

Organizational Culture in an ODL Context: Some Experience from the Zimbabwe Open University

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ABSTRACT

This research sought to identify the dominant organisational culture at the Zimbabwe Open University and evaluate its effectiveness in addressing organisational performance. The study used the quantitative research methodology. The questionnaire instrument was used to collect data from fifty (50) ZOU employees.

The study revealed that the Zimbabwe Open University culture is strong in terms of team orientation as cooperation between members of staff is upheld to attain organisational goals. The team orientation culture has proven to be effective in promoting the, “ZOU family concept”. The study indicated that the ZOU culture has a strong, “people orientation” culture where management supports and empowers employees with job enrichment skills and career development through the staff training and development policy. However the study revealed that the ZOU culture is weak in areas of innovation and organisational change due to its adherence to strict and formal rules, procedures and regulations which staff in the various units are expected to religiously follow as they execute their duties. The ZOU culture is also weak in areas of customer focus and performance management orientations.

The research recommended that the ZOU management should consider customers’ views in key decision making issues of the institution. The ZOU culture should also adopt an aggressive business approach in order for the University to survive in this very competitive Higher Education environment. The research also recommended that ZOU should improve its performance management system to the extent that rewards are linked to performance. The study further recommended that ZOU should promote a culture of innovativeness and risk taking for the University to fully exploit opportunities in Higher Education.

Background to the study

The Zimbabwe Open University is an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution with ten Regional Centres in the ten provinces of the country which makes it a bit challenging to pick the culture of such a geographically dispersed organisation.

There is not known a study that has been carried out at ZOU to assess whether the Zimbabwe Open University culture supports the concept of World Class Service delivery. Cohen (1997)

states that technological advancements and global competition is creating pressure on higher education institutions to respond to the changing environment.

Deal and Kennedy (1982) argue that organisational culture is the single most important factor for success or failure of an organisation. Scott et al. (2003) noted that organisational culture is increasingly viewed as a critical pillar of organisational efficiency. Price (2003) observes that in order to work towards improving organisational culture, an organisation must first find out “who it is”. Davidson (2004) similarly states that it is important that top management understands the current status of its organisational culture before implementing strategic initiatives or other performance improvement interventions.

It is therefore essential for the ZOU management to assess how well the institution’s culture supports organisational performance and when and how the culture needs to be changed. Assessing and improving the ZOU organisational culture as well as determining when cultural transformations are necessary is very critical for long-term organisational success. Bredenkamp (2002) states that without a thorough analysis and assessment of the organisation’s culture, progress and a sustainable programme for success cannot be assured.

This study therefore seeks to explore the key features of the Zimbabwe Open University culture. It is expected that the research findings will assist Senior Management to identify those cultural traits that should be adopted and developed in order to enhance organisational effectiveness at ZOU.

Statement of the Problem

The Zimbabwe Open University’s vision is to become a World Class Open and Distance Learning University. However there is not known a study that has been carried out at ZOU to investigate whether the culture of the University supports the notion of World Class service delivery. This study therefore attempts to identify the ZOU culture and assess its effect on organisational performance.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the organizational culture of the Zimbabwe Open University. The study analysed the key features of the ZOU culture and attempted to relate the ZOU culture to organisational effectiveness. The study was guided by the following objectives:

Objectives of the study

- To identify the key features of the Zimbabwe Open University organisational culture.
- To assess the impact of the Zimbabwe Open University culture on organizational effectiveness.
- To recommend cultural elements that should be developed to enhance organisational effectiveness at ZOU.

Key Research Questions

The study sought to address the following questions:

- What are the key features of the Zimbabwe Open University organizational culture?
- What is the impact of the Zimbabwe Open University culture on organizational effectiveness?
- What are the cultural elements that should be developed to enhance organisational effectiveness at the Zimbabwe Open University?

Justification of the study

There is not known a research that has been done to explore organisational culture of the Zimbabwe Open University. Schein (1992) maintains that before organisations adopt any development projects there is need for a cultural survey to understand the dominant cultural traits of the organisation and how they support implementation of organisational goals. It is therefore necessary to carry out this organisational cultural survey. The study will benefit the Zimbabwe Open University in assessing the effectiveness of its organisational culture. The information will be used to recommend cultural traits that can be adopted by ZOU to improve organisational effectiveness. The study will also assist other ODL institutions in understanding their cultures and how culture impacts on organisational effectiveness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of organisational culture

Schein (1992) states that, “organizational culture is a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems”.

The three levels of culture

Schein (1985) discusses three levels of culture, namely, behaviour and artefacts, values and norms, beliefs and basic assumptions.

Behaviour and artefacts

According to Du Toit (2002), artefacts are the first level of organisational culture and are observable symbols and signs of an organisation that can be easily discerned. They include the physical layout of the workplace and observable behaviour of its employees. These range from aspects such as architecture, office design, office furniture, language, dress codes, work climate, work processes, organisational structures, rituals and celebrations.

Espoused values

Kennedy (1999) states that espoused values is the second level of organisational culture. According to Schein (1985), espoused values represent the principles and standards valued by

the organisation's employees. These form the basis as to what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. Espoused values could be represented by the philosophies, strategies, and goals set by organisational leaders.

Basic Assumptions and Beliefs

This is the third level of organisational culture. Assumptions and beliefs reflect the shared values within the specific culture. They guide behaviour and tell people how to think, feel and perceive work, performance goals, relationships and performance of colleagues (Du Toit, 2002).

The seven primary characteristics of culture

The seven primary characteristics of organisational culture were first defined by Jennifer Chatman and Jehn, (1994) who assert that each characteristic describes an overall view of an organisation's culture. The primary characteristics of culture include:

Innovation and Risk Taking

Malhotra (2009) states that innovation and risk taking can be described as the degree to which employees are encouraged to take innovative steps and calculated risk. According to Denison (1990), companies that have innovative cultures are flexible and adaptable, and experiment with new ideas.

Aggressiveness

Schein (1992) defines aggressiveness as the extent to which employees are aggressive or competitive rather than unconcerned or relaxed. Companies with aggressive cultures value competitiveness and out-performing competitors. Richard (2003) asserts that Bill Gates' Microsoft Corporation is often identified as a company with an aggressive culture.

Outcome-Oriented

Barley (1984) opines that outcome oriented cultures pay more attention to the final product result rather than on processes. Sackmann, (1992) describes outcome-oriented cultures as those that emphasize achievement, results, and action as important values.

Stability

Karen (1994) states that stable cultures emphasize stability rather than growth. Stable cultures tend to focus on maintaining their current level of success. Barley, (1994) argues that managements of these stable organizations strive to ensure stability of the company rather than focusing on growth.

People-Oriented

Trice (1988) postulated that people orientation is the extent to which management gives attention to the effect of decisions on people working in the organisation and on its shareholders. Parker

(2000) states that people-oriented cultures value fairness, supportiveness, respect for individual rights and incentivisation of staff.

Team-Oriented Cultures

Malhotra (2009) describes team orientation as the degree to which work is organised around teams rather than on individuals. Hofstede and Geert (1991) observe that companies with team-oriented cultures emphasize cooperation among employees.

Detail Orientation

Richter (2011) describes detail orientation as the extent to which employees are expected to pay attention to details. Attention to detail defines the degree of importance a company allocates to precision and detail in the workplace. The degree of attention the employees are expected to give is crucial to the success of such businesses.

Individual Autonomy

Barney (1994) describes individual autonomy as the extent of responsibility, independence, and opportunities for exercising initiative that employees in an organisation have. "Individual autonomy is when individuals have the knowledge, skill, desire, and opportunity to personally succeed in a way that leads to collective organizational success", (Covey 1999).

Structure

Harrison and Roger (1972) describe structure as the degree of rules and regulations and the amount of direct supervision that is used to supervise and control behaviour. Schein (1992) notes that there are different types of organization structures that are based on either geographical regions, products or hierarchy.

Support

Denison (1990) describes support as the degree or extent of assistance and warmth managers provide for their subordinates. Senior management's support of employees is an essential pillar of success in building a sustainable worksite employee wellness program.

The above mentioned theoretical framework aptly summarises what organizational culture is and the impact culture has on organisational performance.

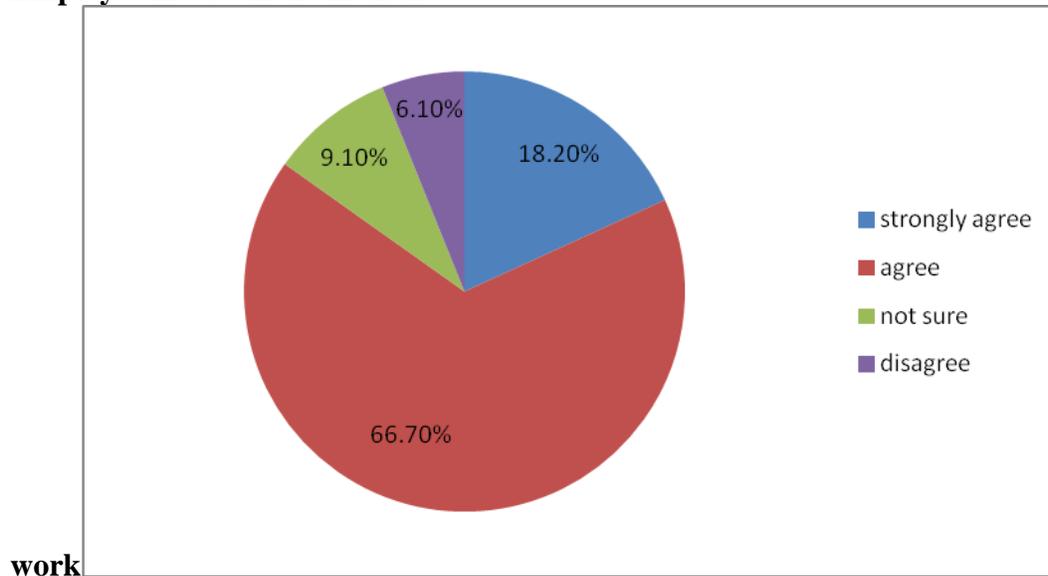
Research Methodology

The study utilized both the quantitative and qualitative research methods. The questionnaire instrument was used to collect information from Zimbabwe Open University employees. The researcher preferred questionnaires because responses are gathered in a standardised way and are more objective than interviews. Generally, it is relatively quicker to collect information using a questionnaire. A total of 50 staff members at the National Centre and Harare Regional Centre participated in the study. The sampling technique that was used in the study is purposive

sampling because limited participants were required to complete the questionnaires. The researcher with assistance from the Human Resources department administered the questionnaires. The researcher also carried out face to face interviews with the Human Resources personnel to collect qualitative data. Data collected through questionnaires were quantified into percentages and presented on pie charts.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Employee involvement in their

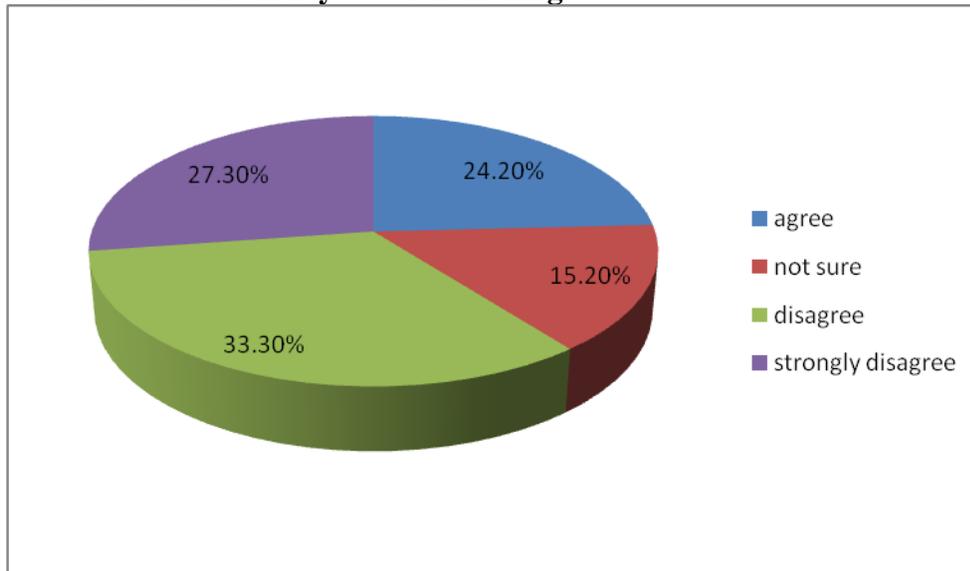


The research revealed that 84.9% of the respondents indicated that most ZOU employees are actively involved in their work. This data clearly shows that most ZOU employees value their work and the ZOU culture is strong in terms of work ethics where employees believe in hard work and diligence. Employees at ZOU find their work to be important, meaningful, and intrinsically rewarding. They are generally highly engaged in their work and are more likely to stay in their jobs at ZOU.

Delegation of authority is practiced at ZOU

The study confirmed that 66.7% of the respondents highlighted that delegation of authority is practiced at ZOU. This research clearly indicates that leaders at ZOU foster a culture of power sharing as top leadership delegates other responsibilities to managers at lower levels. The cordial relationship where the superiors trust subordinates and give them necessary authority creates a team oriented culture where the subordinates are answerable and accountable to superiors. The research also discovered that delegation of authority facilitates a culture of management development. Delegation acts as a training ground for management development where subordinates have an opportunity to learn, to grow and to develop new qualities and skills. This indicates that the ZOU culture is strong in terms of future orientation which emphasizes on succession planning as subordinates are exposed to perform managerial tasks through delegation of authority from their superiors.

Staff involvement in key decision making



The research revealed that 75.8% of the respondents felt that that ZOU employees were not involved in key decision making at the institution. This may be due to the fact that most of the lower level employees might not be aware of the several Committees that provide platforms for staff to participate in key decision making of the University. This may militate against a culture of innovation where members of staff are not motivated to bring out new ideas for fear of reprisal.

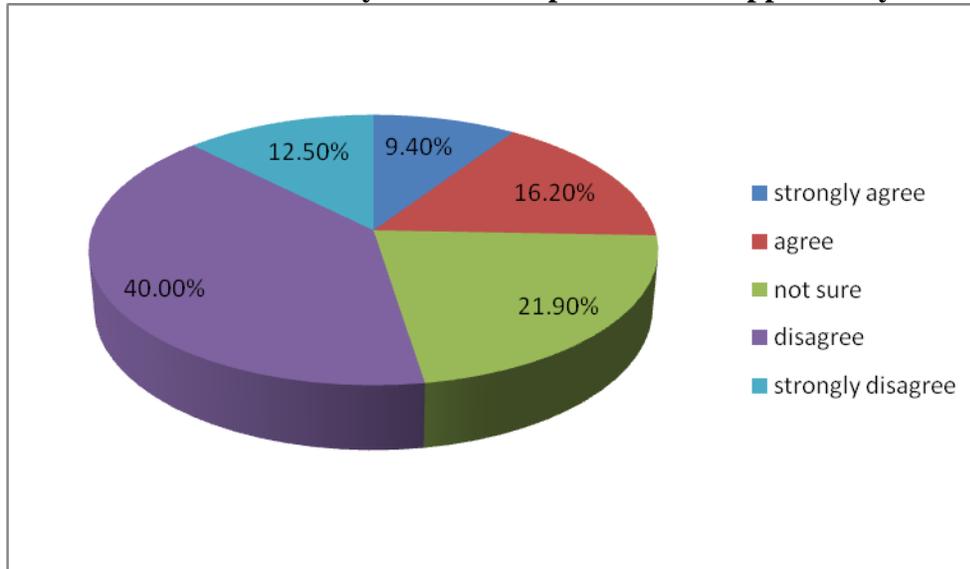
Staff capability is constantly improving

This study confirmed that 63.7% of the employees indicated that staff capability at ZOU is constantly improving. This observation supports the prevalence of people orientation traits where the institution provides the staff training and development facility which has contributed much to the enrichment of employee job skills. ZOU institutionalized an employee capacity building system where ZOU employees receive various training and retraining programmes to enhance service delivery.

Leaders and managers practice what they preach.

The research highlighted that 66.6% of the respondents highlighted that leaders and managers at ZOU do not practice what they preach. The study affirms that the ZOU culture has a weak leadership role modeling system. Bandura (1997) defines role modeling as learning through observing others' actions. This implies that ZOU leadership and managers practice the, "do as I say, not as I do" approach which is not an effective method of leading, particularly when working to improve an organization's culture. In order to establish an effective ZOU culture, management at all levels must lead by example.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the ZOU performance appraisal system

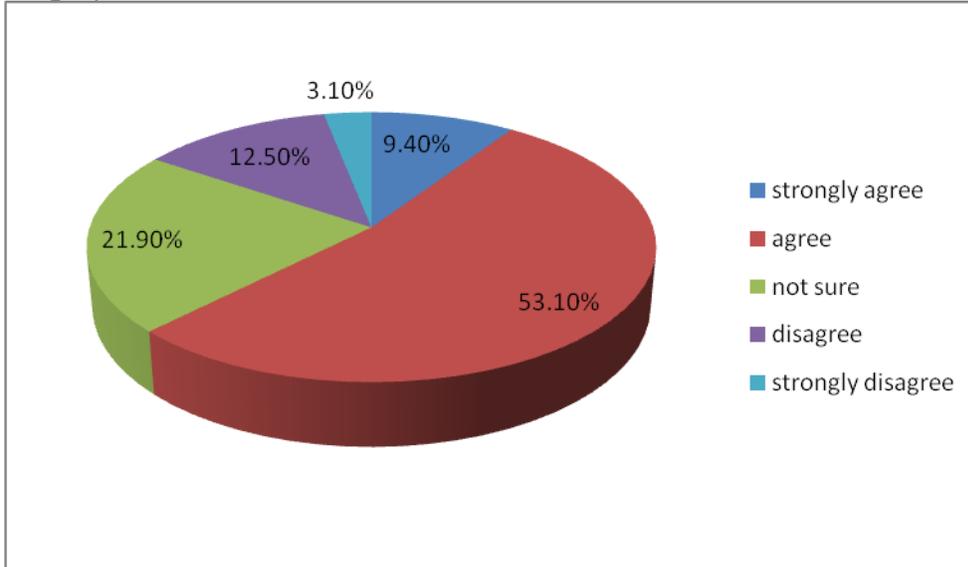


The research revealed that 74.4% of the respondents indicated that ZOU's performance appraisal system is not effective and efficient. This indicates that the ZOU culture is weak in terms of its performance management system. The absence of a criterion shared by staff for the allocation of rewards and status which outlines what behaviour is rewarded and what behavior is punishable ultimately influences employee personal values. It would seem as if ZOU's performance appraisals system is not effective because most individuals who carry out performance appraisals are not sufficiently trained on how to effectively conduct performance appraisals. In addition results of the performance appraisals are not being effectively utilized by the institution to reward outstanding employees and train employees who are facing challenges when executing their duties.

The interests of customers often get ignored in decision making

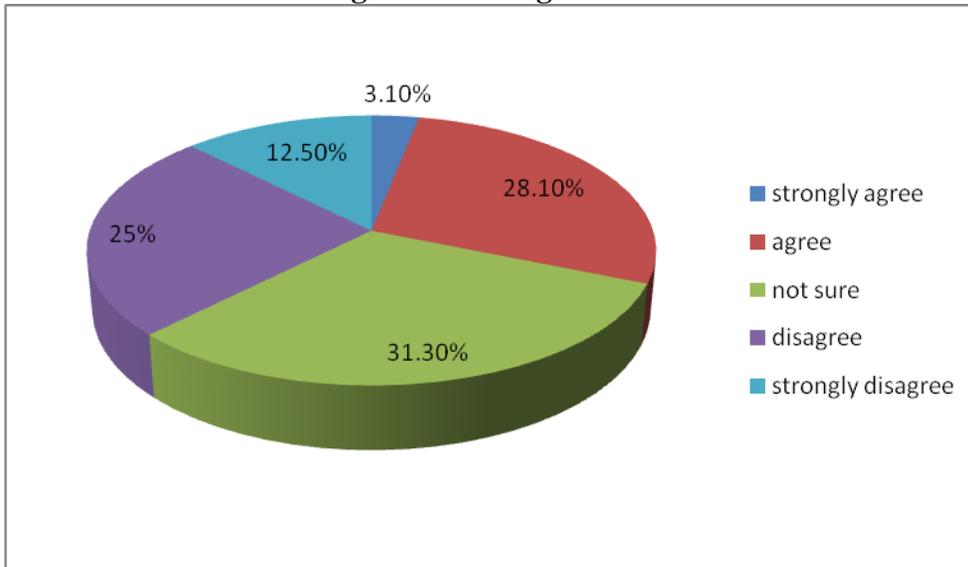
The research disclosed that 60% of the respondents mentioned that the interests of ZOU customers often get ignored in decision making. Ignoring customers' views in decision making to some extent maybe due to the fact that ZOU does not have a platform where management listens to and considers customers' views. When developing new products or services the organisation should attentively listen to and understand its customers' needs, their behaviors and frustrations. The benefit of clear customer-orientated values, behaviours and regular feedback is that it provides a framework against which employers can reward customer-orientated behaviour thus helping to create a customer-focused system that delivers in line with the customer's vision. This in turn can lead to increased student enrollment at ZOU.

Employees work as a team at ZOU



This study observed that 62.5% of the respondents were of the opinion that employees at ZOU work as a team. This may be a result of a clear ZOU vision and mission statement which propels employees within departments to share a common perspective in attaining organisational objectives. It seems team orientation at ZOU has contributed to a high rate of employee interaction and enthusiasm which positively impacts on employee motivation.

Innovation and risk taking are encouraged and rewarded

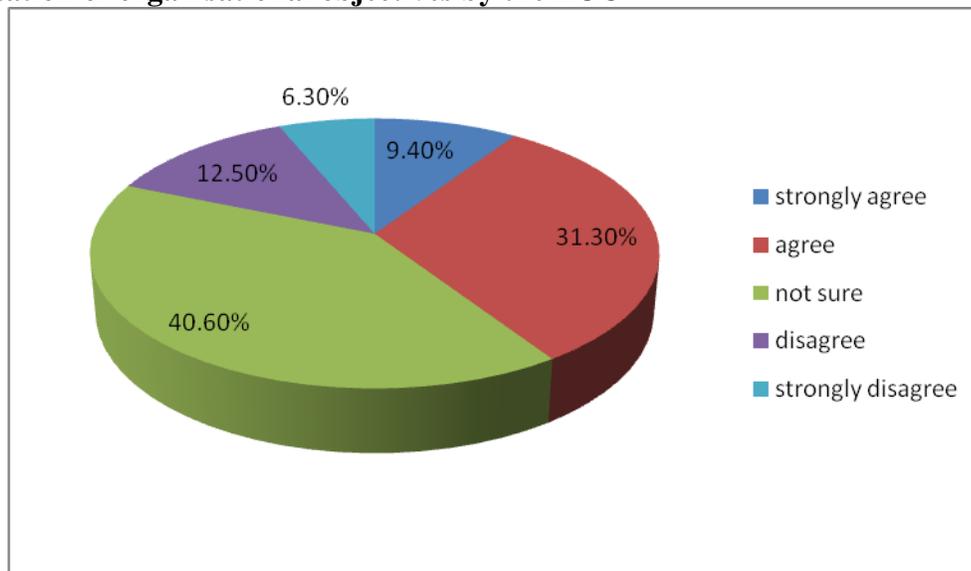


The research revealed that 68.8% of the respondents indicated that innovation and risk taking is not encouraged and rewarded at the Zimbabwe Open University. The research revealed that the ZOU culture has rigid rules, procedures and regulations which govern the University operations and these hinder innovativeness among employees. This study shows that the organisational learning mechanisms set by the top management are not effectively enabling and motivating employees to bring forward innovative ideas on how the University operates. Organisational performance may decline if employees are afraid of taking risks and bringing forth innovative ideas.

Clear Vision and Mission statement.

The research revealed that 75% of the respondents agreed that there is a clear vision and mission statement that gives direction to work. This supports the notion that the ZOU culture is strong in terms of future orientation. By crafting a clear mission and vision statement, ZOU leaders powerfully communicate their intentions and motivate employees to realize set goals and objectives.

Implementation of organisational objectives by the ZOU



leadership.

The study confirmed that 59.4% of the respondents felt that the ZOU leadership is not visibly and strongly implementing set goals and objectives of the institution. The research suggests that the ZOU leadership should facilitate the redeployment of scarce organizational resources towards set objectives. Failure to provide adequate resources in support of organisational change leads to feeble implementation efforts, neglect of core organizational activities and functions.

The findings of this research revealed that the ZOU culture is strong in certain areas and weak in other areas. The research suggested some recommendations to address the weak areas of the Zimbabwe Open University culture.

Conclusion

The research concluded that a shared organizational culture helps to unite employees of different demographics. Organisational culture at the workplace promotes equality and provides diverse employees with a sense of unity and understanding towards one another, thereby promoting better communication and conflict management. The study noted that organizational culture helps to keep employees motivated and loyal to the organization. The research has clearly shown that competition among employees is one of the results of a shared organizational culture. Employees will strive to perform at their best to earn recognition and appreciation from their superiors. This in turn increases the quality of their work, which helps to improve institutional performance. The values, beliefs and work ethics have also contributed to building the Zimbabwe Open University's brand image.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of this study, the following recommendations were suggested:

- ZOU management should work more vigorously to promote a culture of participative decision making which includes direct consultation with more staff members from grass roots level. This can be attained through enhancing Unit meetings, Works Council meetings, meetings between the Vice Chancellor and all staff.
- The University should foster a culture of performance management through linking performance with rewards and also organise training workshops based on performance appraisals and identified leadership management skills.
- ZOU should foster a culture that facilitates change. Management should ensure that the institution promotes flexibility and quick adoption of new and improved ways to facilitate change.
- The institution should promote a customer focused culture that values the importance of customers and embeds customer feedback and customer satisfaction throughout major organisational practices. ZOU should concurrently carry out customer satisfaction surveys to ascertain customer needs and wants and their views should be seriously considered in key decision making to promote a customer oriented culture. For instance, the goals of the Strategic Plan should clearly articulate the needs of customers and other critical stakeholders.
- This study should be complemented with future research on how the culture of the University could be aligned with strategy implementation so that performance at the University is enhanced.

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