Towards a Framework for Diagnosing the Culture of a Construction Project Organisation

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Abstract

In undertaking research into culture within a construction project organisation, it is important to have a framework that takes account of the construction project context. In developing such a framework, semi-structured interviews were conducted with experienced practitioners. Analysis of the interviews revealed that while all project participants play a role in the culture that develops within the project organisation, the main contractor is the principal driver of the culture. Key determinants of culture include leadership, workforce stability and training, commitment, procurement, and other project arrangements. In terms of the manifestations of culture, the main dimensions that practitioners recognise and consider relevant are associated with the five key areas of commitment to client, teamwork, leadership, workforce welfare and delivering improved quality. These are issues consistent with current construction industry thinking. A conceptual framework that links culture with project performance and incorporates all the various elements is presented. The framework provides parameters that can help structure and organise data on cultural orientations along relevant dimensions, and will have some relevance for culture researchers.

Keywords

construction project organisations, conceptual framework, culture, qualitative analysis

Introduction

In seeking to improve the processes and outputs of the construction industry, culture is an important consideration (Maloney and Federle, 1990; Hall, 1999; Riley and Clare-Brown, 2001; Low and Shi, 2001; Skitmore et al., 2004). Here, culture is considered to be the shared values and basic assumptions of people within the industry which is manifested in practice. It has been suggested, for instance, that culture has an influence on the propensity for litigation (Fenn et al., 1997; Phua and Rowlinson, 2003), and the attitudes and behaviours towards such aspects as health and safety (Cooper, 2000). It is logical to argue therefore that for improvements to be achieved in these areas, construction industry participants need to become more aware of culture, especially at the project level where multi-organisational dynamics come into play. Unfortunately, the paucity of research on culture in construction (Dainty et al., 2007) has not helped to generate the necessary awareness. For a long time, its importance has been underestimated and culture has been treated as the “black box” of the industry (Fellows and Seymour, 2002) with many of the inexplicable construction industry ills being attributed to it without much by way of research to show the extent of its impact. A plausible reason for this situation is the absence of suitable empirically or theoretically derived frameworks that provide appropriate parameters and points of reference for its investigation within a construction project context (Tijhuis, 2001), a situation attributable to the complexity of the phenomenon of culture.