

Alejandro ÁLVAREZ-NOBELL

Organizational culture development. A study model based on the grounded theory method

Desarrollo cultural en las organizaciones. Un modelo de estudio basado en la Grounded Theory

María ROMERO-CALMACHE
Manuel SÁNCHEZ-SANVICENTE
Paz ARAGÜÉS-DUFOL*¹

Resumen

La cultura organizacional se configura a partir de la interrelación de los procesos de apropiación de la filosofía, la pertenencia, la adaptación, la satisfacción y el liderazgo compartidos por un grupo. Este conjunto de categorías puede ser reconocido mediante el uso de una matriz que incluye en su estructura subcategorías o conceptos y un conjunto de propiedades observables en el público interno. El presente artículo tiene por objetivo describir un modelo de estudio construido a partir de la Grounded Theory o Teoría Fundamentada que nos permita comprender el desarrollo cultural de las organizaciones. El estudio de caso se realizó en una compañía líder en Europa del sector de la distribución.

Palabras clave

Comunicación; Cultura Organizacional; Clima Organizacional; Teoría Fundamentada.

Sumario

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Abstract

Organizational culture is configured by the interplay of the processes of philosophy assimilation, sense-of-belonging formation, adaptation, satisfaction and leadership that are shared by a group. This set of categories can be identified through a matrix of subcategories or concepts and a set of properties that are observable by the internal public. This article proposes a model to study organizational culture development based on the grounded theory method. The case study was conducted in a leading European distribution company operating in Spain.

Keywords

Communication; organizational culture; organizational climate; grounded theory.

Summary

1. Introduction. 2. Organizational culture: Foundations and theoretical basis 3. Methods. 4. Results. 4.1. Organizational culture development matrix 4.2. Philosophy. 4.3. Sense of belonging. 4.4. Adaptation. 4.5. Satisfaction. 4.6. Leadership. 5. Conclusion. 6. References. 7. Appendix.

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¹ Notas aclaratorias del texto. Se sitúan en este margen al lado del párrafo que la origina.

1. Introduction

This article proposes a study model to understand organizational culture development based on the analysis of the organization's reality and the identification of its basic social process (Strauss, 1990). The model's design is based on the Grounded Theory method, which was formulated in 1976 by the sociologists Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss from Columbia University. Through the systematic application of this method, which has recently increased in the field of communication and marketing (Soler Pujals and Fernández Gómez, 2010), and the case study of a leading European distribution company operating in Spain, we generated an inductive theory on organizational culture development (Glaser, 1992).

This article firstly offers a theoretical contextualization of the concept of organizational culture; then a detailed description of the model's methodological design and the case study, which is relevant to understand the results; and finally an explanation of the study model for organizational culture development.

2. Organizational culture: Foundations and theoretical basis

The term culture comes from the Latin verb *colère* that means 'cultivation of the soil'. This meaning was used until the 17th century when the term began to be used to refer to the 'cultivation of knowledge'. It was not until the 20th century when the term culture acquired its current colloquial meaning.

In general terms, culture can be defined as a socially transmitted behaviors system that serves to link communities with their environments. There are many scholars who have examined culture as an object of study and shown that this construct has, historically, been a structural element of all societies, regardless of origins or time. Culture is the way humankind adapts itself to the circumstances of the environment, but also involves a series of behaviors that identify and differentiate it.

The study of culture, as a structure and social system, has its roots in anthropological research. To contextualize this research it is important to note that, as Abravanel, Allaire and Firsirotu (1992) have pointed out, there are two distinct systems of thought about culture: the ideation system and the socio-cultural system.

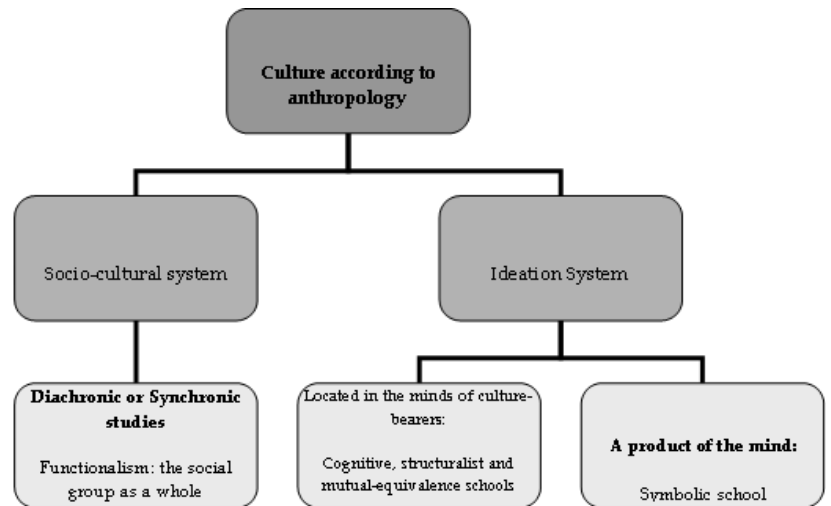
The school of thought that understands culture as a sociocultural system is subdivided into four currents:

functionalist, functionalist-structuralist, ecological-adaptationist and historical-diffusionist. On the other hand, the view of culture as an ideation system is represented by four perspectives: cognitivist, structuralist, symbolic and mutual-equivalence. The sum of all these perspectives results in a broad and multifaceted view of a particularly difficult concept to define since it covers elements that are very difficult to evaluate. Culture is dynamic context loaded with symbols, a set of functional cognitions and a deep and subconscious mental structure.

González-Romo has developed a list of the properties possessed by the concept of culture that help us to shape the previously exposed idea:

- “Culture emerges from the interests of a social group to adapt to an environment in order to survive.
- Culture is formed by the knowledge arising from this adaptation process.
- Such knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation and is historically cultivated.
- Culture is based on the beliefs, customs, attitudes and habits of a particular social group.
- The social group in which culture is manifested has a particular form of communication based on a specific language and symbols that the whole group must interpret” (2002: 90-91 – free translation).

Figure 1: Theoretical models for the study of culture



Source: Sanchez, 2000: 324-325.

Moving on to other issues, sociologists apply systematic interviews, questionnaires, and other quantitative methods of data collection that allow establishing clear typologies of cultural attributes. These techniques and tools can be effectively implemented to analyze the culture of different institutions. Companies are the result of the organization and work, which are indispensable elements that constitute a single whole. They are social entities² in which men and women, apart from providing their workforce, grow professionally and interact with others, thus it is easy to understand that each organizational environment generates its own system of ideas, a particular expression of business thinking and a peculiar way of working. In this line of thought many studies have been carried out from different perspectives and disciplines³ and at various moments in history since the early 18th century.

Although it is difficult to establish a universal and accurate definition of organizational culture, it is possible to review some of the most widely accepted ideas in the academic and business worlds, which clearly reflect the importance that organizational culture can acquire in the practice. Rodríguez-de-San-Miguel defines organizational culture as “the set of values and beliefs that are commonly accepted, consciously or unconsciously, by the members of an organization” (2003: 53). Perhaps, the most influential definition of culture is the one given by Edgar Schein, since he has given the widest dissemination to the concept: “I will define culture as a pattern of basic assumptions invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration” that have worked well

² Or subcultures as Stefanova and Lucas (2006) call them.

³ For example: corporate sociology, psychology, anthropology, or the recent management theories.

enough as to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems" (Schein, 1998: 25).

For its part, Gagliardi adds that "culture distinguishes one organization from another and guides its decisions", which means that it shapes its identity (what makes it to be what it is) and defines its own style to cope with the problems arising from its internal operation and its external adaptation (1984: 21).

It can be noticed that the previous definitions have several common elements, such as: the beliefs, values and norms that are shared by a group and determine its behavior. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, organizational culture must be understood as the set of values, beliefs, and basic assumptions that are shared by a group, are the basis for organizational policies, identify an organization, and differentiate it from others, which makes its members feel part of it.

Before concluding the definition of organizational culture it is necessary to mention several key issues that are involved in this concept:

- The definition of culture involves a set of interactive⁴ and fundamental elements, generated and shared by members of a group or organization.
- Culture is generated by the interaction that occurs when trying to achieve group goals. The experiences that are generated and then shared are what build the organizational culture.
- When "shared", culture generates internal identity and cohesion in the organization.

In short, the concept focuses on the way in which groups interpret, build and negotiate the reality through the creation of an organizational culture. Culture, therefore, constitutes the context for the interpretation of a system of meanings within which social interaction takes place.

3. Methods

In order to describe a study model to understand the establishment and development of organizational culture through the analysis of reality and the identification of basic social processes (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), we used the Grounded theory method, formulated in 1976 by the sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss from Columbia University. Currently, this theory is increasingly employed in the fields of communication and marketing (Soler-Pujals and Fernández-Gómez, 2010).

⁴ Interactive elements must be understood as the interaction between the manifestations, values, beliefs and basic assumptions.

According to Strauss, the anchored theory, as it is also known, "is an exploratory research method focused on the generation and development of theories that explain phenomena and the conditions needed for them to occur" (1987: 111). Therefore, this method seeks the systematic generation of inductive theory. This method is not oriented towards description, but towards conceptualization. For Goulding (2001), this qualitative method is similar to ethnography (descriptive and interpretative study of a group's reality) since their sources of information are the same: interviews, field observation and use of all kinds of documents (diaries, letters, autobiographies, newspapers and other audiovisual texts).

This research was undertaken in different phases. The first one focused on defining the theoretical sample, which consisted of a group of key individuals and situations. The sample is not statistically representative but is relevant in terms of magnitude for the phenomenon under study. The case study was a leading European distribution company (from the supermarket and retail sector) operating in Spain.

The second phase consisted of the collection of data. A database was created with multiple sources (surveys, interviews, documentary analysis, and observation). The data were later analyzed in order to identify concepts and their interrelationships. In the case of surveys, a self-administered questionnaire was given to a non-probabilistic sample of the internal public. The questionnaire was distributed in all the Spanish working centers of the distribution company from March to April, 2010. The questionnaire was answered by 2,267 workers, which represent 40% of all the staff of the business group in Spain. The sample was stratified, composed of 73 workers from middle and senior management positions, 188 specialists, 1479 collaborators, and 527 non-classified workers. The working centers were located in the Spanish cities of Zaragoza, Burgos, Logroño, Bilbao, Vitoria, Madrid and Barcelona.

The previous phase allowed us to formulate the main ideas, the questions to be asked, and the first field notes that were later consulted and reviewed. The following phase was the coding and categorization of concepts and their characteristics. The code is the closest thing to a theoretical concept, which is understood as the basic unit of analysis, given that the theory is developed from the conceptualization of data. Categories are higher in level and more abstract than the concepts they represent. The grouping of concepts forms categories. This process is more "dense" and was based on the raw data and the researchers' experience, including the knowledge obtained from the review of the literature on the

subject (Corbin and Strauss, 1990).

This was followed by the axial coding to relate codes (categories and concepts) to each other, via a combination of inductive and deductive thinking, which determined its validation. The selected concepts were analyzed and reorganized to extract a central idea and its descriptor questions. At this stage, it was necessary to return to the field and the initial group to choose more elements of analysis and obtain more data.

Afterwards, we conducted a selective encoding to reduce the initial categories and identify the core variable or central category. This central category allowed us to establish the paradigm of the theory (Goulding, 2001) to explain our object of study: organizational culture.

In conclusion, we obtained a set of concepts with their properties (qualities and attributes that explain what is going on), which were related and integrated according to their similarities and shared interests. This stage of analysis took into consideration a triangulation that combined different methods and data sources. These are the results.

4. Results

4.1. Organizational culture development matrix

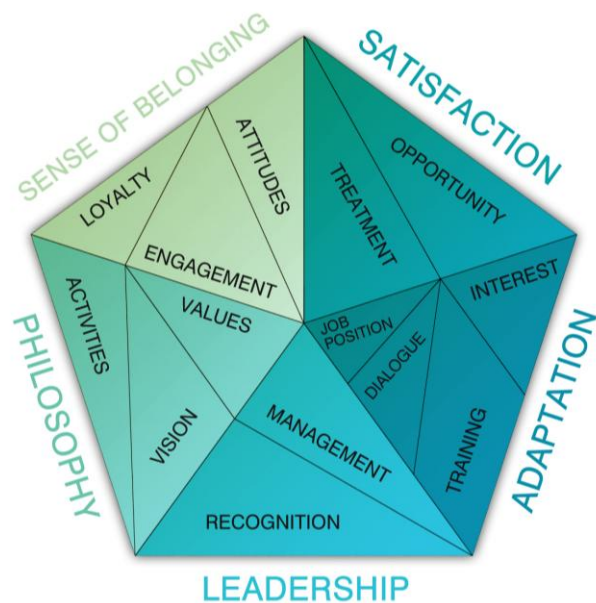
The central category of our theoretical paradigm is the organizational culture and we will call it organizational culture development matrix, which is understood as the interplay of the processes of organizational philosophy assimilation, sense-of-belonging formation, adaptation, satisfaction and leadership that are shared by a group. These categories are the basis for the corporate policies that identify an organization and differentiate it from others, making their internal audiences feel a constitutive and constituent part of it.

Consequently, the proposed categories, and their corresponding concepts, for the study of organizational culture are:

1. Philosophy.
 - 1.1. Vision.
 - 1.2. Values.
 - 1.3. Activities.
2. Sense of belonging.
 - 2.1. Loyalty.
 - 2.2. Attitudes.

- 2.3. Engagement.
- 3. Adaptation.
 - 3.1. Interest.
 - 3.2. Training.
 - 3.3. Dialogue.
 - 3.4. Job position.
- 4. Satisfaction.
 - 4.1. Treatment.
 - 4.2. Opportunity.
- 5. Leadership.
 - 5.1. Recognition.
 - 5.2. Management.

Figure 2: Organizational culture development matrix



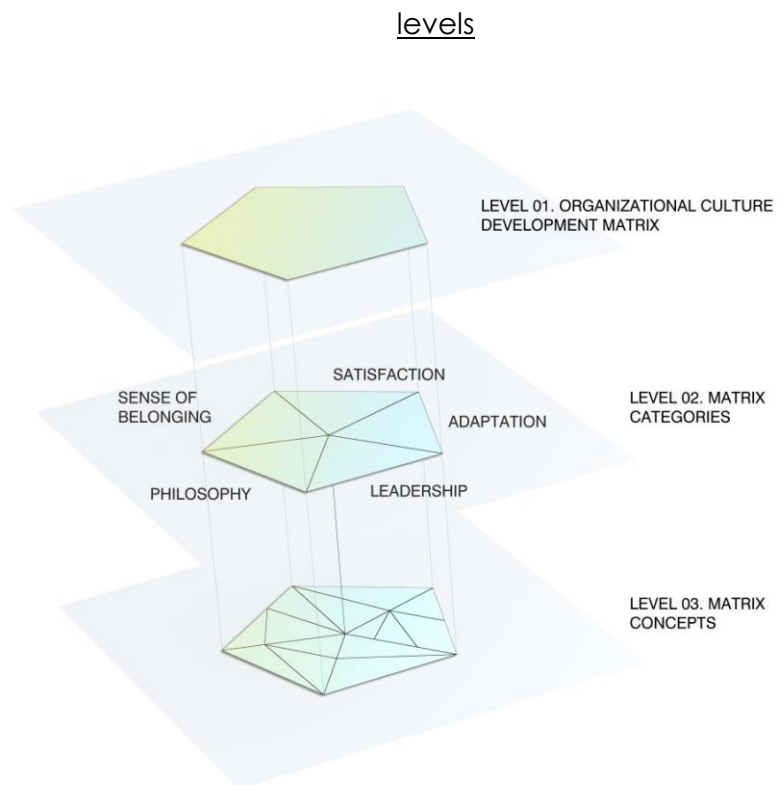
Source: Authors' own creation.

Each of the categories is composed of concepts, which are subsequently composed of properties or sets of attributes and indicators that can be observed and analyzed in the organizational reality. The organizational culture development matrix offers the possibility of evaluating the establishment and development of organizational culture in order to manage its

consolidation and growth (through internal communication tools) and contribute to the organization's mission. The concepts are not watertight compartments, but on the contrary, they are completely interrelated and in constant connection. The construction of a theoretical model for this phenomenon is justified from the analytical and diagnostic point of view, and of course by its usefulness to manage a continuous improvement in these aspects.

The following sections develop each of the categories that make up the organizational culture development matrix, their corresponding conceptual variables, and the set of descriptors that, as a way of indicators, allow the observation of this phenomenon in the organizational reality.

Figure 3: Organizational culture development matrix



Source: Authors' own creation.

4.2. Philosophy

This category is formed by a set of properties and definitions that constitute the corporate identity. Philosophy refers to the controlled statement about the state and objectives of the organization. It has three concepts: vision, values and activities.

Vision is related to the organization's position towards: the context (markets, scenarios, etc.); its dynamics (adaptation to

changes); its potential; its innovative capacity; and its competitive possibilities.

Some of the questions to evaluate this concept could be: Do you think that our company is adapting well to the changes occurring in the market? Do you consider the company to be one of the best companies in the sector? It is an innovative company? It is a leading company in the distribution sector?

Values are the set of convictions and ethical standards that govern the organizational behavior. They axiologically determine the life of the organization and subsequently: its explicit definition and practice; the confidence it generates among its publics; the organizational engagement and responsibility and their constant presence; and the discursive and empirical consistency.

Some of the questions to evaluate this concept could be: Can we trust this company? Is this company concerned with society's problems? Does it contribute in actions of social interest? Is it present in the day to day activities? Is this company ethical in its relationship with the environment? Are its teams (socially or environmentally) committed with their community (e.g. through the participation in the organization of festivals)?

The third concept that defines the organizational philosophy refers to the organization's everyday practices. The activities condition the cognitive and emotional components that prevail in a relation, by determining the attitudinal performance of any person. This category reflects the set of actions that define and justify the existence of the organization in its mission. What we say determines where we imagine we can arrive; what we say determines what we are. Its properties are: the role played in relation to the environment; the solutions provided to satisfy needs, generate value and provide benefits; the structural and infrastructural conditions; the quality and utility of the processes; the quality and variety of the supply of goods and services; the visual identity system and its corresponding image perceived by the different publics; the different forms of production; the various ways to connect with its publics; the financial strength; the sustainability of the activity.

Some of the possible questions to evaluate this concept are: is the company the cheapest in its area of influence? Are the company's image and products irreproachable? Is its climate warm and modern? Is the purchase made quickly and easily? Does it offer a wide range of own-brand products? Does it offer a good customer service? Is it a customer-focused company? Is the quality of its products excellent? Do you think customers are very satisfied with the offer and attention found

in our shopping center? Do you think the customer service here is better than in the competition? Is the financial strength very good?

4.3. Adaptation

Adaptation is the first stage of cultural establishment, whereby the internal publics configure their interest and expectations in relation to their performance and the organization. At this stage the abilities and skills needed to perform their role and functions are developed; and language is articulated to the chain of meanings, assumptions, and communication skills that define the organization's social discourse. It has four concepts: interest, training, dialogue, and job position.

Interest is produced by the desire of any internal public to satisfy its needs, which motivate its performance and relation with the organization. The properties of this variable depend on the degree of interest shown by the organization towards the wellbeing of its employees.

Training refers to the set of skills and competencies required to fulfill the assigned role and responsibilities. Some of the possible questions to evaluate this concept are: Do I have the knowledge and the training needed to do my job properly? Do multiple skills help my organization to win the preference of our customers every day? Has the training helped me to perform better my job every day? Do I have enough knowledge and training to take on greater responsibilities?

Dialogue refers to the direction, the meanings and the platforms used in the different (formal and informal) communication flows through which the messages circulate in the organization: either those flows that occur between the organization's collaborators, or those coming from the environment in which the organization operates.

Some of the possible questions to evaluate this concept are: Do I know what our customers say about us and what we should do to become better? Do I consider myself sufficiently informed about the results of the company? Do I consider myself sufficiently informed about the results of my area/department? Do I know which are the most important challenges and problems in my area/department? Do the internal communications channels make me feel informed? Do I understand perfectly the criteria used to assess my work?

The organization's spaces, layout, decoration, distribution, infrastructure, resources and the tools necessary to complete tasks condition the organizational culture development. However, when talking about the concept of job position it also refers to the assigned roles, functions, routines, tasks, responsibilities; their articulation in the organizational structure;

the treatment and cordiality; the perceived retribution, incentives and motivations; mobility; achievement of goals; and the perception of contribution and value generation.

Some of the possible questions to evaluate this concept are: Does my department dedicate enough time to talk about the ways we can improve the quality of customer service in our stores? Am I well aware of what the company expects from me? Are my responsibilities clearly defined? Do I have the information I need to be able to do my job properly? Do I have the appropriate technical resources to be able to do my job efficiently? Do I know what I have to do in my work to be able to influence the productivity bonus? Does my department carry out multiple tasks? Does my department organize improvement groups? Does the work required from me allow me to fulfill all my duties properly?

4.4. Sense of belonging

The sense of belonging is based on the consolidation of adaptation and a significant increase in the level of loyalty, involvement and engagement in relation to the organization. The internal public customizes the institutional project, the mission, vision and values through its behaviors, performances and discourses. The perception of value must be mutual (both for the individual and the organization). In this sense, formal recognition is very important, although it should not be a *sine qua non* condition. This state of loyalty can be recognized in the attitudes and engagement of the internal public.

Loyalty implies a tacit and moral contract that is manifested in the relationship with the organization and the benefits (not only economic or material) and continuity prospects that it provides. Some of the possible questions to evaluate this concept are: Do I recommend my company as a good place to work? Do I do seek job opportunities in other companies? Will I continue to work here for at least the next two years? Would I take into consideration a job offer from another company at this moment?

In the case of attitudes, the sense of belonging is reinforced by certain collaborative and proactive behaviors that are not necessarily constricted to specific functions or tasks. Solidary, optimistic, participatory and constructive spirits are indicators of the development of attitudes aimed at consolidating the workers' sense of belonging in an organization.

Some of the possible questions to evaluate this concept are: Do I feel committed to solve customers' problems in our stores? I am prepared to make an extra effort if my company requires so? Do I have autonomy to carry out my work? Do I experience the problems in my area/department as my own?

Does the company try to improve the results even if they are always good?

Engagement is the clearest manifestation of the sense of belonging and involvement in an organization. In addition to responsibility, engagement is driven by a clear visualization of opportunity for personal and professional fulfillment and development. This dimension is associated with a state of full happiness, which is not related to circumstantialities and situations. Undoubtedly, it is also a bet for the future that involves a set of expectations and needs that should be analyzed objectively so that they can be fulfilled. Some of the possible questions to evaluate this concept are: Do I feel responsible for my job? Do I feel part of the team of the area I work for? Do I feel responsible for the results achieved in my area/department? Is my area/department always concerned about improving the results even if they are good? Do I feel closely connected to people working in my area/department? Do I feel a very proud about working in my area/department? Do I feel committed with the company? Do I truly feel part of the team? Do I feel a strong personal bond to the company? Do I feel very proud to work here? Do I experience my company's problems as my own?

4.5. Leadership

This category has two concepts: recognition and management. This dimension of organizational culture is closely linked to the skills and attitudes held by the directors and managers. This dimension is dynamic, situational and very complex to standardize in the case of large organizations with multiple locations under a single model. The organizational climate and consequently the organizational culture development are directly conditioned by the staff's performance and the consistency and profile of the power structures.

The role of recognition has to do with the motivation to perform tasks, the recognition of achievements, progress, success, efforts, contributions, initiatives, participations, enthusiasm and confidence. Similarly, this variable must always be taken into consideration by leaders in the management of improvements, in quality control processes, in objectives management, in performance evaluations, and in training and development programs. Some of the possible questions to evaluate this concept are: Do I feel highly motivated to do my job well? Does my boss recognize a job well done? Does my boss trust its employees?

The study of management seeks to identify the profile of those who occupy positions of management, leadership or supervision. It requires the legitimacy of the competencies

needed by the staff to perform their functions, of the forms of interaction, management types and skills put into practice, the management of objectives, the distribution of functions, the ability to do teamwork, vision, delegation, planning, empathy, etc.

Some of the possible descriptor questions to evaluate this concept are: Is the company directed by very capable people? Does my boss spend enough time talking to me about my performance and how we can improve it? Does the staff in my area/department meet periodically to discuss the performance, the goals and the results? Do I find my boss when I need him/her? Does my boss explain why am I asked to do something? Does my boss respect my responsibilities and let me organize my work myself? Does my boss delegate responsibilities to me? Does my boss ask for my advice on things related to my work? Does my boss talk to me about his/her assessment of my work? Can I express my ideas in the one-to-one meetings with my boss about my performance? Are the one-to-one meetings with my boss about performance actually useful? Does my boss explain to me the reasons behind every change in the company? Does my boss recognize the right to error? Does my boss promote and facilitate the formation of improvement groups? Does the salary clearly reflect the quality of the work of each person?

4.6. Satisfaction

This category is subdivided into treatment and opportunity. It is associated, on the one hand, with the levels of expectation and fulfillment of objectives and needs and, on the other hand, with the perception of a healthy and sustainable work environment and climate.

Treatment is related to the everyday satisfaction, which is linked to the conciliation with personal life, and the quality and warmth of human relations. Some of the possible questions to evaluate this concept are: Does the company have an excellent reputation in society? Does the boss treat well his/her employees? Am I satisfied with my job? Does the company acknowledge that my area/department is working more effectively than in the past? Does my company give me an adequate salary in comparison to other companies in the sector? Does my job allow me to combine my personal and professional life reasonably, taking into account the sector I am working on? Is this company good for me? Do we work more effectively now than in the past?

Finally, opportunity is based on the coherence that can exist between the vision of the personal and the institutional projects, and on the trust that the organization puts in its publics and vice versa. Some of the possible questions to

evaluate this concept are: Does a responsible HR policy provide opportunities for my professional development? Does it offer opportunities for internal promotion?

5. Conclusions

This in-depth study based on the grounded theory method has allowed us to design a theoretical model for the analysis and understanding of the establishment and development of organizational culture, which is configured by the interplay of the processes of organizational philosophy assimilation, sense-of-belonging formation, adaptation, satisfaction and leadership that are shared by a group and are the basis for the corporate policies that identify and differentiate an organization and subsequently make the internal publics feel a constitutive and constituent part of it.

The organizational culture development matrix includes a set of categories composed of concepts and properties, or a set of attributes and indicators that can be observed and analyzed in the organizational reality.

This contribution to the complexity of the study of culture is a complex model that is nonetheless practical to be used in the organizational management and improvement, as it allows the individualization of all its psychosocial factors and their relations.

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***Mg. Alejandro ÁLVAREZ-NOBELL**
Teachers Researcher
San Jorge University (USJ) – Spain
aalvarez@usj.es

***Mg. María ROMERO-CALMACHE**
Teachers Researcher
San Jorge University (USJ) – Spain
mromero@usj.es

Lic. Manuel SÁNCHEZ-SANVICENTE
Scholar
San Jorge University (USJ) – Spain
nsanchez@usj.es

Lic. Paz ARAGÜÉS-DUFOL
Teachers Researcher
San Jorge University (USJ) – Spain
dufoles@gmail.com

