

Symbolic Leadership in the Organizational Culture in the Context of Transformation

Dina Aslamazishvili*

Scientific Group, Business School
Georgian American University
Aleksidze str. 10, 0160 Tbilisi
Georgia
e-mail: dinaaslamazishvili@gau.edu.ge

Valentina Ignatova

Institute of Social Engineering
Reshetnev Siberian State University of Science and Technology
Prospekt imeni gazety “Krasnoyarskiy rabochiy” 31, 660037 Krasnoyarsk
Russian Federation
e-mail: valyaig@mail.ru

Anastasiya Smirnaya

Institute of Social Engineering
Reshetnev Siberian State University of Science and Technology
Prospekt imeni gazety “Krasnoyarskiy rabochiy” 31, 660037 Krasnoyarsk
Russian Federation
e-mail: nastenasm@yandex.ru

Abstract Put to their definitions in substitution ‘leadership’, ‘strategy’, and ‘culture’ sound almost as the same concepts. One may easily interchange them and get the same understanding directions. Regardless to the sameness and disadvantages of their definitions, these super popular terms obviously engine the production process of different meanings, and lead to different ways of thinking, depending on the space context they are applied to.

The meanings engineering lies in the area of symbols, symbols not as artifacts or signs or images, but as the metaphorical spiritual unity of the form and the meaning, connecting the two worlds. Symbol unfolding its primes sense though zero structure to the context of transformation. Our paper explores the ways symbolic can be a part of leadership influence, and symbols place in managing organizational culture.

Keywords: *symbolic leadership, transformation, organisation, organisational culture*

1 Introduction

In his work “The Writing of the God”, Borges (1949) points out at the complexity of reality which might be an infinite number of dreams and a complex structure of multiple realities. So are the organisations and their structures.

Organization is the indivisible part of being a human today, that common form of a group with the structure and purpose. Nowadays the concepts of intangible organizational life are more in focus than ever before. Regardless the criticism of ‘spiritual’ practices applied to management of realistic business activities, such as coaching, happiness programs for employees, level three leadership, these practices are often used as the only possible for managing meanings and linkages in organization. Organization is a complex system of senses, tangible and intangible dimensions. As a social entity, human production, set of over-biological programs of existence, organization shares two types of results with society, – objective (budgets, sales, profit) and symbolic (values, feelings, attitudes). Managers are not only getting the objective results; with their leading function they produce behavioural and psychological anchors in their groups and organization as a global group. Human being cannot exist without symbolic. In humankind history retrospective homo sapiens could happen because of the desire to cognize and symbolize. There appeared art, science, philosophy, and culture as over-biological codes,

opening the perspectives for symbolic reflection. The symbolic production in organization is explored within the context of meta-symbolic, - when some forms symbolizes other forms which are symbolic as well, as stated by Sköldböck (1990). Managers work with these symbolic forms, even if they do not consciously realize that. From one side they deal with them in themselves, from another, - in doing things through and with their employees. Attitudes, in-group relations, perception, emotions, motivation, and other processes cannot be managed directly. One cannot just tell employee to become happy or change the negative attitude. It is possible only within the context of transformation and change in people do not happen only from the external factors, it is a combination of situational influence and inner energy of change, like interactionist perspective in behaviourism.

2. Symbolic leadership

How does meta-symbolic work in organizational leadership? First, let us agree on the understanding of leadership, which sometimes is vague. Leadership is a special type of influence, managing energy in oneself and others. Strategy and culture as well are influences, only creating different meanings and symbolic context. Leadership is creating an incredibly special context for symbolic unfolding, as it is the phenomenon realized only in human relationships. Nowadays professional managers move to shadow, like in servant leadership approach, and it produces the main product, - effective administering (management). It is the production of system, approach, model, which starts to exist itself. That managerial system becomes a symbol. Management is the toolbox with the variety of instruments, which in the right application to the congruent situation helps in achieving results with and through people. That human/humble dimension puts management to the symbolic context, the system of meanings with the primary sense, like the 'arche', the origin, the beginning of the Universe.

Symbol as an eternal sense-engine, possessing two energies (structuring and chaotic), regulates the development of transformation spiritual processes. Symbol is a connection, bi-polar sense. The human experience is full of dichotomies, polarities, with inner conflict and no wholeness. Symbol as a human dimension, has two polarities as well, but their dialectic overlap conducts the wholeness of chaos and structure. The essence characteristics of a symbol are the following: differentiability (differentiating the objects and the phenomena), substantive content (ideas expression), imperativeness (pointing the specific order), universality (connection), communicativeness (encoded human communication), multiple-meaning (different meanings), teleological nature (goal orientation), duality of inner nature (form and content unity). They are reflected in the regulative role of a symbol in transformation context: from stability to innovation. Symbol is a form of hyper-spirit culture content access. Symbol works as a piggybank and crucible of culture senses, included in the transformation context of Human-Universe relations, unfolded in the organization and reflected in organizational culture as a symbolic system.

Human through the reflective thinking gets deep in the symbolic world. The desire of ideal state and understanding make him/her to explore the image Universe and self-in-the-Universe, their metaphoric reflection, and communicative intention realization to reproduce and transfer meanings with signs. Management history went through different stages, from scientific management with the idea of one best way, and administrative theories of bureaucracy and multifunctional planning, organizing, overseeing and coordinating, to the behaviourist people-focus, systems and contingency approaches. Modern tendencies were focused on knowledge management, talent management and management by organizational culture. Symbolic management ideas raised with the Pfeffer research (1981). The scientist underlines the importance of human dimensions in organizations, as people bring along with them values, expectations, norms, - the symbolic elements of organizational reality. Pfeffer states that management practices and leader behaviour targeted at the building workplace spirituality, act as countering tools to negative work-related attitudes, as low job satisfaction, negative job involvement, not affective commitment and others (Pfeffer 2010). The ideas related to management as symbolic action, disappeared on the background of management research in situational leadership. There was a huge focus on the criteria which influence the leadership style choice, most effective in the situational context. Nowadays the organizational reality creates a deep symbolic context, as managers deal with virtual teams, internet space for work, the influence of memes, social networks. Management is not already a situational milieu, it becomes again symbolic, in the way how the stories, rituals and metaphors work for leading people in the workplace.

3. Organizational culture in the transformational context

Management by symbols is a relatively new direction for leaders in contemporary organizations, which are meaning-bearers and culture-bearers as well. The most symbolic framework in organization is culture. Alvesson (2002, 119 p.) states that culture is a complex system of meanings, not a set of muscles. Organizational culture is not only in activity mode, not only the number of instruments and norms, and cannot be measured only by the strength and positive-negative modes, it is a complex human reality, - symbolic space, symbolic reality which is the deep cultural content, cultural shamanism of intervening levels of influence. Culture is objected from the individual existence and consciousness human world. Culture as a symbols production, is defined by the human self-consciousness and intend the overlap of individual and Universe (Beliy 1994, 308 p.). Culture emergence made human to explore the world in the space and time parameters not only physically, but emotionally and intellectually (Kudashov 2007, pp. 64-65). Organizational culture makes managers to explore the world in social dimensions, not only intellectually and emotionally, but symbolically, in metaphors, signs, images. Values, norms and beliefs as a core of organizational culture are presented in these symbolic forms. Fuller (2011) describes organizational symbolism as the study of the expressive functions of organizational life. He offers the following five dimensions as organizational symbols:

- type of symbol (action/object);
- direction of the symbol (external/internal);
- source of the symbol (proactive/reactive);
- message of the symbol (content);
- substance of the symbol (image/essence).

Some of these dimensions are close to the interpretation of symbol's essential characteristics described earlier, like differentiability (differentiating the objects and the phenomena) – type of symbol; substantive content (ideas expression) – substance of the symbol; communicativeness (encoded human communication) – message of the symbol; duality of inner nature (form and content unity) – substance of the symbol.

Culture is not a static social parameter of humankind, symbols make it dynamic and put its existence in transformations: from traditional state to trans-traditional state, where it takes place a process of changes in symbolic fields. The transformation happens like in pendulum, and in the climax bifurcation point of trans-traditional culture there happens cultural transition, and new symbolic context starts. Traditional culture (TC) is non-flexible, closed, immanent state of culture. It is characterized by not changing values, orientations, traditions. Trans-traditional culture (TTC) is characterized by the culture change towards innovation, risk-taking, influences acceptance, broad interpretations. Organizations are dynamic open systems, related to the environment. Organizational cultures as well are dynamic in long-term run, regardless to the idea that some organizations are rigid as institutionalized in their value-orientations, followed from the founders. The inner symbolic energy makes the organizational cultures flow from traditional to trans-traditional module and back to traditional, and symbolic leadership plays a significant role in this transformational context. Organization becomes institutionalized when its culture is easily recognized inside and outside of the organization, like McDonald's, and when the organization continues its existence as following the primary vales of the founders, as Disney. Institutionalization does not have a negative connotation, as if organizational culture is positive and strong, it enhances performance effectiveness. However, culture in this case can become a strong barrier to changes, and organization potentially will need new leadership, as it can initiate its change and organizational culture change. Flowing from TC to TTC and back to TC module organizational culture creates a cyclic development and transformational context. Leaders are not only involved in it, but as well get additional responsibility for managing the symbolic part of organization during fluctuating times.

4. Symbol in organizational leadership within TC and TTC modules

Understanding organizational culture as a symbolic sphere, and organizational leadership as symbolic action in transformation context of cultural transitions, explains the following models in the symbol's dimensions for traditional and trans-traditional culture (Figure 1,2).

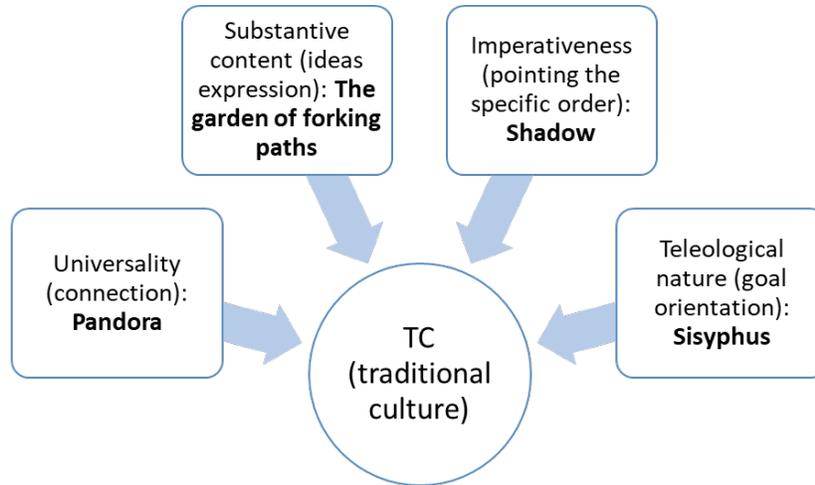


Fig.1. Model of organizational culture – Traditional Culture (TC) Module in symbol’s dimensions
Source: Own results

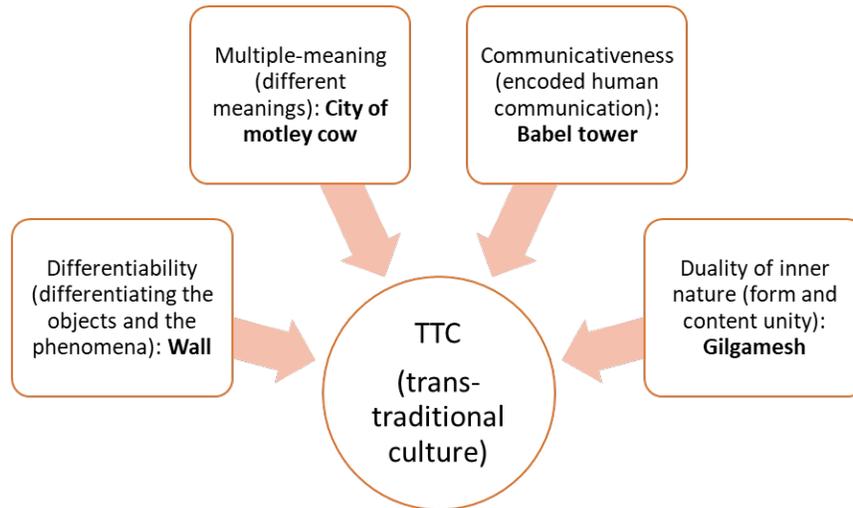


Fig.2. Model of organizational culture – Trans-Traditional Culture (TTC) Module in symbol’s dimensions
Source: Own results

Symbol essence characteristic Universality (connection) corresponds to the symbolic cognition Pandora. The name “Pandora” is taken from Goethe’s poetry (1810), symbol as Pandora-demon, possessing everything and sharing everything, uniting the opposite worlds. In organizational leadership context it means connection – symbol as Pandora, getting everything and possessing everything, connecting the opposite worlds. In organization there work different people, there are different functions and jobs, all are united in groups and in a social entity of the organization. Leader as Pandora, offering everything in unity, trusts unitarist approach. It has Traditional Culture (TC) focus, and examples are groups, departments, teams, organizational structure.

Symbol essence characteristic Differentiability (differentiating the objects and the phenomena) corresponds to the symbolic cognition Wall. The name “Wall” comes from Sartre’s poems (1939), symbol is like the wall dividing the fake and illusion from reality, which are reality themselves. In organizational leadership it means differentiating meanings – symbol as a wall, dividing the reality and fake, illusion which become reality again. In organization there is a division of real goals and not clearly defined directions, the effective and ineffective ways. Leader is the indicator of real and illusion, and the connection of tangible and intangible, the stop point between spiritual and physical in organizational culture. It has Trans-Traditional Culture (TTC) focus, and examples are organizational artifacts, planning, learning and orientation programs.

Symbol essence characteristic Substantive content (ideas expression) corresponds to the symbolic cognition The Garden of Forking Paths. The metaphor is taken from the same-named Borges poem “The garden of forking paths” (1941). Symbol is like this garden, where there are forking paths, leading to the united world-cognition, blending past and future, illusion and reality. In organizational leadership it means the realization of meanings, - symbol as a garden of forking paths, getting to one world understanding, where past and future, illusion and reality are intervening. In organizational culture it is one unique set of values for the organization. Leader is the communicator and the creator of the uniting sense of why we are all here, in this organization. It has Traditional Culture (TC) focus, and examples are mission, vision, managerial values.

Symbol essence characteristic Multiple meaning (different meanings) corresponds to the symbolic cognition City of Motley Cow. Nietzsche’s analogy from “Thus spoke Zarathustra” (1883-1885), where symbol is like this allegoric symbol, mixing the multiple shades of meanings in full diversity. In organizational leadership means Differences in meanings, - symbol as a city of motley cow, blending different shades of senses and meanings. In organization it is associated with diversity, and challenges leaders meet in helping people who are different to work together. It has Trans-Traditional Culture (TTC) focus, examples are diversity programs, organizational citizenship, organizational development programs.

Symbol essence characteristic Imperativeness (pointing the specific order) corresponds to the symbolic cognition Shadow. The name comes from the Nietzsche’s “Thus spoke Zarathustra”, the metaphor of Shadow is like symbol for the Wanderer, involved in the eternal dialogue with his own shadow. In organizational leadership means Pointing on the meanings ordering, - symbol as a shadow, the Wanderer cannot get rid of, and because of that he is all the time in dialogue with it. In organizational life it is the set of norms and ethical principles defining the right behaviour and the potential penetration if they are broken. Leaders are ethical examples of the behavioural direction, defining what is right and wrong. It has Traditional culture (TC) focus, examples are code of ethics, principles.

Symbol essence characteristic Communicativeness (encoded human communication) corresponds to the symbolic cognition Babel Tower. Traditional allegory of languages differentiation and human disband. Symbol here gets us back to the time when humankind was united and spoke one language. In organizational leadership means Encoded transition of meanings, - symbol as a return to the Babel Tower times, when there was one language and one dialect for all the people. In organizational culture it is the example of language homogeneity of the workplace, use of professional language and some specific terms clear for the employees and uniting them against the organizational outsiders. Leaders speak this language and create the language norms for organizational unity. It has Trans-Traditional culture (TTC) focus, examples are language deep meanings, professional terms and slang in the organizational units.

Symbol essence characteristic Teleological nature (goal orientation) corresponds to the symbolic cognition Sisyphus, from the Camus’s “Myth of Sisyphus”. Symbol of a human permanently taking the stone to the peak of the mountain, and in the last minute it falls back. It is the intention to achieve the goal, which is meaningless, and has no sense, but deep in its eternity. In organizational leadership means Goal-orientation of meanings, - symbol as Sisyphus, intending to the goal, vague and with no-sense, but deep in its eternity. In organizational life it is the nature of visioning, associated with conceptual skills of leaders. It has Traditional culture (TC) focus, examples are visioning, problem-solving, creativity, decision-making.

Symbol essence characteristic Duality of inner nature (form and content unity) corresponds to the symbolic cognition Gilgamesh, like a hero from Mesopotamian Poetry, “Gilgamesh Epos”. The hero who is half-God in the search of immortality. In organizational leadership means the unity of the form and the content, - symbol is dual as God-Human Gilgamesh, looking for the Immortality. In organizational culture it is the image of a leader, the person who connects the meaning and the real work, leader who is dual in symbolic and omnipotent influence, someone who regulates the levels of energy in organization. It has Trans-Traditional culture (TTC) focus, examples are leadership as influence in organization (Epos of Gilgamesh 2005).

5. Conclusions

Symbolic leadership is the influence within organizational culture symbolic dimensions, when culture flows from Traditional to Trans-Traditional state (module), and it is always of dynamic nature, there is a growing importance of leadership transformation context. Within the symbol’s dimensions leaders build the pendulum of culture development, defining the meanings and differentiating them as well. In the dual polarities there is a one primary-sense of a symbol and a dynamic energy of zero-structures to assist leaders in symbolic influence and realizing organizational symbolism in real managerial actions.

In the transformational context of organizational culture leadership style and instruments may vary because of the organizational culture state. In TC module symbolic leadership is responsible for connecting, setting the values, managing the differences, and visioning. The main focus is on groups, department and teams as organizational units, how to arrange the jobs and tasks in the cohesive structure. As well as values-based management, conducting and promoting the values codes, being ethical examples Leaders are directed to vision and apply conceptual skills, creativity and decision-making. TC module is more for institutionalized leadership in organizational culture.

In TTC module symbolic leadership exists around the organizational artifacts, planning, learning and orientation programs, moreover leaders care about diversity programs, organizational citizenship, organizational development programs, professional terms and slang in the organizational units. Leadership is realized in TTC module as influence and energy management in organization. TTC module is for more spiritualized leadership in organizational culture. Leaders deal with the organizational illusions, perceptions, connecting the real and spiritual modes in organizational management. Moreover, leadership is more focused on symbolic systems as language, rituals, artifacts, managerial and employee actions. In this dynamic module leaders diverge more than concierge the meanings, values and beliefs in organization.

References

- Alvesson M, *Understanding Organizational Culture*, 1st edn. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2002), 214 p.
- Beliy A, *Simvolizm kak Miroponimanie*, 1st edn. (Moscow: Respublika, 1994), 528 p.
- Borges JL, *The Writing of the God. Labyrinths: Selected stories & other writings*, 1st edn. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sur, 1949) In: Yates DA, Irby JE, Gibson W, *Labyrinths: Selected stories & other writings* (N.Y: New Directions, 2007), 240 p.
- Borges JL, *The garden of forking paths. Labyrinths: Selected stories & other writings*, 1st edn. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sur, 1941) In: Yates DA, Irby JE, Gibson W, *Labyrinths: Selected stories & other writings* (N.Y: New Directions, 2007), 240 p.
- Epos of Gilgamesh (2005). *O vse vidavshem (1884-1891)* In: *Epos o Gilgameshe. O vse vidavshem*, 1st edn. (Moscow: Eksmo, 2005), 544 p.
- Fuller SR (2008) *Organizational symbolism: A multidimensional conceptualization*. *The Journal of Global Business and Management* 4(2):168–174. doi: 10.5465/amr.2008.32465742
- Goethe VJW (1810) *Pandora* In: *Goethe VJW, Passage CE, Goethe's Plays*, 1st edn. (N.Y.: Ungar Pub Co, 1980), 626 p.
- Kudashov VI, *Filosofskie aspekti usovershenstvovaniya cheloveka*, 1st edn. (Krasnoyarsk: Sibirskiy Yuridicheskiy Institut MVD Rossii, 2007), 232 p.
- Nietzsche FW, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, 1st edn. (Erlbach: Ernst Schmeitzner, 1883-1885) In: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, 1st edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 342 p.
- Pfeffer J, *Business and the Spirit: Management Practices That Sustain Values*, In: Giacalone RA, Carole LJ, *Handbook of Workplace Spirituality and Organizational Performance*, 3rd edn. (NY: Routledge, 2010), 352 p.
- Pfeffer J (1981) *Management as Symbolic Action: The Creation and Maintenance of Organisational Paradigms*. *Research in Organizational Behavior* 3:1-52
- Sartre J-P, *The Wall*, 1st edn. (Paris: Gallimard, 1939) In: *Sartre J-P, The Wall*, 1st edn. (London: Calder Publications Ltd, 2018), 256 p.
- Sköldberg K, *Administrationens poetiska logik*, 1st edn. (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1990), 336 p.