



LEADERSHIP IN CONSTRUCTING AND REPRODUCING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE THROUGH SYMBOLS AND RITUALS

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Abstract

This article develops a normative account of leadership as the primary agent in constructing and sustaining organizational culture. Culture is treated as a shared pattern of meaning that stabilizes expectations, guides conduct, and defines what counts as legitimate success. Leaders shape culture through symbolic interaction, where everyday choices, language, and attention cues become moral signals that members interpret and repeat. Role modeling strengthens this process by aligning stated values with observable behavior, especially under pressure, conflict, and uncertainty. Ritual communication, such as recurring meetings, recognition practices, and onboarding ceremonies, reproduces collective memory and identity by reiterating narratives and distributing status. A conceptual framework is proposed linking three mechanisms: symbolic signals, exemplary conduct, and ritualized talk. The framework emphasizes procedural fairness, explainable decisions, and respectful boundaries as conditions for durable legitimacy. It argues that culture cannot be reduced to formal statements, because members learn values through repeated encounters with leadership conduct. The paper concludes that leaders sustain culture by managing interpretation, protecting voice, and maintaining coherent rituals that connect words with follow through.

Keywords: leadership, organizational culture, symbolic interaction, role modeling, ritual communication, legitimacy, procedural fairness.

Introduction

Organizational culture is often understood as a pattern of meaning that makes members feel they know what is appropriate, what is valuable, and what is considered successful. This pattern of meaning is present through working language, meeting habits, punctuality standards, ways of giving awards, and ways of interpreting failure. Culture does not appear as a transferable object; rather, it is formed from the repetition of actions considered reasonable. In organizational life, this repetition creates a sense of stability and common direction, while simultaneously establishing boundaries for behavior considered deviant (Selart & Schei, 2011). These habits ultimately determine how everyone in the office feels involved and enthusiastic in carrying out their work (Mardikaningsih & Darmawan, 2022; Putra & Mardikaningsih, 2022). For this reason, culture has a binding power, although it is rarely stated as a written rule. New members usually learn the culture through small cues, such as how leaders respond to questions, how seniors evaluate initiatives, and how conflict is discussed. The work atmosphere built from these daily interactions is also a key factor for workers to feel comfortable and satisfied with their work results (Radjawane & Darmawan, 2022; Sinambela & Lestari, 2022). From these experiences, beliefs are formed about things that are safe to do and things that should be avoided. Culture eventually works as a social disciplinary mechanism that directs collective energy toward specific goals. However, this mechanism is not neutral, as it always includes moral judgments and priorities chosen by the organization.

Leadership becomes a primary concern when culture is understood as a result of socially constructed repetitions. Leaders exist as figures whose words and actions carry higher weight compared to other members. This weight stems from formal authority, but also from the ability to direct meaning. In many organizations, leaders determine what is worth discussing, what is considered urgent, and what language is used to evaluate people (Xenikou, 2022). Furthermore, a good leader must know when to adjust their style so that changes within the team can run smoothly and successfully (Mardikaningsih & Darmawan, 2022). Thus, leadership works through the production of shared interpretation, not merely through instructions. When a leader praises a certain behavior, the organization learns that the behavior is valuable. When a leader

remains silent toward another behavior, the organization may read that silence as justification. Even small choices, such as who is called upon to speak and who is ignored, shape the map of social status. This is crucial because the way leaders treat their members will directly impact the well-being and productivity of the entire organization (Darmawan et al., 2022). This social status map then influences how people organize themselves, how they convey ideas, and how they negotiate differences. Therefore, understanding organizational culture demands attention to leadership as a source of value affirmation through decisions that appear simple yet repetitive.

Symbolic interaction within an organization explains how daily actions carry messages that transcend their practical functions (Xenikou & Furnham, 2013). The way a leader closes a meeting, chooses words when giving corrections, or responds to mistakes all become symbols read by members as moral cues. The values demonstrated by these leaders are actually a way to change or strengthen the value systems already existing within the group (Rojak et al., 2022). Symbols are not always slogans; they can be gestures, seating arrangements, or the way time is allocated to people. When these symbols are repeated, they form a shared story about the organization for example, stories of courage, caution, or compliance. These stories then help the organization to remain strong and able to survive despite facing various external challenges (Oluwatosin et al., 2023). This shared story then becomes the basis of collective identity. Collective identity influences how members feel pride or fear, how they view competitors, and how they assess customers. Leaders are often at the center of story production because they have access to broad communication stages. However, symbols can also be produced through seemingly spontaneous actions, such as a leader choosing to step down and help with routine work during critical moments. Such actions build symbols of equality or symbols of closeness. Because of this, leadership needs to be understood as a process of symbol formation that guides behavior without always resorting to prohibitions.

Exemplarity is a powerful path in culture formation because organizational members learn through observing behaviors that are granted legitimacy (Fine & Hallett, 2014). An honest and socially responsible leader will create a healthier and more trusted work

environment (Rojak & Darmawan, 2021). Exemplarity works when there is consistency between words and actions. If a leader calls for integrity but violates procedures for personal gain, members capture the message that rules can be negotiated by those in power. If a leader calls for cooperation but rewards only competition, members capture the message that collaboration is merely a slogan. Therefore, the discipline and motivation shown by leaders significantly influence how members improve the quality of their work (Saputra & Darmawan, 2023). Exemplarity is also seen in how leaders manage emotions, for instance, when facing criticism or failure. The way a leader restrains anger, acknowledges limitations, or apologizes shapes the ethical standards of communication. These standards are then followed by middle managers and spread as habits. If this communication and fairness proceed well, the relationship between superiors and subordinates in daily tasks will feel fairer and more open (Gani, 2022). Exemplarity is important because culture is often formed by what is done, not by what is said. Within an organization, observation is continuous, making inconsistencies easy subjects of conversation. These conversations form judgments about the leader's legitimacy. Thus, exemplarity is a symbolic resource that determines whether organizational values become a commitment or remain as rhetoric.

Ritualistic communication refers to communication practices performed repeatedly as affirmations of identity and values (Nordby, 2020). Routine meetings, Monday morning briefings, award ceremonies, and the way new members are welcomed can become rituals. Rituals are binding because they provide structure, produce a sense of togetherness, and repeat the narrative of purpose. Through these rituals, every member can understand how to balance work affairs and personal life according to prevailing norms (Eddine & Darmawan, 2022). In rituals, leaders often act as guardians of meaning who determine the theme, tone, and boundaries. Word choice in rituals is important, as it can normalize the courage to speak or normalize silent compliance. Furthermore, rituals can produce inclusion or exclusion. If a ritual always centers on a specific group, other members feel like spectators. If a ritual provides space for participation, members feel recognized. In the right way, effective leadership through these routine activities will build strong loyalty and professionalism among all employees (Ernawati et al., 2020). Ritualistic

communication can also strengthen discipline, for example, through the affirmation of work standards; however, discipline built through rituals tends to be more accepted because it feels like part of an identity, rather than coercion. Therefore, leadership in rituals needs to be understood as the work of maintaining cohesion while simultaneously organizing a hierarchy of meaning, so that organizational culture can be reproduced stably over time.

Problems regarding leadership and organizational culture center on the tendency to simplify culture as a managerial variable that can be changed through short programs. This simplification ignores that culture is formed from the repetition of symbols, exemplarity, and communication rituals that are often unconscious. We often forget that self-confidence and a strong office culture are the primary capital for someone to work well (Hariani, 2021). When organizations talk about cultural change, attention often falls on formulating official values, while daily practices remain guided by cues given by leaders through small decisions. Consequently, organizations can experience a gap between stated values and practiced values. This gap causes normative confusion for members, as they receive double messages about what is valued. In fact, a combination of healthy culture, appropriate leadership, and fair rewards is greatly needed to maintain high work performance (Ernawati et al., 2022). Normative confusion can produce cynicism, which is the belief that the language of values is merely a tool for legitimacy. Cynicism weakens commitment and reduces trust in leadership. Moreover, the simplification of culture makes organizations less sensitive to the ways culture is reproduced through informal interactions, such as through jokes, styles of correction, or the tolerance of demeaning behavior. In academic discussion, this issue demands a framework that positions the leader as a director of meaning, not merely a structural decision-maker.

The next problem relates to the difficulty of distinguishing between culture as a result of collective action and culture as a result of symbolic dominance from authority. Leaders indeed possess a vast capacity to shape meaning, yet members also negotiate, interpret, and sometimes reject the meanings offered. The tension between leader influence and member agency is often disguised, leading to leadership being glorified as the sole determinant. If leadership is treated as the sole determinant, the discussion

loses its ability to explain why the same symbol can be interpreted differently by different groups. Within an organization, differences in interpretation are influenced by work experience, hierarchical position, and access to information. Leaders are often unaware that rituals intended to build togetherness can be read as control. Leaders may also fail to realize that exemplarity regarded as firmness can be read as intimidation. When differences in interpretation are not addressed, cultural reproduction proceeds through uncertainty and fear rather than through consensus. This issue demands a conceptual discussion on how leadership works through symbols, how symbols are received, and how rituals organize the boundaries of participation.

Most organizations rely on structural changes but forget that culture is maintained through habits of meaning attached to the actions of leaders (Vilas-Boas et al., 2018). This writing is important to demonstrate that exemplarity and communication rituals are not decorations but the center of legitimacy production. The urgency is also linked to the needs of modern organizations to maintain cohesion amidst cross-team work, remote work, and rapid information flows. In such situations, symbols and rituals become binding tools that determine whether members feel they share a common orientation. Without an orderly understanding, organizations are vulnerable to building cultures that appear neat in documents but are fragile in interaction. This writing helps position leadership as ethical work that manages meaning, rather than merely administrative work.

The purpose of this writing is to develop a normative conceptual framework regarding leadership in the formation and preservation of organizational culture. The description aims to explain the symbolic mechanisms, exemplarity, and communication rituals that turn organizational values into social habits. This writing also aims to formulate normative measures regarding message consistency, the legitimacy of actions, and the regularity of rituals as requirements for cultural reproduction. Theoretically, this framework clarifies the relationship between authority and the production of meaning within organizations. Practically, this framework provides a reference for leaders in organizing communication, providing examples, and designing organizational rites that maintain cohesion.

Method

This study utilizes a qualitative literature study to develop a conceptual synthesis regarding leadership and organizational culture, with a focus on symbolic mechanisms, role modeling, and ritual communication. The process emphasizes the mapping of ideas, the categorization of themes, and the arrangement of relationships between concepts into a coherent argumentative flow. Sevilla (1992) emphasizes the importance of orderly research steps, including defining the scope, selecting relevant sources, and ensuring the clarity of operational terms. These principles are applied to structure the boundaries of the discussion, ensuring that the analysis remains centered on leadership actions as the production of meaning, rather than as a mere list of leadership styles. Through this approach, sources are analyzed to discover normative propositions on how symbols, role models, and communication rituals shape relatively stable organizational habits.

The processing of sources is conducted through iterative reading, noting key concepts, and comparing ideas to identify consistencies and conceptual tensions. McBurney (2001) emphasizes that research methods demand clarity of reasoning, the separation of claims from evidence, and caution in drawing conclusions from written materials. These principles are used to distinguish between descriptions of culture, explanations of its formative mechanisms, and normative assessments regarding the quality of leadership. The themes developed include the production of symbols through daily actions, the formation of norms through role modeling, the standardization of identity through rituals, and the reproduction of culture through communication consistency. Each theme is woven into a mutually supporting framework to prevent the discussion from lapsing into general descriptions. Consequently, this qualitative literature study produces a conceptual map that can be used to understand leadership as the work of meaning-making and as the ongoing maintenance of organizational identity.

Result and Discussion

Leadership in the formation of organizational culture can be understood as the work of organizing meaning that directs collective action. Culture

does not stand apart from practice; rather, it attaches to the way people interpret work events. Leaders become the source of reference because they sit at the point where decisions, language, and evaluations converge (Vilas-Boas et al., 2018). Fundamentally, the combination of a strong culture, appropriate leadership, and high commitment is the primary key for an organization to run effectively (Darmawan, 2022). When a leader labels an event as a success or a failure, that labeling becomes an interpretative framework for members. This framework influences emotions, priorities, and the sense of security. Therefore, cultural leadership is not about spreading slogans, but about shaping interpretative habits. Interpretative habits are formed through the repetition of messages and the repetition of aligned actions. If a leader is able to demonstrate good characteristics, then job satisfaction and the work results of their members will increase on their own (Mardikaningsih & Darmawan, 2012). If messages are consistent, members build a belief that the organization is predictable. Predictability is the foundation of trust. Trust facilitates coordination because people do not have to constantly guess what the boss wants. Thus, the leader as a cultural agent works by providing a stable structure of meaning through language, decisions, and responses to surprises.

Symbolic interaction explains why leader actions that appear small can produce large cultural consequences. When a leader chooses to arrive on time, prepares an agenda, and provides space for questions and answers, those actions become symbols of respect for order and participation. Leaders who are willing to listen and act democratically will usually make the work morale of their subordinates much better (Lestari & Putra, 2021). When a leader interrupts or ignores a question, that action becomes a symbol that certain voices are not valued. Symbols shape expectations, and expectations then shape behavior. Members will adapt by reading the symbols that appear most frequently. Within a normative framework, leaders are obliged to understand that symbols are not fully controlled by intent. Symbols are formed by the way actions are received. Therefore, symbolic leadership demands sensitivity to the social impact of decisions (Aslamazishvili et al., 2020). Moreover, in the midst of uncertain conditions, the way a leader carries themselves determines whether the quality of organizational service can be well-maintained (Irfan & Putra, 2021). Such sensitivity is seen in the careful selection of words, managing

turns to speak, and managing emotional expressions. When a leader reprimands with respect, the organization learns that correction is part of learning. When a leader reprimands by shaming, the organization learns that mistakes must be hidden. A culture of hiding mistakes weakens integrity. Thus, symbolic leadership determines whether an organization grows as a space for learning or a space for fear.

Exemplarity becomes the primary mechanism of cultural construction because it unites norms and practices (Janićijević, 2011). Organizational values are often stated in documents, but members judge those values based on the examples they see. When a leader shows openness to criticism, members learn that differences of opinion are acceptable. When a leader is defensive, members learn that it is safe to remain silent. Exemplarity is also evident in how leaders treat rules. We also need to remember that in addition to good examples, the provision of incentives and a healthy office culture will make members increasingly loyal to their organization (Jahroni, Darmawan, Mardikaningsih, & Sinambela, 2021). If a leader demands compliance but makes exceptions for themselves, the organization learns that rules are tools. Within a normative framework, exemplarity demands visible self-discipline. Self-discipline is visible in consistency, such as consistency in giving credit to team work, consistency in respecting deadlines, and consistency in admitting mistakes. The admission of mistakes by a leader is a symbol of accountability. This significantly influences how workers, including those still on contract status, feel valued and remain committed to their tasks (Hariani, 2023). Accountability strengthens legitimacy, because legitimacy is born when authority is willing to be scrutinized. Exemplarity also shapes a culture of justice. When a leader gives promotions or assignments with clear reasons, members learn that decisions can be understood. When reasons are unclear, members fill them with assumptions. Assumptions give rise to rumors and disrupt cohesion. Thus, exemplarity is the most trusted language in an organization.

Ritualistic communication produces culture through regular repetition. Weekly meetings, morning briefings, achievement celebrations, and learning forums are moments where the organization repeats its identity. In rituals, the leader acts as a narrator. Narratives provide order to experience, allowing members to understand why a piece of work is

important. Through these habits, organizations can become more responsive and quickly adapt when facing changing times (Al Hakim, Sigita, & Irfan, 2022). Rituals also establish boundaries, such as boundaries regarding how to speak, how to convey criticism, and how to respect time. If a ritual is led with order and clarity, the organization learns that discipline is a form of respect. If a ritual is chaotic and frequently canceled, the organization learns that commitment can be delayed. Within a normative framework, a good ritual is not merely an event, but a process that affirms principles. These principles are evident in the consistency of themes and the consistency of follow-up actions. Do not forget that a comfortable office atmosphere and the ability of employees to compete also significantly determine how well their daily performance is (Arifin & Mardikaningsih, 2021). Rituals without follow-up produce cynicism. Cynicism destroys the power of the ritual. Therefore, leaders need to maintain the connection between words and actions after the ritual. Furthermore, inclusive rituals provide space for various units to share experiences, ensuring that culture is not monopolized by the center. The inclusivity of rituals facilitates cultural reproduction because members feel they are part of a shared story.

The leader as the primary agent of culture can be understood through the ability to regulate collective attention (Fairholm & Fairholm, 2000). Attention is a social resource that determines what is considered important. Leaders regulate attention through meeting priorities, through issues raised repeatedly, and through the performance metrics mentioned. If a leader emphasizes service quality and respect for customers, the organization tends to direct energy toward the customer experience. If a leader emphasizes speed without mentioning quality, the organization tends to sacrifice caution. Within a normative framework, the regulation of attention must be accompanied by acceptable reasons. Reasons provide legitimacy. Without reasons, priorities appear as personal will. Fluctuating personal will weakens commitment. Additionally, leaders regulate attention through questions. The questions posed by a leader shape what members search for. Questions that demand learning encourage exploration. Questions that demand justification encourage defensiveness. Thus, the style of questioning is a cultural instrument. A leader who is able to regulate attention ethically

will build a culture that is focused and honest, because members understand what is expected and why it is expected.

Culture construction through symbols demands that leaders maintain semiotic consistency, which is the alignment between signs, messages, and actions (Karathanos, 1998). This alignment is important because members read the organization as a system of signs. Logos, slogans, spatial layouts, and work procedures all convey messages. However, the most powerful message is the leader's behavior when facing pressure. When pressure increases, many organizations reveal their true values. If a leader sacrifices fairness for quick results, members learn that fairness is optional. If a leader maintains fair procedures despite difficulties, members learn that principles can be relied upon. Within a normative framework, symbolic leadership requires the ability to resist the temptation of shortcuts. Shortcuts provide quick results, but often destroy trust. Broken trust is difficult to restore because members store a collective memory of value betrayal. Collective memory forms a skeptical culture. Therefore, leaders need to consider the long-term symbolic impact of short-term decisions. Decisions about who is protected, who is blamed, and who is heard will become stories that are retold. Those stories then become the material for cultural reproduction. Thus, the leader shapes culture through the consistency of signs in both normal situations and crisis situations.

Exemplarity also works through the management of moral boundaries, which are the boundaries concerning unacceptable behavior. Moral boundaries are not always written, but they are enforced through the leader's response. If a leader allows demeaning comments, the organization learns that respect can be negotiated. If a leader stops demeaning comments in a firm and respectful manner, the organization learns that dignity is non-negotiable. Within a normative framework, the enforcement of moral boundaries must be consistent so as not to be perceived as selective. Selectivity creates symbolic injustice, because members judge that different standards are applied to different people. Symbolic injustice destroys leadership legitimacy. Furthermore, the enforcement of moral boundaries must be accompanied by explanations, as explanations help members understand the reasoning. Without explanation, boundaries appear as arbitrary prohibitions. Explanation builds cultural rationality. Cultural rationality is necessary so that

members feel that norms are worth following. Thus, exemplarity is not just about showing good behavior, but also about showing how the organization responds to bad behavior. This is in line with the importance of discipline and strong work motivation so that everyone in the office can provide their best performance (Irfan, 2022). The response to violations becomes the most powerful lesson because it demonstrates value priorities in a tangible way.

Ritualistic communication can become a tool for cultural reproduction through the standardization of organizational memory (Demont-Biaggi, 2019). Every organization has founder stories, success stories, and failure stories. These stories are often repeated in specific forums. A careful leader chooses stories that affirm the values they wish to maintain. If a leader repeats stories about cross-unit cooperation, the organization learns to value collaboration. If a leader repeats stories about heroic individuals, the organization learns to glorify personal achievement. Within a normative framework, the choice of stories determines the structure of social rewards. The structure of social rewards influences behavior, as people pursue what is praised. Therefore, leaders need to realize that storytelling rituals are a form of cultural policy. In addition to stories, rituals also include symbols of appreciation such as certificates, public recognition, or opportunities to perform. Public appreciation is a form of status distribution. The distribution of status influences who becomes a point of reference. This reference then becomes a cultural model. Thus, ritualistic communication is a mechanism that channels values into the collective memory and simultaneously into the status system. The way leaders tell stories and provide appreciation is also heavily influenced by their ability to communicate well with fellow coworkers (Hariani & Sigita, 2022). Both of these elements strengthen cultural reproduction because members remember, imitate, and repeat.

Leaders shape culture through the use of language that organizes moral categories (Muktamar, 2023). Words like responsibility, quality, service, and integrity can have different meanings depending on their usage. If a leader uses the word responsibility to demand compliance without support, the word becomes a burden. If a leader uses the word responsibility to affirm fair accountability, the word becomes a source of pride. Within a normative framework, leadership language must maintain

clarity so as not to become vague and manipulative. Vague language provides room for interpretations that benefit those in power. Interpretations that benefit the powerful strengthen inequality. Therefore, leaders need to avoid terms that make it easy to shift blame, such as mentioning "lack of commitment" without a definition. The attitude of a leader who likes to help and serve their team members is actually the main key to making the team work more cohesively and successfully (Irfan & Al Hakim, 2022). Clear definitions help members improve themselves and help the organization assess fairly. Furthermore, leaders shape culture through work metaphors for example, referring to the organization as a family or as an arena of competition. Metaphors shape expectations. The family metaphor can encourage closeness, but it can also suppress criticism. The competition metaphor can drive performance, but it can also sacrifice solidarity. Thus, leaders need to choose language with ethical awareness, as language is the infrastructure of culture.

Organizational culture is reproduced through the mechanism of socialization, which is the process by which new members learn how to act (Stovall, 2005). Leaders influence socialization through orientation design, through who is selected as a mentor, and through initial messages about what is important. Initial messages carry weight because they form first impressions. Within a normative framework, good socialization combines an explanation of values with concrete behavioral examples. If values are conveyed without examples, new members will seek examples from informal behavior. Informal behavior is often more powerful than documents. To ensure that new members feel comfortable and loyal from the start, companies need to provide real support and a good quality work environment (Darmawan & Mardikaningsih, 2021). Therefore, leaders need to ensure that middle managers and mentors understand the values to be maintained and demonstrate them in action. Additionally, socialization needs to provide space for asking questions without fear. Fear shuts down learning and triggers blind imitation. Blind imitation perpetuates bad habits. Thus, leaders shape culture through the way the organization treats ignorance. If ignorance is shamed, the culture becomes defensive. If ignorance is handled with learning, the culture becomes adaptive. Leaders also influence socialization through the enforcement of initial boundaries, such as those regarding communication ethics and

responsibility. Clear initial boundaries reduce confusion and assist in orderly cultural reproduction.

Leadership in preserving culture demands the ability to maintain continuity without becoming stagnant. Culture needs to be stable to provide orientation, yet it also needs to be flexible enough to respond to change. Within a normative framework, continuity means maintaining core values, while flexibility means adjusting practices without betraying those values. Leaders maintain continuity through consistency in symbols, exemplarity, and rites. Leaders maintain flexibility through the ability to interpret values into new situations. For example, the value of service can be translated into digital channels by maintaining response quality and respect. If a leader fails to interpret, culture becomes a museum. A museum culture rejects renewal and triggers frustration. However, if a leader interprets recklessly, core values are lost. Therefore, leaders need to have interpretative discipline the ability to explain why certain adjustments remain faithful to the values. This explanation is important so that members do not feel pulled in erratic directions. Thus, culture preservation is not a passive activity, but an interpretative activity that requires routine communication. Routine communication in the form of rites helps maintain collective emotional stability, so that change is not considered a threat but a part of the organizational journey (Schein, 2010).

Cultural reproduction also depends on systems of rewards and sanctions, which are essentially the organizational moral language. Leaders shape this system through promotion decisions, project assignments, and public recognition. Within a normative framework, rewards must align with stated values. If an organization claims to value collaboration but promotes the most self-prominent individual, members learn that collaboration is merely lip service. The alignment of rewards and values is a prerequisite for credibility. In addition to rewards, sanctions also shape culture. However, culturally effective sanctions are not harsh sanctions, but those that are fair, consistent, and explainable. If sanctions appear selective, the organization builds a culture of fear and cynicism. Leaders also need to distinguish between reasonable mistakes in learning and ethical violations. Learning mistakes require correction and support, while ethical violations require consequences. This distinction maintains a sense of security while upholding moral

boundaries. Thus, reward and sanction systems become tools for cultural reproduction because they link values with tangible social consequences. Leaders who manage these tools ethically will strengthen a culture that can be trusted (Kerr & Slocum, 2005).

Ritualistic communication can fail if it turns into empty routines. Empty routines occur when meetings are held without a clear purpose, when awards are distributed without criteria, or when speeches are always the same without relevance. Within a normative framework, the failure of rituals erodes meaning because members learn that words are not related to actions. This disconnection triggers cynicism. Cynicism is a cultural poison because it turns participation into a formality. Leaders need to ensure that rituals are always connected to real work experiences (Iszatt-White, 2009). That connection can be built through case reflections, acknowledging problems currently being faced, and follow-up commitments that are qualitatively measurable. Follow-up means there are procedural changes, improvements in coordination, or clarifications of priorities. Additionally, rituals must provide space for dialogue, not just monologue. Dialogue helps members feel valued and helps leaders hear diverse interpretations. Listening is important because the symbols sent by the leader can be read differently. Through dialogue, differences in interpretation can be corrected before they become conflict. Thus, well-maintained communication rituals become tools for preserving a living culture, not a displayed culture.

A leader's exemplarity is tested in conflict situations, as conflict reveals value priorities. Conflict can occur between units, between individuals, or between customer demands and organizational capacity. Within a normative framework, leaders who wish to maintain culture need to demonstrate conflict resolution methods that align with values (Gelfand et al., 2012). If organizational values emphasize respect, then the leader must reject demeaning communication styles. If organizational values emphasize fairness, then the leader must ensure all parties are heard. The way a leader facilitates conflict becomes a model for other managers. This model is then reproduced as a habit. Leaders also need to resist the tendency to take shortcuts by blaming the weaker party. Blaming the weaker party might solve the problem quickly, but it destroys trust. Broken trust will decrease the courage to speak up. When the courage to speak up

decreases, small problems do not surface. Small problems that do not surface grow into large problems. Thus, exemplarity in conflict is a cultural investment. It maintains openness and a sense of security, so that cultural reproduction proceeds through learning rather than through fear. The leader becomes the primary agent because they determine the ethical standards within differences.

Symbolic interaction also occurs through spatial layout and access arrangements, including access to information. Leaders determine who participates in specific meetings, who receives updates, and who is given the opportunity to present. These access decisions are status symbols. Within a normative framework, access arrangements must be fair and understandable so as not to produce an exclusive culture. An exclusive culture concentrates information within the leader's inner circle, causing the rest of the organization to operate based on guesswork. Guesswork breeds rumors. Rumors damage coordination. Therefore, leaders need to build a culture of proportional transparency openness that maintains legitimate confidentiality while avoiding unnecessary secrecy (Bernstein, 2012). Additionally, physical spatial layouts, such as doors that are always closed or workspaces that isolate leaders to an extreme degree, also become symbols. Symbols of distance can be useful for focus, but they can also be read as unavailability. Leaders need to balance symbols of distance with symbols of access, such as consultation hours or Q&A forums. Thus, a culture of participation is not born from intent alone, but from an access design that facilitates voices reaching the top. Leaders shape culture through access design because access determines who feels they have the right to speak.

Cultural preservation also depends on how the organization manages personnel changes, especially leadership succession. Leadership transitions are vulnerable moments because symbols and rites can change. Within a normative framework, a new leader needs to understand that initial actions shape significant interpretations. If a new leader immediately replaces rites without explanation, members may interpret that history is not valued. However, if a new leader maintains everything without reflection, the organization may remain stuck in irrelevant habits. Therefore, cultural transitions require communication that explains what is being maintained and what is being adjusted, along with the moral and

operational reasons (Canterino et al., 2020). Reasoning is important so that adjustments are not perceived as personal taste. Furthermore, a new leader needs to demonstrate exemplarity that aligns with core values. Initial exemplarity serves as an indicator of whether change will damage or strengthen the culture. Thus, preserving culture through transition requires symbol management. Symbol management includes respect for important rituals, recognition of past contributions, and the establishment of new rites that answer current needs. All of this affirms that the leader is the primary agent of reproduction because they organize the meaning attached to change.

Organizational culture often manifests in communication norms, including norms regarding how people express disagreement (Brooks, 1997). Leaders shape these norms through their response to criticism. Within a normative framework, a good response distinguishes between criticism of ideas and attacks on people. Leaders need to enforce boundaries so that criticism does not turn into insults. However, leaders also need to protect honest criticism so that the organization does not lose its source of correction. If criticism is always met with defensiveness, members learn to remain silent. A culture of silence is a fragile culture because problems remain invisible until it is too late. Therefore, leaders need to create rites that invite feedback, such as periodic reflection sessions. However, these rites must be followed by action, as feedback without action destroys trust. Additionally, leaders need to give credit to those who provide criticism that aids improvement, so the organization learns that the courage to speak up is valued. This appreciation does not have to be a gift; it can be public recognition and tangible follow-up. Thus, the leader as a cultural agent regulates the ecology of voice namely, who may speak, how they speak, and what happens after they speak. The ecology of voice determines the quality of the culture.

Exemplarity is closely related to the ethics of power usage. A leader's power can be used to protect, but it can also be used to intimidate. Within a normative framework, the ethical use of power is visible in the way a leader gives instructions, the way a leader distributes opportunities, and the way a leader handles mistakes. An ethical leader does not use ambiguity as a tool of control. Ambiguity makes members dependent and fearful. Instead, an ethical leader builds clarity of

standards so that members can act independently. Independence supported by clarity builds a culture of responsibility. Furthermore, an ethical leader does not monopolize recognition. They provide space for others to appear and develop. Providing space is a symbol that the organization values growth. This symbol is important because a learning culture requires a sense of security to try new things. Leaders also need to enforce consistency between rules and exceptions. Unexplained exceptions create perceptions of favoritism. Favoritism destroys the sense of justice. Thus, exemplarity in the use of power is the core of cultural reproduction, because culture is ultimately the way power is practiced and accepted as reasonable (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

Ritualistic communication also includes the way an organization handles rewards and departures. Success celebrations and the send-off of departing members are symbolic moments that shape memory. Within a normative framework, the way a leader celebrates success determines whether the organization values the process or only the result. If a leader only praises results, members tend to ignore the ethics of the process. If a leader praises an honest and collaborative process, members learn that the way a goal is achieved is important (Sims & Brinkmann, 2002). Similarly, the way a leader bids farewell to a departing member determines whether the organization values humans. If a farewell is conducted with respect, the organization strengthens a culture of dignity. If a farewell is ignored or filled with sarcasm, the organization strengthens a culture of insecurity. Insecurity causes members to hide their career plans, and this destroys trust. Thus, rituals of celebration and farewell are not merely matters of politeness, but cultural policies. A leader who pays attention to these rites sends a message that the organization remembers, values, and maintains relationships in a mature way. That message is then reproduced in the way members treat one another. Cultural reproduction occurs because people imitate the way the leader shows respect.

Cultural leadership can also be understood as the work of managing the tension between formality and spontaneity (Fairholm & Fairholm, 2000). Organizations need procedures, yet work life is also full of improvisation. Within a normative framework, a leader needs to show when procedures must be strictly held and when improvisation is justified. If a leader is too rigid, the culture becomes afraid of making mistakes and

reluctant to try. If a leader is too loose, the culture becomes chaotic and unfair. This balance is built through the explanation of principles. Principles are reasons that can be transferred to new situations. When a leader explains principles, members can judge for themselves whether an action is aligned. Without principles, members only wait for orders. Waiting for orders slows down the organization and decreases the sense of ownership. Thus, the leader shapes culture through the ability to teach principles in routine communication. Principles are also embedded through exemplarity for example, by showing how to make decisions amidst uncertainty. Uncertainty is a common condition; therefore, a healthy culture needs to be accustomed to decisions that remain accountable even when information is incomplete. A leader who demonstrates how to weigh options, how to acknowledge risks, and how to ask for input builds a culture of deliberation. A culture of deliberation strengthens the quality of decisions and strengthens legitimacy.

Cultural reproduction through symbols, examples, and rites ultimately leads to the formation of organizational identity (Patching, 2007). Identity is the shared answer to the question of who we are as an organization. Identity is not only formed by products or services, but by the way the organization treats members, customers, and partners. Within a normative framework, a leader shapes identity through consistent narratives and through actions that affirm those narratives. If the narrative mentions service, actions must demonstrate respect for the customer. If the narrative mentions innovation, actions must provide space for experimentation and manage mistakes fairly. Identity is also formed through public symbols, such as the way a leader speaks in front of external parties. The way a leader represents the organization in public spaces influences internal pride. Internal pride influences commitment. However, pride must be built through honesty, not through exaggerated claims. Exaggerated claims are easily broken by daily work experiences. Therefore, a leader needs to ensure that the promoted identity aligns with the members' experience. Alignment between identity and experience makes the culture stable because members do not need to pretend. They can be professional selves who are aligned with the values. Thus, the leader as the primary cultural agent is the guardian of identity through symbols, examples, and rites.

The leader acts as a director of meaning through three interconnected primary mechanisms. First, symbolic interaction, where a leader's actions are read as moral signs and signs of priority. Second, exemplarity, which is the consistency between words and actions that transforms norms into habits. Third, ritualistic communication, which is structured repetition that standardizes identity, memory, and boundaries of participation. These three mechanisms work through repetition and legitimacy. Repetition forms stability; legitimacy makes stability accepted as natural. Within this framework, a leader shapes culture by regulating collective attention, managing the language of values, enforcing moral boundaries, and designing meaningful rites. A leader preserves culture by maintaining the consistency of signs, maintaining procedural fairness in rewards and corrections, and maintaining a space for dialogue so that differences in interpretation can be addressed. This framework affirms that organizational culture is not a byproduct, but the result of continuous leadership work. Therefore, cultural leadership is an ethical responsibility to maintain dignity, justice, and cohesion through the production of trustworthy meaning.

Conclusion

Leadership serves as the primary agent in the formation and preservation of organizational culture because leaders regulate the production of meaning through symbols, role modeling, and communication rituals. Culture is understood as a pattern of shared interpretation born from repeated actions; thus, a leader's actions carry high symbolic weight and shape the behavioral expectations of members. Symbolic interaction explains how small decisions, language, access patterns, and responses to criticism build moral signs that serve as guidelines. Role modeling confirms that norms become habits when there is consistency between words and actions, especially when the organization is under pressure or in conflict. Ritualistic communication maintains culture through the repetition of narratives, the standardization of memory, and the distribution of social status that determines who serves as a reference. Consequently, cultural reproduction occurs through the legitimacy built by the leader a legitimacy born from procedural justice, the legibility of decision-making rationales, and respect for the dignity of members. This

framework positions culture as the result of continuous leadership work, rather than a decorative organizational attribute.

Implications and suggestions emphasize the need for organizations to organize leadership as a conscious and responsible symbolic task. Leaders are advised to routinely assess the alignment between value messages and daily practices, particularly in reward systems, corrections, promotions, and the distribution of opportunities. Communication rituals need to be designed as spaces for the standardization of a living identity, featuring clear agendas, room for dialogue, and tangible follow-ups so that rituals do not become empty routines. Role modeling must be understood as an ethical discipline in the use of power, including the enforcement of boundaries against demeaning behavior and the protection of honest criticism. Organizations are encouraged to strengthen the socialization of new members through concrete behavioral examples and mentors who align with core values, ensuring that culture is not inherited through informal rumors. Leaders are also advised to manage leadership transitions with clear communication regarding the reasons for what is maintained and what is adjusted. these suggestions direct culture toward becoming a trustworthy and stable system of meaning without losing the ability to adapt its practices.

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