

**Organizational Commitment and Corporate Cults**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the commitment of workers to their organization via three constructs that are derived from the definition of a cult. Cult members are defined as having devotion for the organization, a belief in their leader as charismatic, and separation from the community outside the workplace. A twenty-item test based on the three constructs was found to be valid in measuring “cultedness” among organizational members. The paper further analyzes these three constructs in terms of their effects on Christian lifestyle and expectations. An index of conditionality of relationships is proposed which argues that work is highly conditional and Jesus’ acceptance is totally unconditional.

“I often tell my people that I don’t want any fellow who has a job working for me; what I want is a fellow whom a job has. I want the job to get the fellow and not the fellow to get the job. And I want that job to get hold of this young man so hard that no matter where he is the job has got him for keeps. I want that job to have him in its clutches when he goes to bed at night, and in the morning I want that same job to be sitting on the foot of his bed telling him its time to get up and go to work.”  
Charles Kettering U.S. Inventor and Businessman

What Kettering was referring to in this quote was a "company man" - the essence of the Protestant work ethic in the early 1900's. Many would argue today that this level of organizational commitment no longer exists, instead we live in an age where employees place more emphasis on families, hobbies and the community than jobs. However, in this paper, we contend that a new type of corporate culture exist – the corporate cult. In this type of culture, members are bound to the organization by a strong set of norms which elicit extraordinarily high levels of commitment from employees. In this corporate cult, the employee becomes a “prisoner” to the job and the job becomes an end in itself, instead of a means to an end. Organizational commitment and loyalty are so high in these cultures that work becomes the major focus of the employee’s life, overshadowing family and community.

Borrowing from the literature on religious cults, we propose that the “culted” type of organization is identified by three defining characteristics: an emphasis on high levels of devotion, a charismatic leader, and separation from community (Zimbardo & Hartley, 1985). After discussing the topics of culture and cult, we present a tool for measuring the degree of “cultedness” in an organization.

## **Literature Review**

The concept of organizational culture has been rigorously investigated over the last thirty years by writers such as Pettigrew (1979), Ouchi (1981), Schein (1983), Schneider (1990) and others. A conclusion from this research is that organizational culture has a profound influence on perceptions and behaviors and as such it may be the most powerful determinant of individual and firm performance (Kopelman, Brief & Guzzo 1990). Of particular interest is the impact of organizational culture on employee commitment, which is defined as “the relative strength of an individual’s identification with and involvement in a particular organization” (Mowaday, Porter & Steers, 1982). For example, Ouchi in his analysis of differences between Japanese and American organizations found that Japanese firms value a life-long commitment to employees while American companies value short-term commitment to employment (Ouchi, 1981). Coinciding with the different organizational cultures found in Japan and America, employee turnover was much lower in Japan than in the United States. Similarly, in a study on the retention rates of college graduates Sheridan (1992) found that variations in cultural values played a significant role in the amount of voluntary turnover.

In another study on organizational commitment, Mayer and Schoorman (1992) differentiated between two commitment dimensions: value commitment and continuance commitment. Data from their research supports the argument that organizational commitment is not only related to turnover but performance as well –a relationship previously not supported in Mathieu and Zajac’s meta-analysis on the relationship between commitment and performance (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). Mayer and Schoorman found that

continuance commitment is strongly related to intentions to quit while value commitment is related to organizational citizenship behaviors, satisfaction and job performance.

These studies show that different organizational values and cultures can promote varying levels of involvement or commitment to the organization. However, a question that needs to be addressed as organizations pursue more effective and performance driven cultures are the negative effects that such cultures can have on an employee's personal life.

The premise that employees can be overly committed to work-related roles has been thoroughly researched in work/family conflict literature. Writers in this area concentrate on the separation between work and family roles (Zedeck & Mosier, 1990) and on the amount of time and emotional energy available to employees for the work and non-work areas of their life (Hall & Richter, 1988). The main reasons for the increased attention to the work and nonwork spheres of life include: changing family structures; increasing number of women in the workforce, and growing links between work and family life. (O'Driscoll, Ilgen & Hildreth, 1992). In an attempt to better manage these conflicts, organizations have turned to a variety of programs that seek to better integrate job and off-job activities.

This integration is exemplified in Fortune Magazine's article *The 100 Best Companies to Work For* (Fisher, 1998). Fortune found that at least 40 of the 238 companies they surveyed do dry cleaning for employees. Cleaning employees' clothes seems to be an intensely personal task for a corporation to perform. It's an example of how the organization is becoming the employee's community. Many companies have become even more involved with the employee's non-work life by providing personal concierge service. The company concierge sends flowers and gifts for the employee and arranges vacations and parties. FORTUNE didn't stop at just rating the 100 Best

Companies, they summarized their findings into three corporate traits that make an organization a best place to work: a sense of purpose, inspiring leadership, and knockout facilities that provide for employees' personal needs. These three traits mirror the definition of a cult found in the sociological literature: devotion, charismatic leadership and separation from community.

### **Hypothesis Development**

In order to further develop the idea of the cult type of organizational culture, the authors endeavored to create a measure of an employee's "cultedness." However, there has been a debate for some time in the social sciences as to how organizational culture should be measured. As a construct, culture cannot be seen or touched making it difficult to precisely examine or quantify. Even among other variables in the area of organizational studies, culture is more difficult to measure than job satisfaction, job commitment or an employee's level of motivation to work. These variables, having been studied since the 1930s by scientists in industrial psychology, are easier to measure because they focus on the individual behaviors and attitudes rather than the larger collective behaviors, attitudes and norms of the organization (Schein, 1990).

Culture is traditionally defined as the deep seated values, beliefs and principles of those residing in the organization (Hatch, 1993). According to Schein (1983), culture exists at three levels: (1) observable artifacts, (2) values and (3) basic underlying assumptions. This article focuses on the third level of culture - a pattern of basic assumptions shared by individuals in an organization. This makes it distinguishable from organizational climate, an outward expression of the deeper constructs of values and

culture, which is easier to measure and a more established variable in the social sciences because the manifestations of climate are readily visible.

By far the most popular methodology for studying organizational culture is the survey - i.e. Organizational Culture Inventory (Cooke & Rousseau, 1988) and the Kilman-Saxon Culture-Gap Survey (Kilman & Saxon, 1983). Using questionnaires, the analyst presents a series of items that are assumed to be relevant to the theme of an organization's culture. A major advantage of the survey method is that it is less subjective than the qualitative measurement devices used to measure organizational culture, i.e. direct observation and ethnography. The survey method also lends itself to comparisons within and between organizations. According to others who specialize in measuring organizational culture (Wilkerson & Kellogg, 1993), the survey method is a robust, reliable and valid instrument for this type of study.

Quantifying organization culture is a frustrating task due to the fact that culture is "pervasive" and the examination of an employee's "culturedness" requires an all-encompassing view of the organization - including both the psychological and structural elements of an organization. In order to resolve the rather nebulous nature of measuring organizational culture, researchers in the social sciences have conveniently operationalized culture much the same way as personality - using types and dimensions. Examples of this include the strong culture, adaptive culture and the learning culture (Fletcher & Jones, 1992). In that vein, this study suggests an additional type; the "culted" culture.

Borrowing from the religious cult culture, three traits; devotion, charismatic leadership and separation from community were used to define the organizational cult

type (Zimbardo & Hartley, 1985). A survey respondent who rates high on all three traits, relative to others is more “culted.” The cult scale developed in this study measures how the individual employee views the cultedness of the organization. The subjective nature of individual respondent’s perception means that employees in the same organization may view each of the three cult variables differently. This could be due to a number of factors. One explanation for two employees from the same organization displaying a different score on the measure of cultedness would be the department or division where the employees work. One employee might be located closer to the top of the organizational hierarchy, possibly in the same building or on the same floor, and have more contact with the leader of the organization. Another employee may be more removed from the leader of the organization, for example an employee who is in a remote office location or someone who works at home, possibly never having direct contact with the CEO or others in power. This would also affect the degree to which an employee feels that work is the center of everything they do or the degree to which they feel separated from their community because of work.

To survey the three dimensions integral to organization cults, measurement scales of these traits were taken from existing literature whenever possible. An original list of over seventy measurement items were considered and presented to several focus group of business leaders at a leadership seminar held by the author. Participants were asked to choose which items best corresponded to the topics of organizational commitment, charismatic leadership and separation from community. After discussing these items and thoroughly explaining the rationale that describes an organizational cult, these groups

were able to narrow the seventy items to a more parsimonious group of twenty. These remaining items come from three main sources.

To measure devotion, items from Cook and Walls' (1980) measure of organizational commitment was used. This measure examined what it means to be a member of an organization. The items that were retained from the focus group interviews centered on the area of loyalty to the organization. According to Cook and Walls, some people feel themselves to be just an employee, there only to do their job, while others feel more personally involved and dedicated to the organization. The later would display a higher level of loyalty to the organization.

*Hypothesis 1: Items 1-8 of the cult scale measure the employee's devotion for their organization.*

Using Behling and McFillen (1996) Charismatic Leadership Follower Belief Questionnaire, several items were used to measure the respondent's view of the level of charismatic leadership in the organization. The items that were retained for the measure of cultedness relate to the ability of the leader to inspire followers and the follower's feeling of awe for the person in the leadership position.

*Hypothesis 2: Items 9-12 of the cult scale measure the level of charismatic leadership in the organization from the employee's point of view.*

To measure separation from community, several items from Aryee and Luk's (1996) Work-Family Conflict scale were used that measure the importance of work and work centeredness. These items tap into the degree to which the employee's job and work environment has become a part of the employee's life and sense of fulfillment. To further measure the degree of work centeredness, additional items developed by the author were

included since no existing measure pertaining to the topic could be found. These items related to the importance of work relationships to the individual. Included were items measuring the number of social events an organization prepares for its employees; how the individual enjoys being with others at work and the involvement of fellow workers in the employee's personal life.

*Hypothesis 3: Items 13-20 of the cult scale measure an employee's separation from community via the work centeredness construct.*

In all, twenty items were included in the measure (see Appendix A for survey items). Items were scored on a scale from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5).

## **Results**

After pre-testing the survey instrument with several small groups, the cult measure was distributed to a diverse group of middle managers and supervisors. In all, one hundred and eighteen surveys were returned and analyzed. Means for the three summated cult traits were calculated: devotion  $x=2.21$ , charismatic leadership  $x=2.84$ , and separation from community  $x=3.22$ . All three summated traits were normally distributed. After the preliminary statistics were calculated, the validity of the instrument was determined.

In validation of a measurement tool such as the one used here, two issues are paramount. The first centers on the instrument's internal validity. In this case, the important concern was that the items on the scale measured the three distinct aspects of cultedness. The specific hypotheses were that the survey items would measure the three discrete constructs that constitute cultedness. Statistical measures of validity show that the items assessing Hypothesis 1 on devotion did indeed fall into a distinct group. The

same was found for Hypothesis 2, relating to charismatic leadership and Hypothesis 3, separation from community. A factor analysis of the survey results (using a VARIMAX rotation) shows that the 20 scale items fall into three significant factors according to the factor eigenvalues. This implies that the three dimensions are separate and distinct from one another and are actually measuring unique dimensions of culture. Only one of the items appears to break significantly from what the authors hypothesized - item #20 measuring the degree to which people in the immediate work group take a personal interest in what the respondent does. This question could be omitted because it does not measure work-centeredness based on statistical results. However, the authors decided to retain the item because it is believed to be an important part of the construct.

The items for the three dimensions of cultedness were highly correlated with other items in the construct - but still fairly independent. Cronbach's Alpha for items 1-8, measuring devotion, was 0.86. Cronbach's Alpha for items 9-12, measuring charismatic leadership, was 0.91 and for 13-20, measuring separation from community, was 0.81. The second issue concerning scale validity deals with external validity. This will be discussed in the next section.

### **Conditionality of Relationships**

The application of this finding to Christian lifestyle is related via an index of conditionality, with work on the conditional end and Jesus' acceptance on the unconditional end.

Work is on one end of the conditionality spectrum, because the relationship is conditioned upon performance. When the employee performs, his/her position is secure. But, as soon as the employee stops working, the relationship ends.

Family relationships are created by birth and are found in the middle of the conditionality index. Parents tell their children that they have unconditional love and acceptance for them. However, that relationship is conditioned by the person making the promise. The parent is a fallen human who is capable of sin, thus capable of breaking the promise of unconditionality to the child.

On the other end of the conditionality index we find Jesus' acceptance of humans who confess their sins and accept Him as Lord and Savior. When that happens, he makes the promise, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." As Christians, we believe this promise is made by God, and by definition, God cannot break His promises. Thus, Jesus' acceptance constitutes the highest acceptance level, and is absolutely without condition. A promise from God can never be broken, so His acceptance of us is unconditional.

The problem comes when employees confuse the three types of relationships: Work, family and Jesus. We believe humans have a "God-sized hole" that must be filled by something. If it's not filled by the acceptance of Jesus, it's often filled by the workplace. These employees are tricked into considering a performance relationship as unconditional, which it's not. Our job as Christian Business Faculty members is to help students understand the difference in conditionality between these relationships, so they are able to make informed choices about relationships and not be tricked into a performance-based relationship that they believe to be unconditional.

### **Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research**

The terms "culture" and "cult" have remained quite discreet in the extant literature. Our attempt in this paper is to show the close relationship of the two terms and to reveal the cultedness of everyday organizational members. We believe the cult test

reveals that relationship. The test was designed to gain an organizational level view of corporations as culted or non-culted through surveying individual employees.

The advantage of the survey developed here is that it is fairly easy to administer and takes only several minutes to complete. It is designed so it can be applied to any organization and to be taken by employees in the organization at any level. The instrument can be scored by totalling the responses within each of the three dimensions individually or by summing all the items and looking at a cumulative score.

It's our hope that further research will expand the study to include numerous organizational respondents. This expansion of the study will supply an answer to the question of external validity of the constructs. If enough data is collected across many organizations, a spectrum could be developed that statistically relates organizations along an index from more culted to less culted. In addition, to assess the measures of external validity, we propose a comparative test among employees of two organizations; one that has been established in the literature as displaying the attributes of a culted organization, and one that has been found to be less culted.

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## Appendix A

1. I feel a strong sense of loyalty toward this company.
2. Even if the firm were not doing well financially, I would be reluctant to change to another employer.
3. The offer of a bit more money with another employer would not seriously make me think of changing my job.
4. Based on what I know now and what I believe I can expect, I would be quite willing to spend the rest of my career with this company.
5. I believe in the work my organization/unit does.
6. I feel that I am working for a cause that is greater than just earning a living.
7. My work serves a good cause.
8. The work of my organization/unit benefits society.
9. I have faith in the leader even when things go wrong.
10. I admire the leader.
11. It would be hard to find someone who could lead this organization better than the leader.
12. I trust the leader's decisions.
13. The major satisfactions in my life come from my work.
14. The most important things that happen to me involve my work.
15. My life goals are mainly work-oriented.
16. My work is a large part of who I am.
17. Many of my close personal friends work at this company.
18. The organization where I work is always planning social events for its employees.
19. I look forward to being with members of my immediate work group each day.
20. The people in my immediate work group take a personal interest in what I do.