more organic, dynamic organizational structure but without it, as one interviewee explained, delayering would only be perceived as a cost-cutting exercise and so mediate against commitment and thus 'this development could backfire'.

Without exception, all senior managers felt that changes were largely and consistently externally generated and imposed by government. Pressures for change were geared to 'costs' and went far beyond the need to merely stay within financial budgets. As one senior manager explained: 'Government pressures on the office have actually led us to reduce costs by 20%. So you can't have a bigger pressure than that coming from outside' (Senior Manager).

Similarly, while market testing had only affected certain peripheral areas to date (HRD and catering services), its impact had pervaded the organization. As one Senior Manager commented:

> If you go back to FMIs, I don't think they achieved much at all, and I don't think the setting up of agencies worked either. I think the one thing that really did work was when they finally got to the crude threat 'we'll sack you', we'll give your job to the people in the private sector. Many people here have got families and responsibilities and what they thought was a safe contract was not, they could be pushed out of the organization at all levels . . . it is these kinds of things which have made it possible for managers to drive through change.

This is not to say the internally sponsored LMP went unrecognized, particularly as many identified it as a 'change' in itself rather than a vehicle for change. But constant external pressures for change from government

loomed far larger in the minds and everyday experiences of senior management.

Essentially, the senior management view was of adaptive, empowered and enthusiastic people working in teams towards a common objective within a new organizational culture. Though it was generally acknowledged that some changes were necessary, others were questioned; it was almost, as one senior manager noted, 'change for change sake'. What was clear from interviews with professionals, meanwhile, was the identity and purpose of their work. Professionalism and the correct way of working was clearly a motivating factor with this group. They were almost a community within a community with commitment both to their work and standards, and to the civil service. These attitudes were not apparent amongst the rest of the workforce.

Despite this upbeat image of change, ambivalence was apparent even among senior management. One respondent indicated:

> People don't like change, I don't like change, we like to know where we are, and with the threat to jobs being taken away people are now once more reluctant to change. No, you can't tell where you're going to be at the end of all the changes, you just have to wait and see where you end up. (Group Director)

EMPOWERMENT

One of the consequences of the move away from traditional hierarchical structures to a 'delayered' form was a change in work processes associated with the 'empowerment' of individuals and business units. As one senior manager explained: 'Empowered teams are taking on the responsibilities for their work in order to improve the involvement of staff in a greater area of work activity and improve the quality of service for the organization'. They were, as another senior figure, described them: 'A very different way of working together'.

Newly formed empowered teams would have greater responsibility for the collection and production of data. Moreover, teamworking would make production of data more cost effective and efficient. Interviews with staff in middle management grades and below suggest that senior management enthusiasm about these developments may have failed to anticipate the changes that empowerment can bring. Many of the staff interviewed were cynical about the new work practices. Those working in the Data Collection Units felt the quality of work was much worse and staff morale was extremely low. The new working structures had increased the division of labour in the production of data because teams were now responsible for only one area of production, that is, data collection or data processing and analysis, whereas previously individuals had been responsible for seeing the whole product through. Consequently, people had become increasingly dissatisfied with teamworking and this put the quality of work produced under pressure. Generally, staff complained of increased responsibility

without increased power or remuneration. The scheme is about 'us doing more for the same' as one team member explained. In addition, 'spontaneous' teams were created, drawing together staff from a variety of areas for short-term projects; this resulted in resentment since this work had to be done in addition to existing job/workload and was thus seen as 'a way of Steppers getting things done on the cheap'.

More specifically, many staff felt that inadequate training had been given to team members both in new job skills and in team interaction skills. Some middle managers expressed concerns about 'letting go' of responsibility to such teams, 'some of whom could do the job, others could not'. Others regarded it as a 'fad', 'we will then go back to the way we were working previously, it worked, and we understood it'. Moreover, middle managers were concerned about teamworking because it posed a further threat to their jobs when linked to delayering.

Consequently, the senior management's view of empowerment was regarded by other staff as idealised and in practice it was greeted by many with cynicism and seen as nothing more than 'a cost-cutting exercise', displaying a gap between (1) the rhetoric and the reality of change; and (2) a picture of continuity.

THE ROLE OF HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

The training function at Steppers in the preceding five years had changed significantly. Not only had considerable money been spent on the building of a large new training suite but there was evidence of 'new blood' in senior posts. This, together with a successful in-house bid in the face of a market test, had made the new Human Resource Development (HRD) section at Steppers a much more dynamic operation and one which saw itself as quite separate and distinct from the personnel management section.

Naturally enough, HRD training staff expressed enthusiasm for LMP and it was seen as a success story to the extent that its messages and language of empowerment, teamworking and communication had presented managers and other staff with new working ideas. However, doubts were expressed about whether these ideas had been successfully translated into practice thus making for real change in values and behaviour. Internal documents of the LMP Advisory Group show that this group met to discuss progress on recommendations on 'how to shift LMP from the classroom into everyday working practices' and further reported that little progress had been made in this area, not least because managers were not coaching staff in the use of LMP techniques.

> LMP was known to be successful only in 'pockets' of Steppers where senior line management had given its total support to the project. Otherwise, there are many areas where people are going on in the same old way – doing the hours and not the job – not changing at all, and largely due to line-manager inertia. Some line managers have still not even been on LMP although it has been running for years now. (Middle Manager)

The current Head of HRD, a recruit from the Australian Civil Service, believed that although LMP still had further potential as a vehicle for cultural change, because significant numbers of managers and lower grade staff had not yet attended, 'it had been pushed as far as people appear to want it to go' (see also, Dunn *et al*. 1994; Salama and Easterby-Smith 1994; Tyson 1990).

That the path of cultural change was not a smooth one, was indicated by the HRM manager. He argued that:

> LMP has provided a kick start for change in Steppers and some small changes have occurred which have made people more chance-taking. But people are not risk-taking, the culture at Steppers is still very bureaucratic and role-oriented – you are your job.

He went on to argue that:

> In the private sector organizations know what business they are in, where they want to be in the end. People skills are then matched with the business process in order to achieve the end product. At Steppers there is rhetoric about the need for change and a new ethos based on efficiency and business-like practices but no clear idea of what business we are in or where we want to be at the end.

Furthermore:

> Trying to create a new culture was futile because culture has to match whatever the organization wants to achieve.

The LMP was thus developing people-skills without any real evaluation, something admitted by the Group Director. The inability of senior management to recognise the need for a specific end product was attributed to the current culture of Steppers which (1) fostered administrators not managers; (2) their lack of business management skills (in particular strategic, directional leadership); compounded by (3) their lack of understanding of what was being imposed on them by government (Dopson and Stewart 1990; Talbot 1994; Tyson 1990). The interviews with staff in HRD confirmed a gap between 'rhetoric and reality' and of 'continuity and change'.

THE ROLE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT

Research undertaken by the Institute of Personnel Management on performance management and quality management in 1992 and 1993 concluded that people played an active role in the efforts to manage or change culture (Baron 1994). At the same time the evidence suggests that unless personnel policies and procedures are assessed and reviewed at the outset of a culture change programme the personnel function itself risks becoming the guardian of an outdated culture by reinforcing the behaviours the organization seeks to change.

In theory, the personnel function at Steppers had the potential to contrib-

ute to a change in a civil service agency. Agency status, decentralization and devolving HR functions throughout the civil service have widened the scope of personnel work beyond the reactive and administrative. It is important to note that, in addition to HRD perceiving itself as a separate entity from personnel management (or Personnel and Staff Development – PSD – as it is called at Steppers), staff in general see them as different sections. The attempt to change culture by the LMP can therefore be attributed to the positive contribution to this process by HRD alone.

Many of the managers interviewed, for example, were unsure about the contribution of PSD towards the change programme. Despite the rhetoric of devolution, many managers felt that too much time was spent by PSD on administration and not enough dealing with people and getting new ideas under way. Two comments made by PSD staff epitomise the administrative approach as opposed to a strategic, creative and dynamic one. 'There's loads to do but I don't know what it is' (Senior Personnel Manager). Second, an Executive Officer, commented: 'I couldn't say what I did all week, but I know I was busy. It was like all odd jobs. I had to answer the phone, and call in my senior officer's room three times a day to down load his Email because he was away'.

Other managers referred to the tensions created by PSD, between autonomy and procedural constraints. This was the feeling of a number of people and was colourfully expressed by one: 'I used to think the unions were a barrier to change, I think I got it wrong, the real obstacle to change in this place is the personnel section'.

To investigate these tensions further, interviews were conducted with selected members of PSD. It was apparent that whereas those in HRD, associated with the LMP, could be seen as dynamic, PSD staff were mainly 'reactive' and engaged in administrative and clerical tasks, not unlike the traditional administrative 'clerk of the works' model (Tyson and Fell 1986) where personnel is primarily concerned with adherence to rules and regulations and routine administrative and far from the innovative, sophisticated model associated with HRM and culture change (Armstrong 1990).

During interviews there was unease with the concept of culture in PSD, what it meant and what if anything they could do to change it. One respondent questioned whether culture change was needed, 'Things are fine now, we have become more like a business'. Moreover, members of PSD focused more on specific aspects of change, the 'processes' and 'systems' such as performance-related pay and appraisal than on the patterns of values and behaviours associated with culture itself. Finally, significant discontent was expressed both about the changes to traditional personnel activities and especially to the way in which new personnel systems had been imposed by government via senior management.

MIDDLE MANAGERS

A common concern expressed by middle managers, and confirmed with interviews conducted with subordinates, was that managers conditioned to working in hierarchical structures lacked the interpersonal skills needed to manage people in empowered teams.

> We are not people managers, nor human resource experts. We have gone from administering tasks to managing people without adequate training. I'm all in favour of more responsibility and power over those I manage but we do need more professional support. (Graduate Manager)

The majority of middle managers at Steppers have been promoted by means of an internal labour market from the ranks of junior staff who, as elsewhere in the civil service, enter – usually educated to sixteen years old – with a distinct lack of the management training and development appropriate for them to become 'new public managers' (Talbot 1994; Tyson 1990).

The extent to which middle management are being asked to transform culture should not be underestimated. The LMP itself targets this group as key change agents and they in turn are expected to help their staff acquire new skills, new attitudes and deliver increased efficiency. This requires the commitment of middle managers and the harnessing of their capabilities in a new direction – to manage and no longer to just administer. It was their role as 'change agents', however, that created problems and tensions.

Lack of ownership of the change process was evident due to imposed change. Even where consultation had taken place it was seen as mere 'window dressing' as decisions had already been made and would be implemented regardless, resulting in resentment and detachment. Moreover, change plus delayering made many middle managers cynical. The majority argued that delayering had significantly lowered morale. For many, it had occurred purely to cut costs, not to meet a strategic need. As one explained: 'Prospects of promotion are very much reduced, it does not matter anymore what I perform like, as far as I can see there are no prospects here for me'.

This problem was acute in an organization which has viewed job security as a key employment benefit and led to growing discontent over relatively modest remuneration, especially by comparison to the private sector. 'We are trading middling job security for an increased commercial focus but we are not being rewarded for it. Pay is not based on market rates but is being held back by government policy' (Middle Manager).

Perhaps one of the most telling remarks came from a middle manager who had been in the civil service for over 20 years:

> Yes, there have been some changes in working practices, there have been some attempts to change values but the problem is all these changes are not going in the same direction. Take my grade for instance, on the one hand LMP is supposed to make me a facilitator of change, on the other

> we see delayering cutting back on management jobs. I've got nowhere to go from here, no more promotion, I'm at the end of the line. This has made me very cynical of the organization. Do cynics make the best leaders?

Individual performance-related pay linked to the staff appraisal system was also a contentious issue, with progress now based on performance determined by the 'subjective' assessment of line managers via staff appraisal. Traditionally, promotion prospects determined by line managers was unpopular and pay determined by this method is regarded as highly unsatisfactory. For many middle managers, the introduction of performance-related pay acted as a demotivator by focusing further on public sector pay inadequacies.

Faced with such contradictions and issues many middle managers feel disenfranchised, both at work and from the change process itself. Even those who are committed to that change process find difficulties:

> Many are simply not able to understand all the information being thrown at them, for example, the new pay and grading system. Consequently, they are not able to cope with the increased demands of decision making and responsibility. (Middle Manager)

THE 'RANK AND FILE'

When junior staff were asked if the nature of their work had changed in recent years, what became clear, during the course of interviews, was that the method or 'how' they did their work had changed to the extent that many felt their 'world had been turned upside down'. The cause of this disruption was the widespread application of information technology (IT) at Steppers where all staff were allocated and expected to use a personal computer. For young staff computers were already a way of life, but for the majority of Steppers staff, who are in the 25–44 years age group and in junior grades, IT was seen as a major issue and one which they found difficult to adapt to. Although HRD offered a range of IT courses for staff, many of the older staff expressed difficulty in making use of their personal computer 'second nature'. This was exacerbated by what was seen as a constant pressure to change or the 'pace of change'. For example, no sooner had one software package been introduced then a new one was on the agenda. In recent years, WordPerfect had been superseded by Smart which had been overtaken by the currently used Lotus 123, and Excel was due to come on line in the near future. Staff learned to deal with the pace of change, not by overtly resisting – after all it was only a job – but by 'coping' with it. For example, they utilised the software package to the minimum extent required to do the job. This is shown by the comments of one junior officer: 'I don't even understand Lotus yet, and I am holding back on it, because I don't see the point in learning it all if it's going to be replaced

with Excel'. And so, junior staff had learnt to absorb the changes as best they could.

While the HRD team responsible for the LMP programme was confident that new attitudes to work would develop and change would be successful because of empowerment and new ways of working, interviews with junior staff showed clearly that work had changed, but was not supported by attitudinal acceptance. Many who worked in the new empowered teams felt that the work had been reorganized for the benefit of management not themselves. Some felt positive about the new more flexible working practices but for others the nature of the tasks remained meaningless and the degree of control granted to teams was very limited.

Junior staff showed little commitment either to the civil service or Steppers, which contradicts the idealised view of all public sector committed workers ethos (Lawton and Rose 1991; Newman 1996). If, however, such workers are not committed to the work of the public sector then in theory it should be easier to change the culture, to 'engineer change' as one described it, but through mechanistic tools and threats. The key levers of change identified were CCT and in the short-term PRP. But these mechanisms were seen to be of use only to those staff affected. CCT had, according to one junior staff worker 'come and gone, and missed us by a mile', and PRP was for many meaningless, 'too remote or removed from daily routine' to have any significant impact.

Many of these workers had identified not with the organization as such but with other common identifiable groups. For instance, some expressed commitment to their workmates, colleagues or team members. Others felt some loyalty to their section, or unit, but this mainly reflected confidence or admiration for section heads. Many part-time workers showed a sense of commitment to other non-full-time workers. Women particularly identified with other women and mothers, who shared 'common problems'. Many of the women part-timers interviewed valued their job because of the flexible working hours/arrangements provided and favourable working conditions which enabled them to manage their work and domestic responsibilities. The majority of those interviewed are committed to their families not to the organization.

Cultural management was seen as the 'latest fashion' for managing people and like previous attempts at reform it would in their view 'rock the boat a little, but there was no real fear of capsizing'. Some trade unionists went further, and questioned the process of change itself and the lack of opportunity for proper two-way consultation and involvement. It was felt that all the changes, even LMP, had been driven by external forces without any attempt to involve the staff until after the changes had been introduced. As one union member explained:

> yes, in this climate we accept the need for change but why not consult the staff. It's an opportunity missed, even when new plans are intro-

> duced they are not met enthusiastically by staff, why should they? The name of the game here is compliance, we are told what to do and get on with it.

As another explained:

> For culture change to work you need trust, it involves two-way communication, both parties understanding the other side. Here, change is all one-way, top driven, its almost as if we are pawns in a game of chess.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has highlighted some of the problems with efforts to establish a new culture within the UK civil service. The senior management view of effective change contrasts with the other workers who argued it was relatively shallow. At best the outcomes are unintended and at worst rhetorical devices. Senior management, for example, used a range of performance indicators to illustrate cultural change. When staff were interviewed, however, it was clear that because of the power relationship at Steppers, they paid lip service to the results and did what was necessary without any real attitudinal and cultural change. Control systems, performance appraisal, performance pay and management would appear to maintain conformity in this organization, rather than shared values.

The case reported also highlights the problems of culture change which is seen by staff as imposed from above or top/down driven. From interviews with senior management it was clear they held a strong unitarist view of the organization. No attempt was made to explain or discuss cultural or sub-cultural difference in the organization such as gender, professional versus non-professional civil servants, divisions between sections, or, more importantly, divisions associated with the frontier of control between worker and manager.

What was apparent at Steppers was that sub-cultures existed within this organization which internally differentiated staff into smaller groups (Brown 1995). Thus, a 'them and us' situation pervaded at Steppers with staff grades holding a fundamentally different view of the world to senior management and this fostered a low trust relationship despite the attempt at cosmetic change. Middle managers too, though showing more commitment to aspects of the change programme than junior staff, were also somewhat ambivalent to, or cynical of, many of these changes. Within Steppers, the issue of gender as a sub-culture was also apparent, especially with the ever-growing numbers of female flexible workers, who were the least motivated, developed and valued members of the organization. Generally, this group of workers typically felt excluded from the general fabric of Steppers and its new culture. Indeed, for many this culture appears as a threat to the traditional bureaucratic paternalism associated with the civil service.

Finally, what this case study highlights is the problem of culture change imposed from outside the organization. The dominant view by all grades of

management and staff alike was that change had been imposed by external pressures. Such transformation was neither explained in Ibbs, nor apparent to senior management, should this be through a radical revolution or an incremental approach? To many of the staff the changes were simply seen as a response to external pressures which were separate and incoherent. Though senior management attempted to provide a sense of direction through the LMP programme, barriers to change remain, over formalized reporting procedures, hierarchical structures despite delayering, and personnel policies which did not 'fit' a dynamic flexible organization. In many senses, then, the culture change management programme was used and viewed at various levels of the organization as a rhetorical device. Moreover, it is very difficult to do away with traditional bureaucratic patterns of relationship by simply flattening the hierarchy or putting staff into empowered teams, and the efficacy of culture as a management control device is doubtful (Hope and Hendry 1995).

This turns us to wider debates on management culture. This approach presumes that organizational cultures can be assessed, managed, constructed and manipulated in the pursuit of enhanced organizational performance (Mabey and Salaman 1995, p. 283). Organizations will be able to replace decaying bureaucracy with a dynamic organic culture, and cultural control will simply displace bureaucratic and technological control (Anthony 1994).

The resurgence of unitarism associated with HRM has centred on culture (Noon 1994; Provis 1996). Organizations, accordingly, are viewed as being united under the umbrella of common goals, with all employees integrated into a team working towards these objectives. The emphasis is on leadership rather than power, the leader promoting a system of strongly held, shared values (Morgan 1986, pp. 188–9), through cultural change (Mabey and Salaman 1995).

While participants share some interests, it is not, however, at all clear that they need to have any distinctive shared values or congruence of interests as the unitary perspective implies (Keenoy 1990; Noon 1992; Provis 1996). A diversity of individual and group interests means the organization is a loose coalition of interests and conflict and power are inherent and ineradicable characteristics of organizational affairs (Morgan 1986). The public sector is a testament to the pluralistic reality of organizations. The highest trade union membership and density is to be found in the public service, as is the high density of professional occupations and associate professions. Professional employees lay claim to 'professional status' and this places them in a different kind of relationship, both to their managers and to service users (Moore 1996).

Watson (1995), moreover, distinguishes between the 'official' culture of an organization and the 'unofficial' culture or cultures of organizations. The former is the system of meanings, values, norms, espoused by the dominant managerial coalition, the latter are the systems of meanings, values and

norms actually prevailing in the organization. This is echoed by Brooks and Bate (1994) on the civil service, who found that an attempt to change from above was neutralized and frustrated by the cultural infrastructure at local level (see also Gouldner 1964).

While certain of our findings support the work of Brooks and Bate, we disagree on aspects of sub-cultural group values and in particular their contention that civil servants 'have a sense of public responsibility and duty' (1994, p. 181) and their claim that the public sector ethos is alien to the norms and values of the enterprise culture. At Steppers, support for the public sector ethos was not apparent in the junior staff interviewed but sub-cultures did exist which opposed the dominant cultures. These were based around identifiable groupings, for instance, 'us, the staff', versus 'them, the management' and professionals and full-time and part-time workers.

At the same time, what was clear from those interviewed was that the majority of staff had an aversion to change. This can partly be explained by the 'traditional' culture of the bureaucratic administrative civil service. Staff have been socialized into a culture in which individuals are trained to comply strictly with rules and procedures and because career incentives and promotion have been designed to reward conformity and discipline. Such values have been embedded, if not entrenched, in the civil service mentality. Another reason why staff had an aversion to change was fear about the implications of change and the threat to jobs associated with privatization. The rationale, or logic, of staff was to maintain the *status quo* and their view of the world was a long way off from the 'change masters' in Whitehall.

This is not to suggest, however, that culture cannot be changed, particularly when it grows organically (Hope and Hendry 1995). This is, therefore, a challenge to the prescriptive literature on culture change where the emphasis has been on pragmatic change implemented in a top/down fashion to create a consensual unitarist organization and a call for wider, more systematic studies based on long-term behavioural change which emphasises complexity (Anthony 1994; Legge 1995; Ogbonna 1992).

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