

The Role of Physical Symbols in Organizational Culture And Management*

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Abstract

With the intensifying competition generated by globalization, organizations have increasingly begun to attach importance to values such as organizational culture in order to establish a strong and sustainable structure. Organizational culture can be defined as the totality of internal variables that make members feel valued and strengthen their commitment to the organization. This concept, which also reflects the identity of an organization, consists of various tangible and intangible elements, including language, religion, beliefs, values, norms, symbols, and laws. Among these elements, symbols occupy an important place in organizational culture and may appear in organizations in visual, auditory, or sensory forms.

Although symbols are often underestimated, they have a considerable positive influence on organizations in terms of internal communication, member commitment, employee empowerment, motivation, and performance. When used effectively, symbols can contribute to organizational strategies and support the mobilization of the organization. They also play an important role in keeping members united, guiding and controlling behavior, influencing attitudes, facilitating change, and increasing organizational energy. From a broader perspective, the effects of symbols can be observed not only in organizations but also in institutions, states, and countries through the meanings they convey and the impact they create on individuals. By employing a literature review method, this study aims to examine the importance of physical symbols within an organization—such as logos, clothing, equipment, and the physical environment of the organization—in relation to management and organizational culture.

Keywords: Symbol, Organizational Culture, Symbol in Management, Physical Symbols

Introduction

With the rapid increase in competition today, organizations have begun to work on increasing their strength. Increased organizational strength can be achieved through the commitment of organizational members to the organization and high levels of internal communication. Regardless of the type of organization, it can be said that every organization has a common denominator called "organizational culture." Organizational culture is a force that sets an organization apart. The concept of organizational culture, which also reflects the organization's identity, consists of many sub-elements, both abstract and concrete, such as language, religion, belief, values, norms, symbols, and laws. The concept of symbols is also one of the important elements that reveal organizational culture (Köse, Tetik, Ercan, 2001: 219).

Many symbols that seem insignificant at first glance can carry very powerful meanings for organizations and management. Physical symbols in organizations represent the underlying values, assumptions, philosophies, and expectations of organizational life, and also influence behavior by revealing internalized values and norms.

Another function is to facilitate understanding the emotions, cognition, and behavior of organizational members by increasing member communication within organizational life (Rafaeli, Worline, 1999: 3-4).

Just as expressions are effective in language, every physical symbol that is "visible," such as emblems, flags, clothing, colors, architectural designs, and protocol arrangements, also has meaning in organizations and states, and it can be said that it has a great impact on the community it addresses. This study will examine the effects of symbols, which are quite important for institutions, on organizational culture and management. It is a fact that symbols, which have begun to be used more effectively, especially with the widespread use of mass media, appear in every area of our lives and are a subject that needs to be addressed (Rafaeli, Worline, 1999: 2).

Symbols

When the concept of symbol is examined in the literature, it becomes clear that it has been defined in different ways across various disciplines. Some of these definitions are as follows:

“A symbol is the form of expression of the inexplicable” (Kılıç, 1995, p. 56).

“Symbols are concrete objects or signs that make perceptible those things that cannot be perceived directly through the senses” (Temren, 1995, p. 88).

Historically, symbols were predominantly used to communicate religious, mythological, and mystical beliefs. Over time, with the development of different forms of art, symbols became significant elements that added deeper layers of meaning to artistic works. Beyond this, the alphabet and the language produced through its pronunciation represent one of the most widespread forms of symbolic use. Language, in this sense, serves as a primary means through which thoughts and emotions in the human mind are expressed (Gök & Kutlu, 2005, p. 268). Symbols are also frequently encountered in daily life through language and ordinary communication. Moreover, they can be described as a means of communication commonly used in advertisements, politics, religious and historical works, documents, works of art, poems, historical figures, and many other fields (Salt, 2006, p. 6).

Symbols are highly effective in representing people, events, or objects; however, they may be interpreted differently across regions, cultures, and communities. In this respect, it can be argued that many communities develop their own symbolic language through the meanings they attribute to people, objects, and events. This symbolic language is commonly referred to as “symbolism” (Kesken Nazlı, 2016, p. 706). In other words, the real meaning of a symbol and what it signifies for an individual are closely associated with that individual’s level of perception and interpretation (Ersoy, 2007, p. 11).

Symbols are also closely connected with social values and norms. From the perspective of management and organization studies, symbols carry significant meanings and transmit various messages to employees, managers, and target audiences (Sağlam Arı, 2014, p. 18). The physical symbols used by organizations have the capacity to reflect and communicate many organizational elements, including culture, purpose, and ideology. Therefore, it can be stated that every organization or community possesses its own distinctive symbols. The ideology, values, and character of an organization play a decisive role in the formation of symbols, which constitute one of the fundamental components of organizational culture (Kesken Nazlı, 2016, p. 708).

Symbols may be regarded as the visible face and vital indicators of organizations. The meanings attributed to symbols within organizations are closely related to cultural and social interactions. In an organizational context, a symbol can be defined as a sign experienced through the senses, used by organizational members to produce meaning, and perceived through visual, auditory, tactile, or olfactory forms. Symbols are experienced as real phenomena and have tangible effects on organizational life. For example, an organization’s spatial order, physical appearance, and clothing practices may serve as strong indicators of organizational dynamics. In brief, symbols include not only the physical arrangement of an organization and the objects within that arrangement, but also the meanings and experiences that organizational members attach to them (Rafaeli & Worline, 1999, p. 5).

Organizational Culture

The concept of culture is a phenomenon that exists in every society without exception, and every society has its own unique culture. Culture can vary from nation to nation, and even within the cities and villages of the same country; for example, each region has its own regional dishes, songs, customs, and values. In fact, it can be said that culture and society are an inseparable whole, and culture is also one of the characteristics that distinguish societies from each other (Köse, Tetik, Ercan, 2001: 220). Based on this conclusion, it can be said that since organizations are composed of members who carry the characteristics of the society and culture in which they exist, every organization can be said to have a different culture (Köse, Tetik, Ercan, 2001: 220). Organizations, being social systems, are in constant interaction with the external environment. In fact, interaction with the

external environment is quite important for the sustainability of an organization. If there is anything as important as sustainability for an organization, it is maintaining its structural integrity. For all of this, the values determined by the organization must be compatible with the changing internal and external environment (Özdevecioğlu, 1995: 120).

Organizational culture generally consists of the traditions, understandings, and norms adopted by the members of the organization (Kırım, 1998: 58). Organizational culture, which is one of the important factors in ensuring harmony within the organization, also acts as a glue that holds together factors such as values, norms, and policies (Şahin, 2010: 24).

For the organization, it is very important to see the support of its members and for the members to be in harmony in line with the goals it has determined. When these conditions are met, it can be clearly seen that effectiveness and efficiency also increase. The adoption of the organizational culture by individuals in the organization is advantageous for the organization in every aspect. Even if each member of the organization comes from different cultural structures, as long as the manager in the organization can bring all members together on a common ground, in the culture, it is a fact that there will be many benefits such as commitment to the organization and productivity (Köse, Tetik, Ercan, 2001: 222).

Organizational culture, although considered holistically within certain boundaries and factors, can be said to have an unlimited structure encompassing many things. Organizational culture is a structure composed of many elements such as symbols, language, ideology, and beliefs. In fact, many researchers consider culture as a system of symbols and ideology, and focus on the meanings underlying these symbols (Alvesson, Berg, 1992: 96). From an organizational perspective, culture can be explained as the sharing of values and cultures by organization members over time, reaching a common ground, and being symbolized by everyone. Organizational culture is also closely related to the values passed down from the past to the present, team spirit, the organization's traditions, its adopted ideology, philosophy, and personality. Although the organizational structure may change, culture is a phenomenon that can be continued through transmission (Kesken Nazlı, 2016: 714).

It is crucial for the success of the organization that its members adopt the organizational culture, remain committed to it, and ensure its continuity. Similarly, the understanding of the elements and symbols that constitute organizational culture by both organizational members and the environment in which the organization is influential provides a significant strategic advantage to the organization. Adopting and emphasizing organizational culture, and formulating mission and strategies accordingly, can be considered a move that strengthens the foundations of the organization (Kesken Nazlı, 2016: 715).

Physical Symbols In Organizations

Although various abstract and concrete elements may be regarded as symbols within organizations, concrete symbols tend to attract greater attention due to their visible and tangible nature. Physical symbols, which are primarily based on visual representation, consist of objects, artefacts, and spatial elements found within the organization. When the criteria for selecting these concrete elements, their intended purposes, the ways in which they represent the organization, and the extent to which they influence organizational processes are identified, it becomes easier to understand the structure and culture of the organization (Svabo, 2007, p. 50).

A wide range of elements, including logos, clothing, equipment, objects, and the physical location of the organization, can be considered physical symbols. These symbols provide both organizational members and the external environment with important information about the organization. For organizations, physical symbols function as significant instruments through which they present themselves to internal and external audiences. From an organizational and institutional perspective, elements such as institutional identity, the quality of products or services, organizational ideology, and the characteristics that distinguish an institution from others can be communicated to the target audience through physical symbols.

Therefore, in terms of organizational culture, physical symbols may influence the loyalty and commitment of organizational members. From the perspective of the organization's external environment, they may also shape customer perceptions and behavior. In this sense, physical symbols can contribute to defining an organization's strengths and weaknesses, its competitive position, the perception of its target audience, its corporate image, and the quality of its internal communication (Nur Dündar, 2013, pp. 95–96).

The Role and Significance of Symbols in Organizational Culture

The concept of symbol has the ability to give people ideas and create perceptions about many issues such as an organization's ideology, values, character, vision, and mission. The concepts of symbol and symbolism are

concepts that emerge together with organizational culture and are quite important in terms of interpreting events, explaining issues, and giving meaning to behaviors within the organization (Turner, 1986:101-115). The concept of "organizational symbolism," as an effective way to reveal the subconscious feelings, emotions, and images of individuals in the organization, is also frequently used in the literature as the organization's perspective. Symbols also have the characteristic of revealing the underlying structure, values, and ideology of the organization (Kesken Nazlı, 2016: 708). While visual, tangible elements such as logos and emblems are usually highlighted when talking about an organization's symbol, many things can be considered as symbols, for example; Elements such as organizational training, orientation programs, uniforms, meals, rituals, and common jokes within the organization reveal the character of the organization, distinguishing it from others. In a sense, symbols are the clearly observable aspects of organizations (Dandridge, Mitroff, Joyce, 1980: 20). In other words, from an organizational perspective, everything can be considered a symbol; what matters is that the symbol evokes a broader or different "phenomenon" than what is visible, and that this means something to the organization. Even small details such as room arrangement or the color of furniture can carry symbolic meaning (Vilnai, Rafaeli, 2004).

Symbols also have the potential to shape organizational strategies and motivate the organization due to the meanings they carry; in short, symbols can be said to be the "building blocks" of cultures (Pondy, Frost, Morgan, and Dandridge, 1983). Symbols have a highly developed representational capacity; they bring together concrete and abstract concepts and have a great influence on people's perception and communication styles (Alvesson, Berg, 1992: 86). Symbols are used in organizations as a means of cohesion, control, influence, and change, as well as affecting the behavior and energy of organizational members. In addition to preserving the existing system and influencing future plans, they can also give employees an idea about the organization's past (Şişman, 2007: 96).

Symbols, which have the ability to provide information about organizations, can most easily reveal the experiences, character, and structure of organizational life that are seen, felt, and heard. While they bring many benefits such as a common consciousness, understanding of values, belonging, and commitment to the organization among organizational members, they also make the organization more understandable for both members and people outside the organization (Pondy, Frost, Morgan, 1983: 13).

When viewed in terms of the meanings they evoke and their effects on organizational members, symbols also have a great influence on practices and developments within the organization. For example, certain messages and meanings can be conveyed to organization members through language, which can be used as a symbolic tool. Even using the word "team member" instead of "personnel" in an organization can have a positive impact on employees, increasing their motivation, and can convey to the external environment that the organization values teamwork (Kesken Nazlı, 2016: 708-709).

The Importance of Symbols from A Management Perspective

Symbols provide individuals with insights into various dimensions of an organization, including its status, position, reputation, sense of justice, team spirit, communication patterns, and organizational structure. In this respect, symbols may play a decisive role in organizational processes and events. They may influence organizational management either directly or indirectly. In some cases, organizations determine their policies and develop strategic courses of action based on the perceptions they aim to create in the minds of individuals through symbols (Fuller, 2008, p. 170).

An organization may project an image of its organizational structure and management style to the external environment through various physical and symbolic elements, such as office layout, objects used within the workplace, employees' clothing, and their general appearance. Symbols may also shape members' imagination in areas such as creativity and decision-making. While emphasizing similarities within organizations may create unity and cohesion, excessive emphasis on differences may lead to conflict and disorder (Pratt & Rafaeli, 2001, pp. 107-110).

When examined carefully, symbols can convey significant messages to managers in terms of achieving effective management. What is essential is that managers recognize these symbols and act with an awareness of their meanings in order to analyze the relationship between the organization and its members. For instance, organizational members may wear institutional clothing because they feel a sense of belonging, believe in the organization's values and principles, and attribute meaning to this practice. Conversely, they may wear the same clothing because they fear possible sanctions if they do not comply. In both cases, although the same symbol is used, the meaning attributed to that symbol by organizational members differs. Therefore, managers should be aware of what a symbol signifies for both the organization and its environment, and they should select and use symbols appropriately. Accordingly, the underlying meanings of symbols should not be overlooked when formulating organizational policies (Pratt & Rafaeli, 2001, pp. 120-122).

When used appropriately, symbols can provide numerous benefits for organizations. For example, clothing practices, workplace design, and the objects used in the work environment can transmit important messages to employees. These symbolic elements may contribute to employee performance, motivation, and empowerment, thereby supporting organizational success (Sağlam Ari, 2014, p. 14). Symbols also play an important role in representing status and identity within the organization.

Understanding the deeper meanings of symbols can help managers interpret and explain intra-organizational relationships more effectively. To understand the language of symbols is to understand the messages they convey; however, these messages are not always explicit and may sometimes give rise to misunderstandings. Since symbols have a strong influence on organizational structure and processes, they also function as important instruments in shaping social relations and intra-organizational interaction (Pratt & Rafaeli, 2001, pp. 93–102).

Problems arising from status differences, which constitute an important issue in organizational life, may also be addressed through the conscious use of symbols. Seemingly minor practices, such as standardized dress codes and the creation of a more uniform work environment, may foster a sense of equal status among organizational members and increase their commitment to the organization. In this way, the negative effects of status differences and perceived inequality, which are common problems in organizations, may be reduced or prevented (Pratt & Rafaeli, 2001, pp. 114–116).

Conclusion

Symbols perform several significant functions within organizations. Among these functions are creating emotional effects on organizational members, reflecting organizational values, strengthening collective identity, and making organizational culture more visible and understandable. Symbols may influence the emotional responses, interpretations, and behaviors of organizational members. They may also enable individuals to communicate more easily about ambiguous, sensitive, or uncomfortable issues within the organization. In this respect, symbols possess the capacity to bring organizational members together around shared meanings, common values, and a collective vision (Rafaeli & Worline, 1999, p. 24).

Symbols can also be considered as important sub-components of corporate identity that strengthen the commitment and sense of belonging of organizational members. At the same time, they constitute a valuable analytical element for understanding organizational culture. Various types of symbols may be encountered within organizations. These may include behavioral symbols, such as myths, ceremonies, and rituals; physical symbols, such as logos, objects, spatial arrangements, and clothing; and verbal symbols, such as slogans, stories, narratives, and organizational language. Each of these symbolic forms can convey important information about the organization, including its values, culture, priorities, traditions, power relations, and patterns of internal communication (Kesken Nazlı, 2016, p. 718).

From the perspective of both organizational members and managers, it can be argued that the meanings and messages carried by symbols are highly significant. Accordingly, recognizing the symbols present within an organization and understanding their underlying meanings is closely related to understanding the organization itself. In other words, the effective interpretation and management of symbolic language can facilitate internal communication, reduce uncertainty, prevent misunderstandings, and minimize potential conflicts within the organization (Sağlam Ari, 2014, p. 18). When physical symbols are used consciously and appropriately, they may produce positive outcomes such as strengthening employee empowerment, improving organizational interaction, enhancing motivation, and contributing to higher levels of performance (Sağlam Ari, 2014, p. 21).

In addition, symbols should not be regarded merely as decorative or superficial elements of organizational life. Rather, they should be understood as meaningful instruments that shape perceptions, guide behavior, and contribute to the formation of organizational identity. For this reason, managers should approach symbols strategically and evaluate how they are perceived by both internal and external stakeholders. A symbol that is meaningful and motivating for one group may be interpreted differently by another group. Therefore, the effective use of symbols requires managerial awareness, cultural sensitivity, and a clear understanding of the organizational context.

In conclusion, a careful examination of organizations reveals that symbols are present in many different forms and play an important role in organizational life. What is essential is not merely the existence of symbols, but the ability of managers and organizational members to recognize them and understand the meanings they carry. When used appropriately, symbols have the potential to facilitate organizational functioning, strengthen internal communication, support employee motivation, and contribute to organizational cohesion. Although the meanings of symbols may vary depending on the organization, its members, and the social environment in which it operates, symbols should ideally convey consistent and shared meanings within the organization. In this way, they can contribute to a stronger sense of unity and belonging among members. Furthermore, examining symbols in

relation to the feelings, thoughts, communication patterns, and behaviors of organizational members allows organizational culture to be understood in a deeper and more comprehensive manner. Symbols help reveal not only the visible aspects of an organization but also its hidden assumptions, values, and internal dynamics. Therefore, the study of symbols offers an important perspective for understanding how organizational culture is created, maintained, and transformed over time. From this perspective, symbols should be considered indispensable elements of organizational culture and valuable tools for effective management.

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