

Organisational Culture And Defence Acquisition: A Key Internal Factor For MoD

by *Dr Charles Kirke*

Charles Kirke teaches military anthropology and human factors integration at Cranfield University, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom. In this article, he discusses the many cultures and sub-cultures that exist in the Ministry of Defence and how these affect the way culture change should be approached.

'Culture' has attracted a great deal of attention in recent years. The word seems to be on everyone's lips, especially those talking about apparently intractable social problems – things such as 'racism' (however defined), binge drinking in the young, optimistic claims for allowances, or the payment of bonuses to those popularly deemed not to deserve them. The spirit of the times seems to be that such things are all due to 'culture' and this 'culture' must be changed.

As an anthropologist I have had to develop an understanding of 'culture', not as a buzzword but as a serious issue for academic study. As a (now retired) military officer and a specialist in the culture of military social groups – particularly British ones – I have found myself thinking about the social systems in the Ministry of Defence. Recently these thoughts have focused on the effects of culture in defence acquisition and how to turn these effects in a positive direction, particularly in the light of Bernard Gray's recent independent review.¹ This article is an attempt to summarise some of these thoughts, which are entirely mine. It does not represent any official opinion or thought.

What is Culture?

But first, what is 'culture'? From my social anthropological viewpoint I naturally take a bottom-up approach when looking at an organisation, because social anthropology is founded on the study of small groups. This is not to negate the validity of the top-down approach favoured by many management consultants who seek to take an overarching view of a whole social system (perhaps through a network-enabled survey or an organisation-wide analysis of formal and informal information channels). The two approaches may well be complementary, but in this article I am looking at culture as played out in the small interactions of everyday life – a low-level view.

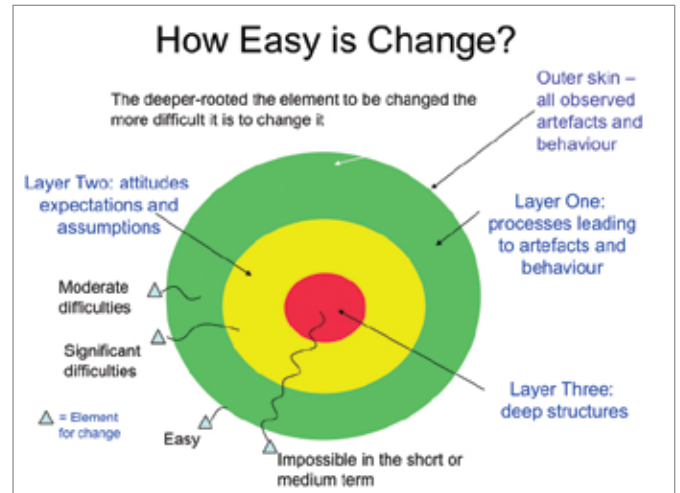
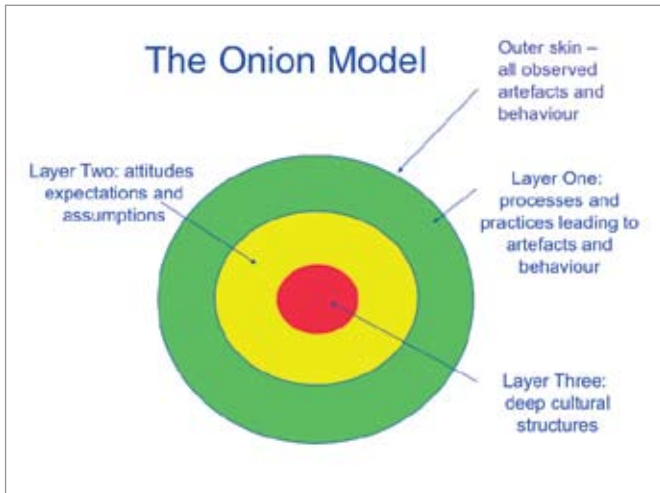
In the words of one great anthropologist, culture consists in 'all learned behaviour'.² To focus this wide definition down to make it relevant to this article, 'culture' can be

considered as all learned behaviour that is shared in a group, enabling its members to interact in ways that all understand and treat as 'normal'. It consists of a shared body of ideas, attitudes, expectations and assumptions about how things are and ought to be. This means that culture does not have a separate existence (although it may sometimes be useful to think about it as if it has). In fact, it exists entirely between the ears of the people in the group and is only visible in how they play it out in their everyday lives; in a process rather like positive feedback, the attitudes, expectations and assumptions are reinforced, restated and reproduced in the minds of the members when played out in normal life.

All learned behaviour that is shared in a group may be a useful theoretical definition of culture, but how do we determine where groups start and end? We belong to many different groups at the same time – a family, for example, a close work team, a wider organisation at work, a sports team, fellow-smokers, and so on. In each group we behave in different ways because each group has its own culture, or its own variant of a local culture. My concept of the 'operating group'³ may be useful here. This is the group of which a person is exercising membership at any one time, which takes precedence in those circumstances over all other groups to which they belong. Thus a member of a team in Defence Equipment and Support (DE&S) in Abbey Wood might have as their operating group at work the team itself, a sub-group within the team, a cross-team meeting, or a group of old friends with whom they normally eat Friday breakfast. Each group will have slightly different conventions of behaviour – different cultures – so how a person behaves will be specifically relevant to the group he or she is in at that particular moment.

Culture and Normal Life

Two important consequences flow from the way that culture informs and directs normal life. The first is that culture is instinctive: it provides us with the 'right' way of doing things and understanding the world. Our culturally informed behaviour is a given in our lives. The second is that the effects of culture, instinctive as they are, have a massive effect on our lives, and this combination of instinctiveness and massiveness makes it very hard for us to be aware of the particular social conventions of the groups to which we belong. Culture feels so natural that we do not notice it.



A useful way of thinking about culture is ‘the onion model’, described for instance by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner in their book on cultural diversity in business.⁴ This treats culture as a multi-layered entity with an outer skin representing the observable elements that we can all see – people’s behaviour, the things that they make and use, and so on. Beneath this outer skin are the processes and practices that can be deduced from the observed behaviour. Deeper still are the attitudes, expectations and assumptions that make the group’s members feel that the processes and practices are ‘right’, and deepest of all are the deep cultural structures – values, norms, basic standards of decent behaviour and so on – which underlie the behaviour of the people in the group.

Where the culture of an organisation is strong, having a profound influence on its members, then change imposed from outside is very likely to trigger resistance among them, particularly if this change impinges on areas that lie deep within the ‘onion’. Two processes are particularly apparent in large organisations such as the Ministry of Defence. The first I have called ‘cultural drag’, meaning a slowing down of change through lack of cooperation by the work force who tend to look back to how things were and drag their feet in transition to the new state of affairs desired by their management. The second I have called ‘cultural precession’⁵ using an analogy from the world of gyroscopes. Under cultural precession the management want to push the organisation into a desired set of behaviours but the members actually behave in different and unexpected ways.

It follows then, that intelligent management needing to change an organisation should as far as possible avoid confronting the existing organisational culture, but rather attempt to use it positively as a vehicle for change. This does beg the question, however, of how well the management facing the need for change actually understands the culture of their organisation and the groups of which it is composed.

There is one other common feature of culture that is relevant to this article, which is to do with group identity and associated attitudes towards outsiders. There is no question

that the sharing of a strong culture helps people stick together and promotes solidarity and cooperation within the group. It is, for example, a significant force in the bonding of military groups. However, culture can also be a feature in the setting up of barriers between groups, particularly in the form of unhelpful stereotypes. I have seen, for example, civil servants working in acquisition cast their armed forces colleagues as always in a hurry and with a tendency to be greedy and wasteful with public money. I have also seen the equal and opposite view expressed by military officers that civil servants were too keen on process at the expense of achievement. Such stereotypes are always a barrier to trust and often create conditions where different groups think that the others are of less value than themselves, or of less use to the greater purpose.

Culture in Defence Equipment and Support

So, how may culture be affecting DE&S? This is a very large question which has not yet been satisfactorily researched. However, there are indications out of which a reasonable initial answer can be framed.

I found indications of significant cultural issues in DE&S when carrying out a pilot study into the organisational culture in Abbey Wood, shortly after the formation of DE&S in 2007. This pilot was aimed at providing proof of principle for a proposed research framework in preparation for a large-scale study into organisational culture at DE&S that in the event was not funded.⁶ The research framework was constructed to identify the range and nature of the many different potential operating groups in the organisation, the characteristics of their cultures and the array of stereotypes that might be creating barriers between the groups. Although the pilot study was not aimed at pre-empting the main study, certain early indications of cultural issues nevertheless emerged.

The first of these issues was that, as expected, there were many different groupings in the organisation, with distinct cultural differences between them, leading to barriers to co-operation and understanding. There were strong and

very different cultures in the two teams I investigated, and a weak overarching 'DE&S' culture expressed in such things as 'dress down Friday' and common features across the board in expectations about the 'right' way to mark the departure of a long-standing colleague. There were the four Service cultures (Civil Service, Royal Navy, Army and Royal Air Force) all of which prompted different behaviours. There were branches of the Service cultures within each Service – for instance, RN operations branch personnel differentiating themselves from engineers; civil servant financial staff differentiating themselves from engineers and contracts staff; members of the RAF divided between air crew and ground crew (with clear divisions within the air crew between fast jet, transport fleet, and rotary wing members); and multiple cultures in the Army along regimental and corps lines.

To make matters more complicated, groups would be happy to combine in the face of what appeared to be common opposition and in so doing would create new ways of doing things and thus, in the terms of this article, new cultures or at least new variants of existing cultures. Cross-cutting all of these different points of view, the division between people who identified themselves as ex-DPA and ex-DLO remained stark.⁷

The existence of all of these different groupings seemed to provide fertile ground for stereotyping, perhaps because of the strong threads of rivalry in Armed Forces' culture which maintain that 'we' (at whatever the relevant level) are 'better than you' (at a comparable level) – there were further indications that the stereotypes were potentially strong and significant, leading to barriers to cooperation and effective communication. The vernacular word within DE&S to describe this effect is 'tribalism'.

Review of Defence Acquisition

These observations tie in with some issues raised in Bernard Gray's review. For example, when analysing "pressures that make projects more likely to experience problems", he finds that:

"Each of the Services naturally wants to ensure it gets the maximum share of available resources" and "it is not in any one Service's interest to show restraint in its bids. In a classic Game Theory problem, restraint by one Service is only likely to result in gains for the others who do not hold back".⁸

It seems self-evident that the organisational and cultural structure of the MoD lends itself to this sort of rivalry out of which it is natural to want the maximum share of available resources.

It appears, therefore, that the organisational culture of MoD Acquisition is complex and multi-layered, consisting of a large array of constituent groups at various scales each with their own culture – expressed in their own way of doing things and in rivalry with other groups, which are stereotyped as less deserving competitors. As culture has a profound influence on behaviour, it follows that a substantial amount of what

is done in DE&S and in the Capability branches and how it is done is affected by these cultures. Under the current pressures for change it is therefore important that the MoD develops a properly researched understanding of the cultural issues in the acquisition system to avoid creating wasteful and ultimately costly cultural drag and cultural precession among the groups of which it is composed.

More positively, if plans for change are made with an eye to the current cultural structures at all levels then they can be constructed to exploit the associated advantages. For example, existing operating groups might be preserved, or unhelpful stereotyping might be minimised, in the setting up of new organisational structures. However, whatever is intended, any proposed changes should be mapped against the framework of the existing culture with the intention of not disturbing what is represented by the deep layers in the onion model. Let us keep the changes in line with the culture, for otherwise any attempts to change the culture of MoD acquisition itself, and those of the constituent groups of which acquisition system is composed, would be an uphill struggle with plenty of costly tears along the way.

I am grateful for the help and advice I have received in writing this article from Professor Karen Carr and Dr Peter Tatham, fellow members of the Centre for Human Systems at Cranfield University at the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom. ■

NOTES

- ¹ Ministry of Defence, *Review of Acquisition for the Secretary of State for Defence: an Independent Report* by Bernard Gray, October 2009, <http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/78821960-14A0-429E-A90A-FA2A8C292C84/0/ReviewAcquisitionGrayreport.pdf>
- ² Lucy Mair, *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1965, page 7
- ³ See for example, Charles Kirke, *Red Coat Green Machine: continuity in change in the British Army 1700-2000*, Continuum, London, 2009, page 33
- ⁴ Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner, *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing Ltd, London 1997), pages 20-27
- ⁵ Charles Kirke, *Organizational Culture - the Unexpected Force*, *Journal of Battlefield Technology* 7, 2, 2004, pages 11-18
- ⁶ Some aspects of the cancelled major study live on in a PhD research project being carried out by Mr Derek Shaw
- ⁷ This was to be expected in the time frame of the pilot study, shortly after the creation of DE&S from the former Defence Procurement Executive (DPA) and the Defence Logistics Organisation (DLO)
- ⁸ Gray Report, pages 28-29