

## **Tying Diversity to Organizational Culture\***

Raquel J. Gabriel\*\*

*What does the term “organizational culture” have to do with diversity in a law library? Can you define what “culture” exists in your current workplace and how it appears to potential employees? Does the existing culture within your institution help or hinder your existing workforce in providing services to your community? In this article, Ms. Gabriel discusses the reasons why conscious recognition of a library’s culture by current employees is critical to promoting diversity as well as potentially helping establish the importance of a library within an organization.*

### **Introduction**

¶1 If someone asked you what you do for a living, what would you answer? Would it depend on when and where you were being asked? What if a child or an adult asked you to define what you do every day? What if this happened at the AALL Annual Meeting? Generally speaking, when I’m asked my profession, “librarian” is the first answer I’ll give. Yet when I’m at the AALL Annual Meeting, I usually answer with the name of my place of employment, automatically identifying myself as an academic librarian—the “law librarian” part is taken care of, given the setting.

¶2 I’ve noticed over the years that when librarians are asked to define themselves, we often name our workplace—perhaps because it’s the easiest way for us to identify each other and determine whether or not our interests will fall along the same lines. After all, in theory, we will have the most in common with those who understand our particular environments (even down to the level of specific jobs, such as reference or electronic services librarian). This type of recognition comes from an acknowledgment that within the same types of jobs, or the same types of work environments, people share a common “culture.”<sup>1</sup> We can identify a set of attributes or values or skill sets within our positions that makes it easier to make

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1. Defining “culture” is an enormous task, as meanings vary depending on the context in which it is used. Here, I am using the following definition: “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.” MERRIAM WEBSTER’S COLLEGIATE DICTIONARY 304 (11th ed. 2003).

connections with colleagues within the profession who perform the same sorts of tasks.

¶3 But one also brings to any position an individual sense of self that includes the integration of a variety of cultures not only from previous places of employment, but also personal experiences. The question of how diversity comes into play in this culture is really the examination of how welcoming a particular workplace culture is to cultures different from its own. Does the organizational culture allow for open discussion and change without fear of retaliation? Does it encourage the flow of new viewpoints and ideas to help it become more efficient or more responsive to institutional needs? Or does it perhaps stubbornly hold onto a culture that was established years ago, simply based on inertia or even due to an outdated perception of what that culture once was?

¶4 Many people only consciously think of the culture that exists where they work when trying to identify others who may be just like them. This can happen at annual conferences or when the organization is searching for a new employee. It may also happen, at least subconsciously, when you are seeking a new job. In a search for a new position, one often researches the organization as well as the duties of the new position. You might compare benefits or salaries to your current job. You might go further and talk to friends and family about the pros and cons of a new position, as well as to professional colleagues to see if you can get an idea of what the place is like, and to determine if the organization might be the “right fit” for you. In all of these preliminary steps, we are processing information that gives us an idea about the “organizational culture”<sup>2</sup> of an institution in preparation for an interview. What happens when you finally get the job?

### Recognition of Organizational Culture

¶5 The phrase “organizational culture” brought back a hazy memory of a long-ago undergraduate course in sociology that I am fairly certain I didn’t fully comprehend at the time. Reviewing the concept of organizational culture for this column, I was quickly overwhelmed by the amount of literature addressing the topic, which has increasingly expanded since the mid-1980s. During that period, the term “organizational culture” began appearing regularly in the field of sociology and was most often associated with ideas about altering the working behavior of American employees and businesses.<sup>3</sup>

¶6 What’s clear is that there is no universally agreed-upon definition of what encompasses organizational culture. Instead, there are myriad schools of thought that describe different types of organizational culture depending on the researcher

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2. Again, what is defined as “organizational culture” varies widely. For the purposes of this column, I am relying on another definition of “culture”: “the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization.” *Id.*

3. In my sociology class, I remember reading excerpts from William G. Ouchi’s *Theory Z*, which compared and contrasted models of American and Japanese business management. WILLIAM G. OUCHI, *THEORY Z: HOW AMERICAN BUSINESS CAN MEET THE JAPANESE CHALLENGE* (1981).

and the type of organization being examined, and there are even discussions of subcultures within organizations.<sup>4</sup>

¶7 In my reading, one particular author's discussion of organizational culture caught my attention:

An organization's culture is reflected in what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it. It concerns decisions, actions, and communication both on an instrumental and a symbolic level.

. . . Organizational culture exists, then, in part through the actors' interpretation of historical and symbolic forms. The culture of an organization is grounded in the shared assumptions of individuals participating in the organization. . . .

. . . Organizational culture, then, is the study of particular webs of significance within an organizational setting. . . .

. . . .

. . . [A] central goal of understanding organizational culture is to minimize the occurrence and consequences of cultural conflict and help foster the development of shared goals. . . . No matter how much information we gather, we can often choose from several viable alternatives. *Culture influences the decision.*<sup>5</sup>

It seems to be an obvious point, but the idea that there is a culture that we adhere to when we are at work is one that usually fades to the background. Yet an organization's culture may affect all of our daily tasks.

¶8 All of us are aware of the various obstacles that may present themselves as challenges every day at work. It might be the reference request as you're walking out the door, or the meeting that got sidetracked by an irrelevant discussion. It may be as simple as a faculty member walking in asking for assistance when you're trying to meet a project deadline. But the way you are expected to handle each of these tasks is a reflection of organizational culture. Do you stop and immediately handle the reference request, or are you comfortable passing it on to another colleague? Do you feel comfortable speaking up in a meeting where the agenda is sidetracked, perhaps by a private disagreement between two individuals, or do you wait for someone else to steer the conversation to a safer topic? Will a faculty member or attorney be understanding if you state that while you are on a deadline right now, you will get back to them within a specific time period, or are you confident that you can refer them to another librarian without this reflecting badly on you?

¶9 While some of us are easily able to make these decisions, newer employees may have difficulty because they have not yet been able to interpret the culture within their workplaces that will help them determine what is expected of them. As

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4. See generally MATS ALVESSON, *UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE* (2002); DON W. PRINCE & MICHAEL H. HOPPE, *COMMUNICATING ACROSS CULTURES* (2000); DAVID C. THOMAS & KERR INKSON, *CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE: PEOPLE SKILLS FOR GLOBAL BUSINESS* (2003); Benjamin J. Broome et al., *Giving Voice to Diversity: An Interactive Approach to Conflict Management and Decision-Making in Culturally Diverse Work Environments*, 8 J. BUS. & MGMT. 249 (2002); Calvin Morrill, *Culture and Organization Theory*, 619 ANNALS AM. ACAD. POL. & SOC. SCI. 15 (2008); Orlando C. Richard et al., *The Impact of Visible Diversity on Organizational Effectiveness: Disclosing the Contents in Pandora's Black Box*, 8 J. BUS. & MGMT. 265 (2002).

5. William G. Tierney, *Organizing Culture in Higher Education: Defining the Essentials*, 59 J. HIGHER EDUC. 2, 3-5 (1988) (emphasis added). It may be that Tierney's article particularly resonated with me because I am in academia, but I think that much of what he articulates as "organizational culture" within an institution is useful reading for anyone new to the field.

with all cultural assimilation, it may take time and effort to learn the correct responses to each scenario within your culture. You may even want to shift the expectations for each scenario if you are trying to change a dominant culture.<sup>6</sup>

¶10 The ability to successfully recognize and navigate an organization's culture often has a direct correlation with whether or not an individual succeeds at a particular institution. Whether success is measured in salary, recognition, or simply inclusion within the organization, is up to each individual. But without the ability to successfully interpret organizational culture, one will likely end up unsatisfied at work.

¶11 Time and again, friends in a variety of professions have taken positions and later figured out that a particular institution really wasn't the best fit for them. Sometimes they discovered this within a few weeks, but more often it took several months or years or even just one distinctive bad experience to realize that the particular job wasn't what they had in mind. At the heart of it is often a realization that in some way, they were in conflict with the "culture" of the workplace. Whether that culture manifested itself in a set of policies or procedures, or in a co-worker, supervisor, or particular department, many times the reason for the unhappiness was the inability to reconcile their own personal or professional goals with what they experienced on the job.

¶12 And while I think that for the most part there is no guaranteed way to determine how an organization's culture truly works until you are immersed within it, I believe there is substantial value in cultivating a conscious cultural awareness of your surroundings, especially in the workplace.<sup>7</sup> Doing so will likely help you become more attuned to the common ideas that drive an organization and, as a consequence, also assist you in recognizing the value an organization places upon diversity within its culture.

### Diversity Within an Organization

¶13 For many individuals, working in an institution that has within its particular culture ways to recognize and promote diversity<sup>8</sup> is an important consideration

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6. For example, you may pleasantly surprise someone by deciding to stop and handle a question as you're heading out the door, if previous experience has made that person believe you would direct them to someone else or put them off until the next day.

7. In my last column I spoke about how my concept of diversity changed depending on what environment I was in, and that because of it, I would often switch roles depending on where I was, which in turn meant that I was acclimating myself to the *particular* culture of that environment. Raquel J. Gabriel, *Diversity in the Profession*, 102 LAW LIBR. J. 147, 148–49, 2010 LAW LIBR. J. 8, ¶¶ 8–9. All of us exist with multiple "cultures" within us, based on our individual personalities and experiences. While many of us may find this easy outside of the work environment (e.g., bonding with others based on common hobbies, rooting for a sports team, or enjoying a specific television show), it can be difficult to ascertain which of the multiple cultures that coexist within us are acceptable at work. For the new employee it can be especially difficult without guidance from a co-worker or supervisor. Even then, there is still a risk that the employee might misinterpret the signals.

8. As in my previous column, I mean to use the term "diversity" widely, to encompass categories beyond the traditional ones of race and gender. *Id.* at 149–50, ¶ 11.

and may even affect the individual's decision about remaining at the institution.<sup>9</sup> Embracing concepts of diversity should lead to an organizational culture rich in opportunities for open communication and progress. In theory, an institution that is committed to diversity within its ranks is also interested in incorporating different viewpoints, which might then lead to increased productivity and employee satisfaction.

¶14 But what happens when an organization is stuck in a culture that, perhaps unconsciously, limits its appeal to diverse candidates? On a more direct level, what happens if you look closely at *your* particular library's culture? How much is the operation of the library affected by the larger organization? Does the larger organization value the library and those who work within it, or is it marginalized? What can you do to improve the situation, and what are the possible consequences if you do so? Are there chains of command that let potential or current employees know whom to go to for advice within, or outside, the library?

¶15 What does the staff of the current library look like? Of the larger organization? How long do employees normally stay at the library, and what are their reasons for moving on? Does the current library management do anything that assists or hinders professional development? Is there support for library staff members who might clash with the larger organization's goals? How much importance does your library put on finding not only the right matching skills of an incoming librarian, but also the right "fit"?

¶16 The reason for asking all of these questions is to bring us back to the idea that we often only think of organizational culture when we are first poised to take a position. It is *then* that we usually take our time and judge whether or not a place of employment holds the same sorts of ideas and values we would like to pursue in our professional careers.

¶17 The challenge is to keep that awareness and careful thinking front and center when one arrives on the job and, more importantly, as one remains in it. It is easy to allow yourself to become accustomed to a particular environment and do the minimum expected of you. If you have managed to do this well, you may contribute to the overall positive image of the library within the organization, your job will be secure, and the status quo will be maintained.

¶18 But what if the status quo lacks diversity in the types of employees, their viewpoints, or even their working styles? To be sure, there need to be some commonly shared values and ideas among colleagues, but there is a difference between a common culture where the majority has a shared set of assumptions and works well together to support and invigorate an institution, and a culture that remains as it is because no one wants to make an effort or, worse, because such efforts are

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9. What makes an employee happy at a particular job varies not only with the person, but also with the type of profession and the individual job duties. It's extraordinarily difficult to define what matters to one at a job, as such things can be fluid and dependent on a variety of internal factors (e.g., position within the organization, salary, autonomy, etc.) as well as external ones (e.g., how much time one can spend with family or friends, commute, cost of living). These factors can also change, depending on what stage one is at in one's personal or professional life. What counts for me is not necessarily how successful an organization is at any *particular* initiative to promote diversity, but rather that the organization maintains a sincere effort to promote it.

actively or tacitly discouraged. When that occurs, is the library really doing all it can to show the benefit of its services to the larger organization? Can it easily justify why there should be resources allocated to it if things remain the same? Can it really say that it is open to diversity?

¶19 In many ways, libraries define their value within an organization by the level of services they provide to their community. Recognizing that the culture within your library has an impact not only on potential hires, but also on the ability of your library to adapt to changes, and on its image within the larger organization, may lead you to some interesting observations.

¶20 Honest dialogue about stagnant culture within a library is never easy, but librarians have the advantage of the continually evolving nature of information to help them jumpstart a conversation within their institutions. It can be as simple as asking questions such as: Is it necessary to work x number of hours at the physical reference desk when statistics show that students or attorneys would rather contact you by phone, e-mail, or instant message? Has the library done a survey to determine whether or not its users would rather utilize print or electronic resources? Once these questions have been asked, it is important to determine if there is anyone in the library who wants to grow beyond the traditional duties given them to investigate something new. And would the library be open to that type of investigation?<sup>10</sup>

¶21 All of the above mean examining a library's culture and increasing the opportunity to include diverse viewpoints. This may lead to the library's acknowledging that perhaps its culture needs to change in order to meet the changing needs of its users. Or it could mean acknowledging changes that have already occurred and articulating them within the library's mission statement or values. In the long run, realizing that a library has an organizational culture and the continual and conscious acceptance and acknowledgment of that culture may make it easier to be open to diversity of opinions, ideas, and methods.

¶22 Libraries and librarians constantly evolve—given the changing nature of information, it's one thing we're almost forced to do. We should also work toward making our organization's culture one that encourages diversity and embraces the concept that new ideas have a place within the organization. I firmly believe that doing so helps a library find the best new ways to serve its users, and also become a more diverse organization.

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10. Finding and creating new ways to determine the efficiency of certain library policies and procedures takes an enormous amount of effort. For example, a survey can be problematic if the time hasn't been taken to construct it correctly, or if it simply seeks to reaffirm the status quo instead of inviting new ideas and possible directions for the library. Finding the staff members who can dedicate the time to creating a survey or implementing other new ideas while handling their regular duties often becomes a delicate balancing act of priorities, and one that likely needs to be undertaken only after serious consideration.