

Defining Subcultures in Online Higher Education

An Inside Perspective

by Dr. Luke Hobson

Introduction

When leaders think of the term “culture” some variation of beliefs, values, and behaviors probably come to mind. What doesn’t come up though is the essential understanding of subcultures. As I progressed in my career as an academic advisor, instructor, instructional designer, and program manager, it was a revelation to learn how each position held their own subculture, despite having the same organizational culture. When an organization is successful, the culture and subcultures change. According to Ed Schein, MIT professor and world-renowned expert on organizational culture, “Organizational success usually produces the need to grow; with growth and aging, organizations need to differentiate themselves into functional, geographic, product, market, or hierarchical units” (2017, p. 229). With this differentiation comes cultural consequences by producing subcultures that are based on occupational, national, and uniquely historical experiences (Schein, 2017, p. 229). These subcultures need to be understood or else the culture of the organization can change in a negative way, losing its original cultural identity. If you are a leader in online higher education, this article may help to guide you through different subcultures and understand their natural assumptions.

Three Subcultures: Operators, Engineers, and Executives

In my experience, online higher education can be defined into three distinctive subcultures. These subcultures are the service based and student facing departments (admission, registrar, academic advising, and instructors), the engineering and design departments (instructional design, course maintenance, and IT support), and senior leadership departments (deans, provosts, and presidents). Interestingly enough, Schein has classified three main subcultures that can be found within any organization and they align to these groups in

online higher education. According to Schein (2017), “In every organization in the public or private sector, three generic subcultures must be identified and managed to minimize misalignment or destructive conflict” (p. 221). These generic subcultures are operators, designers, and executives. I would argue that these subcultures align with the roles in online higher education as service-based and student facing departments are operators, the engineering departments are designers, and senior leadership departments are executives. Let’s break these down.

Service-based and Student Facing Departments – The Operators

The operators are the first line of defense. They are the ones who sell the organization’s products or services, and in this case, it means they are selling the institution’s support efforts, values, programs, and courses. Common assumptions among the operator subcultures are:

- The action of any organization is ultimately the action of the people. We are the critical resource; we run the place.
- The success of the enterprise depends on our knowledge, skill, and learning ability, and commitment.
- We know that we will have to deal with unpredictable contingencies.
- We have the capacity to learn, innovate, and deal with surprises.
- We depend on management to give us the proper resources, training, and support to get our jobs done (Schein, 2017, p. 222).

In online higher education, the admissions office, the registrar, online instructors, and academic advisors, fall into the assumptions above. These departments are based upon human interactions and require a high level of communication, trust, and teamwork to get their jobs done. These departments are the main communication and support system for online students and become essentially the life line for students. It’s not surprising for online students to develop strong relationships with these groups and see them as the “face of the institution.”

After personally speaking with thousands of online students while working as an academic advisor, it was common to hear this phrase. It does make sense though given that the student communicates and interacts with these departments the most.

The operator subculture is aware that no matter how clear the rules are, they are to use their own subjectivity with handling student problems and unpredictable situations. They trust in their own innovative skills to get the job done and to put the student's needs first. Schein also points out another notable trait in that most employees rarely work to their full capacity except under crisis conditions. From my experience, crisis conditions in online higher education mean when a term or semester is starting or concluding, ramping up the work to ensure that students are prepared.

The Engineering and Design Departments – The Engineers

In all organizations, there exists a group that represents design elements of the technology underlying the work of the organization, and this group has the knowledge of how the technology is to be utilized (Schein, 2017, p. 224). This subculture in particular strongly emphasizes their occupational community and their education. Basic assumptions of engineers include:

- The ideal world is one of elegant machines and processes working in perfect precision and harmony without human intervention.
- People are the problem – they make mistakes and therefore should be designed out of the system wherever possible.
- Solutions must be based on science and available technology.
- Real work involves solving puzzles and overcoming problems.
- Work must be oriented toward useful products and outcomes (Schein, 2017, p. 224).

Instructional designers, course maintenance teams, and IT support can be categorized by these assumptions. These departments have focused on their education and take pride in their

work experience and job requirements. To these departments, problems have abstract solutions and can be implemented in the real-world with products and systems that are free of human error. They create products and services that have a purpose, elegance, permanence, efficiency, safety, and aesthetics (Schein, 2017, p. 224). These products are also designed to require standard responses from humans or to have no human operators at all.

All of the points above relate to the design and maintenance of online courses. Instructional designers create courses based on real-world problems and focus on the outcomes of the course. When a course is designed, constructive feedback can be frustrating because the experience is different compared to what the instructional designer envisioned. The assumptions also tie into how a course is designed with learning sciences utilizing instructional design practices (backwards design, ADDIE, SAM, etc.) and different models such as competency based, scenario based, self-paced, hybrid, etc.

IT support also falls into the above categories. Most of the errors they run into stem from human error, not the flaws of the institution's website or LMS. IT systems, chat services, and ticketing systems are all utilized to overcome IT problems from online students and must be solved using technology.

Senior Leadership – The Executives

The third subculture that stands above the others is the executives. This subculture is reserved for the CEO and their executives. In the case of online higher education, this means the institution's president and their inner circle. This subculture cares about the necessities for the institution's survival from a financial standpoint and keeping the stakeholders happy. This

ultimately in higher education means graduation rates, enrollment rates, program outcomes, branding, reputation, and other financial perspectives. Basic assumptions of the executives are:

Financial Focus

- Without financial survival and growth, there are no returns to shareholders or to society.
- Financial survival is equivalent to perpetual war with competitors

Self-image Focus: The Embattled Lone Hero

- The economic environment is perpetually competitive and potentially hostile; “in a war you cannot trust anyone.”
- CEO must be the “lone hero,” isolated and alone, yet appearing to be in control
- You cannot get reliable data from below because subordinates will tell you what they think you want to hear
- Organization and management are intrinsically hierarchical
- People are a necessary evil
- The well-oiled machine organization does not need whole people, only the activities they are contracted for (Schein, 2017, p. 226).

As you can see from the assumptions above, this subculture comprises of employees who have risen through the rankings to get to where they are today. This includes deans, provosts, and presidents. What was interesting when reading Schein’s work on executives is that one position leans closer towards one assumption than another. Unlike other subcultural assumptions that represent a group holistically, the positions from senior leadership in this subculture are more selective of each assumption.

For instance, provosts tend more towards the “lone hero” assumption with feeling isolated and alone. According to Mark Blegan (2019), provost at Carroll University, “As a provost, you have no peers and report to one person who sits above you on the administrative hierarchy — so finding and solidifying a network of fellow theme-parkers on the provost ride can be a lonely process.” This feeling of loneliness can also be seen in relatable school administrator roles for the K-12 environment. According to Dr. Nate Green (2016), an Administrator at the New

Hampshire Department of Education, “School administrators are one particular group of professionals who may experience higher than average rates of loneliness as a result of professional isolation” (p. 67).

This feeling of isolation though does not necessarily apply to deans. According to Blegan (2019), “At my previous institution — first as a faculty member and then dean - I could rely on friendships and relationships nurtured over time to help me solve problems, plan strategy, or simply listen when I needed an ear (p. n.a.)” Deans do not seem to have the same troubles as provosts, but they face other obstacles within their roles which apply to finances and the idea that people are a necessary evil. From the financial perspective, it’s a dean’s responsibility to see the success and well-being of programs that fall into their jurisdiction. If a program produces negative feedback, low success rates, low enrollment rates, and undesirable outcomes, this will all impact the financial survival of the institution and ultimately their job. I’ll also include the idea that people are a necessary evil from hearing story after story over the years from deans mentioning grand ideas on how they could improve their existing programs or build new ones, only to be halted by another person or group within the organization. According to Schein’s work, this makes perfect sense. As Schein (2017) stated how executives see people as “impersonal resources that generate problems rather than solutions. People and relationships are viewed as means to the end of efficiency and productivity, not as ends in themselves” (p. 228). I know that these words sound rather harsh, but in my experience, this is the reality when trying to accomplish a task and constantly facing blockers.

Presidents tend to fall in between a variety of the executive assumptions. The financial responsibilities certainly weigh on the minds of university presidents, but I think the most

compelling assumption would be how it's difficult to receive reliable data because subordinates will try to say what the president wants to hear. This can be seen by who the president chooses to be in the closest inner circle. The most successful presidents I have met have chosen members in their inner circle who will be blunt and straightforward, especially with differing perspectives.

Summary and Conclusion

As online higher education grows, more subcultures will develop. Some of the mentioned roles above didn't even exist 10 years ago or have drastically transformed their previous responsibilities. You can't expect their subcultures to remain the same. It's a leader's job to be able to understand how to navigate and leverage these subcultures. As Schein mentioned, "the leader's task is to find ways of coordinating, aligning, and integrating the different subcultures" (p. 229). If this task is ignored, problems and conflict will rise from the misunderstandings and confusion among these groups. To prevent cultural implosion, leaders in online higher education need to recognize the importance of bringing subcultures together. Building an effective organization is ultimately a matter of meshing the different subcultures by encouraging the evolution of common goals, common language, and common procedures for solving problems' (Schein, 2017, p. 230).

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