

Running Head: INFLUENTIAL SUBCULTURES

Influential Subcultures within Organizations: Diverging Value Alignment in the
Fast-Food Industry

Preface

“Phew, that was a close one!” Dave Thomas thought as his spirit-body began to float back up towards the sky. He had just had a long conversation with Judy, a Wendy’s food-service worker on the brink of throwing in the towel. The repetitive, assembly-line-like food preparation process had nearly driven young Judy mad. Luckily, Dave, being the founder of Wendy’s Old-Fashioned Hamburgers, had been able to quell her anxiety by explaining to her the purpose of the mechanistic structure upheld within the restaurant. He knew that if he hadn’t convinced her to return to work that his organization would lose a hard-working employee. Not only that, the rush of consumers would have overwhelmed the workforce since Judy would not have been there to man the frying station.

“It seems like almost every day I am saving one of my restaurants from calamity due to a worker’s apathetic attitude or a frustrated manager. I think something is wrong,” Dave thought as he continued towards the heavens, “I never wanted the inner-workings of my restaurants to cause so much discontent among the employees.”

When Dave had started the Wendy’s restaurant chain he had the best of intentions. As a result of his extensive work experience in the food-service industry, Dave had cultivated an understanding of how to produce quality food products in an extremely efficient manner. His methods lead to the regular patronage of his establishments. Customer service was an important organizational value – Dave understood that happy and satisfied customers, ones that were served food quickly and exactly to their liking, were more than likely to be repeat patrons. However, Dave was beginning to notice that, especially since his passing, the Wendy’s food-service workers were no longer eager to go above and beyond what was necessary to please the

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customers¹ In fact, it was rare that an individual food-service worker remained in the position for longer than a year. There seemed to be no commitment to the organization by the employees

"I've got to get to the bottom of this," Dave said. "There has got to be an explanation for why the values I started my business with no longer seem to be instilled in those that work there."

Suddenly, Dave had an idea. He stopped his ascension and turned back toward Earth. With a new resolution, he floated away from the spirit world determined to find out where he had gone wrong.

Chapter 1 – The New Kid

It was 10:30AM and, like every Sunday before this one, Judy reported to work at her local Wendy's restaurant. After punching her employee identification number into the time clock, she reported to her manager, Rhonda, for instructions. As usual, Judy was assigned to work at the frying station for the day.

Judy sighed as she tied her apron around her waist. "Another fun-filled day of fry-making. I am such a lucky girl!" Of course, she felt the exact opposite way. The only things helping Judy maintain sanity while working in this position of monotonous fry and nugget production were her opportunities to daydream about her favorite philosophers and sociologists, as well as her impending enrollment at her university of choice. Her recent supernatural encounter had also convinced her to stick-out her employment at Wendy's until she left for college.

It had only been a few minutes into her fry-making cycle before Judy was interrupted by a tap on her shoulder. She turned around to find an unfamiliar face staring back at her. It was a

boy, about sixteen years old, with short blond hair and glasses. He was dressed in standard Wendy's employee garb. For a boy his age he was quite underdeveloped – he was short, thin, and rather pale.

"Can I help you?" Judy asked him.

"Hi Judy, my name is Tommy. Your manager, Rhonda, sent me up here to find you. I'm a new employee here and you are supposed to train me on the fry station"

"How did he know my name?" Judy thought to herself. Rhonda must have told him, she rationalized. Or he had read it from her name tag.

"Okay, Tommy. Welcome to the mind-numbing world of French fry creation," Judy said with a smile. Tommy didn't smile back.

A little put-off by Tommy's serious attitude, Judy began to teach him about the cycle of work involved at the fry station. The task cycle was fairly simple and before long Judy and Tommy were working together filling orders. Judy did the basket filling, dropping, and dumping, while Tommy covered the salting and container stuffing.² "I hate to tell you that this is as good as it gets," Judy said to Tommy. "Sometimes I feel like we are more like parts in a big Wendy's machine than actual employees."³

Judy had to make sure Tommy knew the entire lingo needed in order to interpret an order. For instance, JBC stood for Junior Bacon Cheeseburger, when nuggets are "down" they are in the grease pit, when an order is "up" it is ready to be served, and, of course, lunch rush referred to the surge of customers between 11:00AM and 2:00PM.⁴

Judy also gave Tommy the scoop on the juicy details of the workplace – which managers were "cool" and which ones were less so, how the employee at the burger-flipping station used

to date the girl that works at the front counter, and how one former employee was fired for not keeping up with the pace of the orders.⁵

An important story, Tommy learned, was the tale of the County Health Inspector. Judy explained that that particular official could show up to the restaurant at any time to inspect and rate the cleanliness and sanitary conditions of the facility. Years ago, this Wendy's restaurant received a very low score from the inspector. Because of that incident, a rule was created that every station was to be wiped down with a wet towel every 90 seconds. A timer was installed in the kitchen that rang a bell every 90 seconds in order to signify when the cleaning should occur.⁶ That wasn't the only rule, in fact, there were many official and unofficial rules that the food-service employees obeyed.

"Around here," Judy explained, "No matter what you do, don't ever fall short in order production. Be sure to never wear your visor backwards, and always be on time. Also, if a manager tells you to do something you must do it. They like for us to always be reminded that they're the boss. Be sure to follow all of the criteria on the performance checklist. If you do all that you'll survive here."^{7 8}

Chapter 2 – A Divergence

The lunch rush had finally passed, and Judy and Tommy were able to work at a slower pace. Tommy began to look around the room. He noticed there were a few plaques on the wall, all of them for having outstanding customer service for various years. Nutrition information was also posted on the wall, but it was hidden behind the display used to show off the kids-meal toys. There were also pictures on the wall depicting baskets of flowers and ocean waves – all were very mundane and indiscriminate. However, one picture stood out from all the rest, the huge

photo of Dave Thomas, the founder of Wendy's, smiling, holding a tray with a hamburger and French fries on it. This wall-sized photo was right beside the front counter above the ketchup and plastic silverware island.⁹ The tables were small and made of steel and plastic, while the chairs were wooden and traditional looking, like they were taken from someone's kitchen at home. The garbage cans were large and industrial sized, with a black "Thank You" engraved on them, and they were surrounded by pots of fake flowers.¹⁰

Another thing Tommy noticed was how there were many distinctions between the management, the food-service employees, and the customers. The managers wore red uniforms with golden name-tags, while the food-service workers wore blue uniforms and visors. This made it very clear who was in control and who was subordinate. The customers were distinguished by their separation from the kitchen, the counter at the front was essentially a barrier between the employees and the patrons. The patrons had to obtain their own silverware and ketchup from the condiment island. Patrons were also expected to clean up after themselves and empty their garbage into the rubbish bins.¹¹

The young burger-flipping employee, Fred, turned to Judy and held up a gnarled piece of meat, one that had been left on the grill for too long. With a smirk he said, "It's way better than fast-food, it's Wendy's!"

Judy giggled at the joke. She replied, "Don't let Rhonda hear you say that or else you'll be fried, just like that hamburger!" Tommy didn't laugh.¹²

"Lighten up, Tom, we're just kidding around. It's our coping mechanism. Our managers act like Wendy's is such a great organization with a respectable workplace and delicious food, but if they took a second look they would realize that they work us like slaves and the food here is actually pretty disgusting. The whole situation is laughable, don't you think?"¹³

"I guess I'm just trying to process all of this information," Tommy said. "I came to work here because I thought this business was about providing quality service and creating an excellent experience for the customers. You both don't seem to advocate those principles."

"Uh, yeah, 'excellent customer service' may be written on those plaques hanging on the wall," John explained to Tommy, "If you can't tell, we're more about getting paid and getting out of this town. Trust me, when I was a little kid I did not dream of growing up to become a professional burger-flipper!"¹⁴

"Those supposed 'award' plaques on the wall are just for show, Tommy," Judy said, "For excellent customer service, for passing health inspections, for raising the most money for the Dave Thomas Foundation - it's all to convince the customers that they can trust us and should feel good about choosing our restaurant. I don't even know what the Dave Thomas Foundation is!"¹⁵

Tommy shook his head. "I guess I thought that Wendy's was a very reputable place to work. I thought this workforce would be concerned with upholding excellent customer service standards, but I see you are all more cynical towards your managers and your position within the organization than concerned about the people who dine here." Tommy began to walk towards the backdoor.

Judy looked at John. "Oh no, we scared him away!" she said, "I better go talk to him."

Judy ran to the backdoor to catch up to the disheartened employee.

"Where is she going now?" Rhonda the manager asked John.

"She went to get Tommy, he needed a break," John answered.

With a confused expression, Rhonda replied, "Who's Tommy?"

Chapter 3 - Understanding

"Tommy!" Judy cried out as she bolted out of the building. "Come back!"

Tommy was nowhere to be found. Dismayed, Judy started to head back inside. Before she could get to the door, a gust of wind whirled around her. A familiar cloud appeared and out of the mist materialized a figure of a husky man with silver hair and wiry glasses. It was the spirit of Dave Thomas.

"Dave, is that you?" Judy said.

"Yes, Judy, it is I, Dave Thomas."

Relieved, Judy said, "I'm glad you're here. I was training a new employee and he suddenly just walked off..."

Before she could say another word, Dave interrupted, "Judy, it was me the whole time. I materialized into a human and called myself Tommy. I came into your restaurant in order to observe more closely why my food-service workers seemed to be so apathetic and uncommitted."

Positively dumbfounded, Judy exclaimed, "I should have known!" She continued, "I'm so sorry, Dave. I wasn't on my best behavior in there."

"No, Judy, it's alright. I think I see now why you were so frustrated and walked away from the fry station yesterday. As Tommy, I was fully immersed in your work experience¹⁶ and really got a chance to see the establishment in a whole new light. From the outside, Wendy's seems like a family-friendly, traditional restaurant whose employees uphold the highest standard of customer service. However, that is not what the general workforce values at all."

"Dave, most people come to work at Wendy's because they need a job to make money, not because they admire the organization and want to work here forever," Judy said, "I'm sorry to be brutally honest, but it's the truth."

"Yes, I understand," Dave replied. "However, I would like to make efforts to change that. For starters, I realized that you food-service workers have little knowledge about the organization and its history."

Judy knew that Dave was referencing her comment about not knowing what the Dave Thomas Foundation was. "Can you tell me more about your foundation?" Judy asked.

Dave explained, "My photo may be obnoxiously plastered on the wall, but it seems like none of you know much about me and the history of Wendy's. You may not know this, Judy, but I was adopted. If I had remained in foster care, I may never have been able to pursue my dream of starting my own restaurant. Because I was adopted by such a loving and supportive family, I was able to go out into the world and achieve my dream. I created the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption in 1992 so I could help other children find a loving family to call their own (Smith, 2008). The contributions your restaurant made to my charity really helped make a difference in many children's lives."

"See, knowing this story could have made our efforts much more meaningful. It would have probably helped to align my values as an employee with those of the Wendy's organization. If workers knew your background and what you stand for, then I think they would be more likely to commit to serving the customers and the organization to the highest degree."¹⁷

"Even so, I'm realizing that, if I want to bolster the value of customer service amongst all the workers, actions will need to be taken to make sure the message can have meaning for each individual employee. That way, they all would be unified by this common goal."¹⁸

What should
I do take?

"Well, having this conversation with you has inspired me to improve my customer service efforts. It's also allowed me to reflect on the influence my disparagement towards my managers and the way it may affect others," Judy said. "Us food-service workers had become a subculture separate from the outward culture of the restaurant, a subculture that undermined the management team and only cared about receiving a paycheck. I know that our managers are committed to the customer service experience, but sometimes it's hard to realize that when I am locked in the cycle of the fry station."

Dave thought for a moment before responding, "Judy, I hope you can find it in yourself to continue on with your food-service position. I am now convinced that it is more than just the repetitive cycle of the stations, the weak organizational culture is also a factor that adds to your apathy and resentment. I tried to portray Wendy's as having a strong and purposeful cultural image, but it is time to face the facts. The organization puts up a façade of strong organizational culture, but inside the culture is actually quite weak. I've learned a lot today."

"I'm going to do my best to help the culture grow stronger, Dave, you'll see," Judy said.

"I must go now, Judy. Thank you for taking the time to see my point of view. Until we meet again." With that, the spirit floated towards the sky, fading away as it continued to ascend.

"Goodbye, Dave," Judy thought to herself and she headed back inside the restaurant.

¹ Here, Dave acknowledges that the core value of excellent customer service he had indoctrinated into his business was no longer the core value upheld by the food-service workers at Wendy's. "A critical time in any organization is the transition after the death or retirement of a hero. If new heroes fail to emerge over time, however, the organization may drift from its values and history" (Driskill & Brenton, 2005, p. 47). One reason for the change in core values of the employees in the organization could be attributed to this lack of hero presence within the Wendy's restaurant.

² "Rituals are relatively simple combinations of repetitive behaviors, often carried out without much thought, and often relatively brief in duration. These displays express to onlookers certain physical, attitudinal, or status conditions" (Trice & Beyer, 1993, p. 107). With this in mind, the fry-making process can be considered a type of

ritual found within the Wendy's restaurant. Not only is this ritual repetitive and performed mindlessly, it also signifies the status of the food-service worker versus someone in a management position. In learning of the cycle of fry-production, Tommy is also absorbing from the "established occupational community" the shared "occupational practices" of the workforce. Later, the employees will also transmit to him the vocabularies and values upheld within this particular work environment (Knowlton, 1996).

³ Metaphors give groups an "understanding and an experiencing of one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5). Here, Judy references a metaphor which parallels the food-service workers with machine components. This naturally occurring metaphor gives insight into the monotonous but demanding characteristics of the Wendy's workplace. It also reflects the rules the food-service workers must obey - much like internal components of a machine, the workers must constantly produce a uniform product in order to maintain the functionality of the organization (Driskill & Brenton, 2005, p. 46).

⁴ It is here that Judy explains to the new employee, Tommy, the jargon the food-service employees utilize. "Jargon is specialized language used by those in the same work and way of life; it must be learned and sets members apart from nonmembers" (Trice & Beyer, 1993, p. 91). By introducing Tommy to this jargon, Judy is transitioning him from a non-member status to a member of the organization. This is an example of language as a cultural form.

⁵ Stories are a "primary form of socialization" (Driskill & Brenton, 2005, p. 44) for new employees entering an organization. Since Judy is training Tommy in the role of the food-service worker, she tells him these stories in order to help integrate him into the workforce as well as help him get a better understanding of the rules and expectations of the employees. Some of the stories Judy tells could be considered gossip, which also further integrates Tommy by reinforcing the cultural values of the food-service employees' workplace (Trice & Beyer, 1993, p. 95).

⁶ This particular story Judy tells to Tommy is used as a cautionary tale in order for him to accept and understand the importance of maintaining cleanliness in the workplace. It was this story that led to the rule that calls for cleaning every 90 seconds. This repetitive cleaning process could be considered a type of ritual the employees follow. This is an example of an incident leading to the creation of a rule which thereby generates an organizational ritual. This rule and ritual practice is an observable externality of the organization. From this behavior, it could be interpreted that the appearance of cleanliness is a core value of this Wendy's restaurant.

⁷ By sharing these success "tips" with Tommy, Judy also makes a clear distinction between the management team and the subculture of the food-service employees. "Organization members interpret the behavior and language of others through their own cultural biases. Each member's (or subsystem's) set of beliefs, values, and assumptions becomes their unquestioned 'reality'" (Roelofs, 2005). Judy is communicating to Tommy the socially constructed reality of the food-service employees - that the rules set by management should be followed but with a false respect for their authority position. Judy is saying that following the management's policies is for maintaining employment status only, not out of reverence or agreement with those rules and regulations.

⁸ Morgan (2006) would further explain the food-service worker's social construction of reality in regards to their interactions with management by noting, "reality construction... allows people to see and understand particular events, actions, objects, utterances, or situations in distinctive ways. These patterns of understanding help us to cope with the situations being encountered and also provide a basis for making our own behavior sensible and meaningful" (p. 134).

⁹ Heroes are meant to reveal much about the cultural values of an organization (Driskill & Brenton, 2005, p. 47). In the case of Dave Thomas, he embodies the value of providing excellent customer service in his business establishments. The size of Dave Thomas's photo is a symbolic cultural form meant to indicate his presence and influence within the organization, but it is clear from Tommy's experience so far that Dave's commitment to customer service is not shared by the food-service employees.

¹⁰ Here, Tommy describes many things that are symbolic within the Wendy's restaurant. The tables are small and industrial, making it uncomfortable for an extended stay, but are balanced by the homely looking chairs. This sends a message of both fugacity and tradition to the customer which influences their dining experience. Also, the ketchup and silverware island as well as the "Thank You" garbage cans indicate that customers must get their own

condiments and throw away their own trash. This helps define the boundaries of the Wendy's restaurant customer service.

¹¹ At this point, Tommy is further observing the symbols within the restaurant that distinguish various groups. Often, uniforms are a way for organizations to "signify what part the wearer is playing and what it signifies" within the business (Trice & Beyer, 1993, p. 89). At Wendy's, uniforms serve as a summarizing symbol to show who is in a management position and who is a food-service employee. It should be noted that "organizations with greater status distinctions thereby express ideologies supporting hierarchy and bureaucracy" (Trice & Beyer, 1993, p. 89). This notion holds true, as this author's previous work demonstrated the bureaucratic nature of the Wendy's organization. Tommy's further observations also show the symbols which distinguish employees from customers.

¹² Humor is a cultural form of language that, in this case, is used to serve several purposes. "Humor is an expression of the culture and is intimately tied into its values and norms" (Trice & Beyer, 1993, p. 94). This particular joke expresses what the employees do not value, which is respect or pride for the organization. Here, humor is also used to "make the almost intolerable seem more tolerable" (Trice & Beyer, 1993, p. 95). By joking, the food-service employees are finding ways to cope with their undesirable working conditions.

¹³ Judy is trying to explain the meaning of the joke that was made to the newcomer, Tommy. This gives insight into the sense-making processes used by the food-service employees to interpret their working situation and their relationship with their managers. Organizational culture is rarely defined by management. Rather, it is the result of the sense-making of the regular employees. The "values and views of leaders are not culturally defining unless members of the organization share the values and interpretations of management" (Driskill & Brenton, 2005, p. 89).

¹⁴ John makes it devastatingly clear that the food-service workers do not internalize core organizational values of excellent customer service as Dave Thomas had originally instilled in the mission of the Wendy's organization. Rather, the employees value their paycheck and doing what is minimally necessary to remain employed. Since the passing of Dave Thomas, a hero within the organization, the core values of the employees have diverged from what was originally intended, perhaps resulting from a lack of cultural unity propagated by the bureaucratic structure of the Wendy's workplace.

¹⁵ Judy's remarks reflect the weak organizational culture in this Wendy's restaurant. She and the other food-service workers have core values that differ from those with which the organization was founded. What's more, she is attempting to socialize Tommy in a way that would further decrease the strength of the culture. A negative culture is detrimental to organizational success. A negative culture could be considered "toxic" to an organization because it taints the potential for growth and unity of the workforce (Peters & Waterman, 1982).

¹⁶ By taking the form of the new employee, Tommy, Dave was able to study his organization in the role of the "complete participant." In this role, Dave could be fully immersed in the organization without letting the other employees know that he is actually observing the culture of the restaurant. (Driskill & Brenton, 2005, p. 76)

¹⁷ The stories of Dave Thomas and the establishment, development, and charitable aims of his restaurant chain are narrative cultural forms of the Wendy's organization. This story imparts "moral lessons that reinforce cultural ideologies and values" (Trice & Beyer, 1993, p. 103). Narratives are one way to explain the origins of an organization and promote unified core values. If Judy and the other employees had been made aware of this story, the culture of the organization may have been able to grow stronger.

¹⁸ For this author, what Dave says here is a very critical realization to which organizations should adhere. Morgan would confer that "culture has a holographic quality. Characteristics of the whole must be encoded in all the parts" (2006, p. 138). In order to facilitate change in the organizational culture of Wendy's, leaders will have to find ways to create and define "core meanings that people (can) own and share" (Morgan, 2006, p. 138) for the entire workforce. This is especially important for those, like Judy, John, and Tommy, who work in less than desirable conditions and who also have direct contact with customers.

JAS

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