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Culture and Organization

Sub Title for This Book

Welcome to Technology Region—Working on America’s Future,” proclaim the signs along Route 61, the region’s main artery. It is early, but the nervous, impatient energy of high-tech is already pulsating through the **spectacular countryside**. *Porsches*, souped-up Chevies, Saabs, indeterminate old family station wagons, motorcycles, company vans, lots of Toyotas—the transportational variety is endless—edge their way toward the exit ramps and the clusters of “corporate parks,” engineering facilities, conference centers, and hotels that are the place of daily congregation for the region’s residents. As their cars jerk along, some drivers appear engrossed in thought, a few may be observed speaking into tape recorders or reading documents from the corner of their eyes. In “the region” the future is now; time is precious; and for many of the drivers work has already begun.

H1 HEADING ■

The parking lot in front of High Technologies’ Lyndsville engineering facility is rapidly filling. High Technologies Corporation—“Tech” to most of its employees—is one of the larger, more successful, and better known of the Region’s corporate residents, and reputed to be on the “leading edge” of the high-tech industry. The Lyndsville facility is home to a num-

ber of Tech's more prominent and promising engineering groups. It is a low, sprawling, ugly building squatting behind the spacious parking lot carved out of the countryside a few miles off the highway.

H2 Heading

The many hundreds of people employed at Lyndsville whose day begins as the night shift ends are, on the face of it, a fairly homogeneous group. The age is predominantly late twenties to mid-thirties. Almost all are white and—except for secretaries—most are male. Many would characterize their social status as “upscale.” Almost all have college degrees, mainly in fields of the technical sort, with a majority in electrical engineering and computer science. The range of compensation is wide, but the average, by most standards, is well above the comfort zone. The dress code is loose, if rather drab. Business attire seems almost theatrically out of place and suggests association with the outside world, usually with “business types.” The general demeanor combines a studied informality, a seemingly self-assured sense of importance, and a clearly conveyed impression of hard, involving, and strangely enjoyable, even addictive, work. Many routinely refer to their work as “state of the art”—of considerable quality, innovativeness, and profitability, and thus intrinsically, unquestionably, and self-evidently worthwhile.

H3 Heading

Over the course of the workday, the Lyndsville facility appears to assume the character of its inhabitants: a combination of effort and informality, freedom and discipline, work and play. After early coffees or breakfast in the open cafeteria, the labyrinth of cubicles that occupies much of the internal space becomes the stage for a seemingly chaotic variety of individual activities and complex networks of interaction that take place against a background of subdued but persistent squeaks and whirs from terminals, keyboards, and printers. At first glance, one would be hard pressed to identify differences in rank, status, or power. In many identical and modest-looking cubicles, people are tapping away at computer terminals. Meeting rooms on the periphery are occupied by small groups in apparently intense, occasionally volatile, and sometimes playful discussion. In the central lab space, people are wandering between tangled cables connecting rather unimpressive-looking pieces of equipment to each other and to the ceiling. The cafeteria is occupied throughout the day. Although it often appears that people come and go as they please, it is fairly well established that long hours are the norm. Those not present are assumed to be working elsewhere. Many will continue working through the evening, some on their company-provided home terminals. Others will do so in their minds and—a few would report—even their dreams.

PRINCIPAL QUOTE

The many hundreds of people employed at Lyndsville whose day begins as the night shift ends are, on the face of it, a fairly homogeneous group. The age is predominantly late twenties to mid-thirties.

H4 Heading. The observer, comparing the glimpsed scenes of life at Lyndsville with traditional or commonsensical images of work life in profit-seeking corporations, might wonder what is going on here. Are things as chaotic and uncontrolled as they seem? How and by whom are the collective interests maintained? Why do people work so hard and claim to enjoy it? Is it the work itself that is intrinsically satisfying? Or is it something about the social context in which it takes place? More broadly: what is it like to work here? Is this the organization of the future? Or is it perhaps a futuristic revival of the past?

TEACHER QUOTE

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To insiders, the scene at Lyndsville is “typical Tech”—a way of life taken for granted, with nothing to puzzle over. If asked to address some of the observer’s concerns, many would retort rather matter-of-factly that what one has observed are nothing more than manifestations of Tech’s “strong culture.” If this at first seems somewhat tautological, it soon becomes apparent that “the culture” is a popular explanatory concept, frequently used as a description of the company, a rationale for people’s behavior, a guideline for action, a cause for praise and condemnation, pride and despair, a quality that is said to distinguish Tech from other industries and even from other high-tech companies. “It is,” many would say, “what makes us what we are.” What do they mean? One answer is to be found among those who consider the “strong culture” their domain.

TECH CULTURE: ■ A MANAGERIAL PERSPECTIVE

On this randomly selected workday, the Lyndsville engineering facility is the stage upon which practical managerial concerns with “the culture” are acted out. A few miles away, in a fairly spacious but still modest office at Tech’s corporate headquarters, Dave Carpenter is preparing a presentation to be given at Lyndsville later in the day. He is one of the more senior managers in the Engineering Division, and has been with the company a long time. The group at Lyndsville has recently been made part of his organization—“his world”—in one of the frequent reorganizations that are a way of life for Tech managers, or, as he would say, “a part of the culture.”

1. For Dave, as for many managers, cultural matters are an explicit concern. Dave considers himself an expert. One wall of his office is covered with a large bookcase holding many managerial texts. Japanese management, in particular, intrigues him, and books on the subject take up a whole shelf. (“They know something about putting people to work—and we better find out what it is.”) Dave has a clear view of what the culture is all about and considers it his job not only to understand, but to influence and shape it for those whose performance he believes to be his responsibility.

2. A key aspect of Tech culture, Dave often points out, is that formal structure tells you nothing. Lyndsville is a case in point. “It’s typical Tech. The guys up there are independent and ambitious. They are working on state-of-the-art stuff—really neat things. Everyone, including the president, has a finger in the pot. The group is potentially a revenue generator. That they are committed there is no doubt. But they are unmanageable.” How then, he wonders, can he make them see the light? Work in the company’s interest? Cooperate? Stop (or at least channel) the pissing contests? And not make him look bad? Dave knows that whether he controls it or not, he “owns” it—another aspect of the culture. And as he reads the company, his own future can be influenced by the degree to which he is credited with the group’s success. And he is being watched, just as he watches others. His strategy is clear. “Power plays don’t work. You can’t make ‘em do anything. They have to want to. So you have to work through the culture. The idea is to educate people without them knowing it. Have the religion and not know how they ever got it!”

■ H1 HEADING

And there are ways to do this. Today Dave will make his first appearance at Lyndsville. He will give a presentation about the role of Lyndsville’s various technical projects in Tech’s long-term business strategy. “Presentations are important in this culture,” he says. “You have to get around, give them the religion, get the message out. It’s a mechanism for transmitting the culture.” Sending and interpreting “messages” are a key to working the culture. Dave is clear about what he wants to accomplish: generate some enthusiasm, let them work off some steam, celebrate some of the successes, show them that they are not out on their own, make his presence felt. And maybe give them an example of the right “mindset.” In “the trenches” (a favorite expression), he is sure, there must be considerable confusion caused by “the revolving door”—the frequent changes of management. Lyndsville reputedly has quite a few good and committed people. It is a creative group. But it is also considered a tough, competitive environment. Some say it reminds them of the early days of Tech, when commitment and burnout went hand in hand. Perhaps. The company has been changing. But some things stay the same. Dave remembers life in the trenches. He was “there” years ago, he has paid his dues—including a divorce—and he still feels an affinity for the residents of the trenches, some of whom he will meet today. And, as always, he is prepared. He reaches for the tools of the culture trade—the “road show” color slides used at yesterday’s strategy presentation to the executive committee—and selects the ones for today.

Concern with the culture is not just the domain of senior managers; it has also spawned a small internal industry that translates global concerns, ideas, and messages into daily activities. Near the front lobby of the Lyndsville building, a large conference room is being prepared for more routine “cultural shaping.” Alone in the room, Ellen Cohen is getting ready to run her “Culture Module”

for the “Introduction to Tech” workshop for new hires, also known as “bootcamp.” It will take two hours, and if everything runs smoothly, she will stay for Dave Carpenter’s presentation. (“It’s a must for Tech-watchers. You can learn a lot from attending.”) She is an engineer who is now “totally into culture.” Over the last few years she has become the resident “culture expert.” “I got burnt out on coding. You can only do so much. And I knew my limits. So I took a management job and I’m funded to do culture now. Some people didn’t believe it had any value-added. But I went off and made it happen, and now my workshops are all oversubscribed! I’m a living example of the culture! Now I do a lot of work at home. Isn’t this company super?”

She is preparing her material now, waiting for the participants to arrive. On one table she is sorting the handout packages. Each includes copies of her paper “A Culture Operating Manual—Version II”; some official company materials; a copy of the latest edition of Tech Talk, with an interview with the president and extensive quotations from his “We Are One” speech; a review of academic work on “corporate cultures” that includes a key to the various disguised accounts of Tech; a glossary of Tech terms; and a xeroxed paper with some “culture exercises” she has collected for her files over the years. “It covers it all. What is a Techie. Getting Ahead. Networking. Being a Self-Starter. Taking Charge. How to Identify Burnout. The Subcultures. Presentations. Managing Your Career. Managing Your Boss. Women. Over the years I’ve gathered dynamite material—some of it too sensitive to show anyone. One day I’ll write a thesis on all of this. In the meanwhile I’m funded to document and preserve the culture of Engineering. It’s what made this company great. ‘Culture’ is really a ‘people issue’—a Personnel or OD [Organization Development] type of thing, but they have no credibility in Engineering, and I’d rather stay here, close to the action. It’s a fascinating company. I could watch it forever. Today I’m doing culture with the new hires. I tell them about how to succeed here. You can’t just do the old nine-to-five thing. You have to have the right mindset. It’s a gut thing. You have to get the religion. You can push at the system, you drive yourself. But I also warn them: ‘Win big and lose big. You can really get hurt here. This place can be dangerous. Burnout City.’ And I tell them the first rule: ‘Do What’s Right.’ It’s the company slogan, almost a cliché, but it captures the whole idea. ‘Do What’s Right.’ If they internalize that, I’ve done my job. My job? They come in in love with the technology; that’s dangerous. My job is to marry them to the company.”

What does “Tech’s strong culture” mean to Dave Carpenter and Ellen Cohen? First, and most broadly speaking, it is the context of their work life, a set of rules that guides the relationship between the company and “it’s people.” At one level, the culture offers a description of the social characteristics of the company that also embodies a specification of required work behavior: “informality,” “initiative,” “lack of structure,” “inherent ambigu-

ity," "hard work," "consensus seeking," "bottom-up decision making," "networking," "pushing against the system," "going off, taking risks, and making things happen." But, as the frequently heard metaphors of "family," "marriage," and "religion" suggest, the rules run deeper. The culture also includes articulated rules for thoughts and feelings, "mindsets" and "gut reactions": an obsession with technical accomplishment, a sense of ownership, a strong commitment to the company, identification with company goals, and, not least, "fun." Thus, "the culture" is a gloss for an extensive definition of membership in the corporate community that includes rules for behavior, thought, and feeling, all adding up to what appears to be a well-defined and widely shared "member role."

But there is more. For Dave Carpenter and Ellen Cohen, as well as many others, the culture has a dual nature: it is not just the context but also the object of their work lives. The culture means not only the implicit and explicit rules that guide and shape their own behavior and experience of work; it is also the vehicle through which they consciously try to influence the behavior and experience of others. The "culture," in this sense, is something to be engineered—researched, designed, developed, and maintained—in order to facilitate the accomplishment of company goals. Although the product—a member role consisting of behavior, thoughts, and feelings—is not concrete, there are specified ways of engineering it: making presentations, sending "messages," running "bootcamp," writing papers, giving speeches, formulating and publishing the "rules," even offering an "operating manual." All are work techniques designed to induce others to accept—indeed, to become—what the company would like them to be.

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NOTES

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The roots of Tech policies and associated practices are in the 1950s,
and its current language and ideas appear to be derived
largely from local traditions, from Emerson through the
“company town” to the Human Relations

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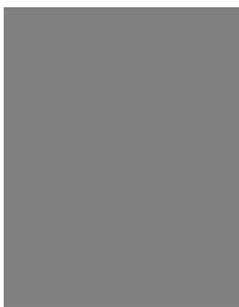
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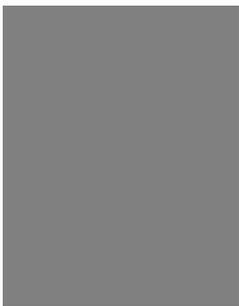
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About the Author



Author's Name. This duality reflects a central underlying theme in the way culture is construed by many Tech managers: the "culture" is a mechanism of control. Its essence is captured in Dave Carpenter's words: "You can't make 'em do anything; they have to want to." In this view, the ability to elicit, channel, and direct the creative energies and activities of employees in profitable directions—to make them want to contribute—is based on designing a member role that employees are expected to incorporate as an integral part of their sense of self. It is this desire and the policies that flow from it, many insiders feel, that makes Tech "something else."



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