*Organizational Culture as a Primary Driver of Organizational Success: The South African University Experience*

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**Abstract**
This paper discusses the influence that organizational culture has on an institution's success. Success is defined more broadly than mere material gain to encompass the notion of wealth creation. Against this background culture surveys conducted at the University of Johannesburg from 2008 to 2014 are examined. An explanation is provided for the apparent discrepancy in the findings between low morale, yet high performance, namely that the two levels of cultural awareness exist in organizations that have not yet embraced the holistic concept of wealth creation. They continue to promote material gain as an end it itself thus creating an environment where constant competitive pressure negatively influences inter-personal engagement in the workplace. These findings, it is suggested, can be extrapolated to organizations that seek to embrace an innovative and dynamic paradigm within the wealth-creating knowledge economy.

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**Introduction**

Profit (material gain) matters. It matters exclusively in commercial corporations. In non-commercial corporations, material gain is of dominant importance. In both commercial and non-commercial organizations, therefore, executive and managerial attention is focused (exclusively or dominantly) on the enhancement of the material wellbeing of the organization in the competition for (often diminishing) global resources (Barnard & Van der Merwe, 2014a). Material wellbeing is equated with success (Nold III, 2012). Strategic investment, strategic goals, (short, medium and long term) planning, performance assessments, appointments, remuneration, incentives, education and training: these are the stuff of executive decision-making because they are the drivers of success (Hogan & Coote, 2014).

An organization's culture (Bartlett (2014) refers to it as "that's how we do things here") receives attention to the extent that it contributes to or detracts from the organization's success in competitive pursuit of the material gain that enables it to fulfil its core function.

The University of Johannesburg in South Africa is a non-profit, state-funded organization that, like all universities, actively pursues material gain as a means to fulfil its core teaching, learning and research mandate. It was established in 2005 as part of the radical transformation of higher education in post-apartheid South Africa. It was the result of an amalgamation of three pre-existing universities each with a widely different institutional ethos. Since 2008 the university executive recognized the importance of a proper understanding of its institutional culture for its overall wellbeing as it sought to establish itself as a leading institution of higher learning in South Africa.

The results of the biennial surveys conducted since 2008 have proven instructive in a number of respects. This paper discusses some of the results within the context of the growing global acknowledgment that organizational success is not solely dependent on the successful competition for material gain. Increasingly, success is being measured by an organization's ability to be genuinely accountable, transparent and sustainable. It argues that an organization's culture significantly influences an organization's ability to be accountable, transparent and sustainable – and therefore successful. Far more attention should be paid and far more resources expended on the non-material wellbeing of its workforce in the competitive, global business environment of the 21st Century.

**The University Of Johannesburg And Its Culture Surveys**

The University of Johannesburg (UJ) was established in 2005. It was the result of a merger of three higher education institutions. The incorporation and merger was part of the radical restructuring of higher education in post-apartheid South Africa, which led to the 36 higher education institutions in apartheid South Africa being reduced to 23 (Barnard & Van der Merwe, 2014b). Three categories of institution were recognized in the new dispensation: traditional universities providing formative education; universities of technology providing vocational or technological education; and so-called comprehensive universities, that provide a mixture of traditional formative and vocational education. UJ was classified as one of five comprehensive universities (Van der Merwe, 2012).

The three higher education institutions that amalgamated to form UJ were all to a greater or lesser degree creatures of the apartheid ideology. Each had had a very distinct institutional ethos. Establishing a new institution that was more than merely the sum of its parts, reflective of the constitutional democracy South Africa had embraced since 1994, and doing so within the ill-defined context of 'comprehensivity' was no easy task (Van der Merwe, 2012).

In the first three years of its existence executive and managerial energy was spent on establishing an academic 'architecture' for the new university; on the complex integration of the human resources, finances, ICT and operations support structures; on a marketing campaign to promote the new university and the values and ideals it stood for. The work was done commendably well and by the end of 2007 much of the structural groundwork had been laid. Today the university reaps the benefit of the hard work done in those early years. It is one of the biggest universities in South Africa with some 50 000 students and an operating budget of around R1.5 billion (*University of Johannesburg Annual Stakeholder Report 20xii*, 2013).

Towards the end of 2007 it became clear that many of the workforce (academic and support staff) experienced a sense of *alienation* from the institution (Barnard & Van der Merwe, 2014b). There seemed to be a pervasive sense among the staff that they were being discriminated against on a range of grounds: race, gender, language, campus affiliation, programme affiliation (traditional formative versus technology). They felt themselves unable to identify with the new institution and unable to properly articulate their concerns about the massive new and different institution that was developing in their very midst.

An executive decision was taken in early 2008 to conduct a so-called 'Culture Survey' (Barnard & Van der Merwe, 2014a). Due care was taken with the proper construction and formulation of the survey questionnaire and with the manner in which it was disseminated and its results collated and analyzed. The survey nevertheless did not pretend to be more than a management tool to assess the extent of alienation of the workforce and the disaffection among staff and to provide indicators on redress measures.

The survey was conducted in October 2008. A set of some 80 statements were formulated to which the participants had to provide standard Likert-style responses. The statements were arranged and analyzed according to seven selected themes:

Fairness and Equity;
Transformation;
Trust, Respect and Support;
Valuing/Accommodating Diversity;
Values and Vision;
Management; and
Job Satisfaction.

All of the themes form part of the collective understanding of what organizational culture is (Bartlett, 2014; Ismail, Romle & Azmar, 2015). The responses were reduced to a percentage 'score' for each theme and an overall 'score'. This was meant to reflect the 'Culture Index' of the institution. A 'culture index' of higher than 70% was indicative of an institution with a workforce

that was generally happy and experienced a sense of institutional wellbeing; a score of below 50% indicated an institution with a disaffected workforce.

The survey was repeated in 2010 and again in 2012. Although some tweaking of statements had taken place and some had been omitted and some added, the surveys were similar and the number of staff who participated in all three surveys sufficient and sufficiently representative to constitute valid samples. As a result comparative analyses of the results of the three surveys could reasonably be undertaken for purposes of managerial intervention.

In 2010, after the second survey, the Council and Executive of the institution recognized that after five years, steady state had been achieved after the merger. The university had overcome the most serious of the merger obstacles, in fact had become recognized as a merger success story within the higher education sector. The time was ripe to develop an overarching strategic plan for the university and for it to face the future with confidence and a sense of strategic purpose. A set of eight Strategic Thrusts were developed, each with its own set of strategic objectives and numerical targets to be achieved in the short, medium and longer term (Barnard & Van der Merwe, 2014a). These Strategic Thrusts were launched in 2011 and were meant to guide the institution for the next ten years.

Within the space of two years the Strategic Thrusts were replaced by a Strategic Plan even more ambitious than the Strategic Thrusts. There were two reasons for this: Many of the targets set had already been reached or were soon to be reached, way ahead of the timespan set for their achievement. Also, UJ had embarked on an ambitious academic project. This was namely to achieve global academic prominence. It had participated for the first time in 2012 in the QS University Rankings System. It had performed creditably in the exercise: a placing in the top 650-700 universities worldwide, which translated into the top 4% of universities (*University of Johannesburg Annual Stakeholder Report 20xii*, 2013). It repeated this performance in 2013. Some of its faculties had propelled themselves into the top 200 in the world. This was no mean feat for a university not yet a decade old, established in the cauldron of post-apartheid politics with its demand for higher education to thousands of disadvantaged learners, and with a 'comprehensive' academic remit.
All of this meant that the University executive and its Council saw fit to pursue the aim of global excellence and stature and to design strategic objectives that would reflect this desire for global recognition. It was a clear institutional change of gear. It also meant that institutional endeavour would gradually be re-directed, from a focus on national and local priorities to global competitiveness. This would require the maintenance of a balance that would place unrelenting performance pressure on the workforce (Awadh & Saad, 2013).

The 2014 Culture Survey was conducted against the background of the strategic shift the university had undertaken. The survey itself was re-designed; some of the themes were retained, but the changes were such that comparison with the results of previous surveys was fraught.

**Results Of The Uj Culture Surveys 2008-2014**

On the basis of detailed biographical information obtained from the participants it was possible for the university to develop fairly comprehensive analyses of the results of each of the surveys.

What follows is a high-level summary of some important results for purposes of this presentation.

*2008 survey*
Some 36% of staff participated in the 2008 survey. The 'culture index' was measured at a lowly 52%. The scores for the individual themes ranged from 45% (for *Fairness and Equity*) to 63% (for *Job Satisfaction*). The score for three of the themes was below 50%.
The results occasioned anxious reflection among the university executive. A range of interventions were undertaken. These included cultural integration workshops, 360 degree leadership surveys, conciliation engagements in identified environments where inter-personal relationships were poor, an annual staff day devoted to integration and togetherness and an annual Diversity Week devoted to a range of social and academic events designed to improve inter-cultural understanding and strengthen the building blocks of nation-building captured in the South African Constitution.

*2010 survey*
The second survey was conducted in 2010. The staff participation rate had dropped to 20% - acceptable to achieve statistically valid results, but disappointing nevertheless. The 'culture index' increased to 57%. This improvement in the index, statistically significant though it was, did not produce executive cartwheels. The theme scores ranged from 48% (for *Fairness and Equity*) to 65% (for *Job Satisfaction*). Only one theme scored below 50%. On the strength of these results the university established a Transformation Office. This Office coordinates all activities related to transformation, cultural integration, social cohesion and affirmative action in the university. Under its auspices, too, a Transformation Charter was drafted and approved and the Vision, Mission and Values statement of the university was fundamentally revised.

*2012 survey*
The third survey was conducted in 2012. It took place after the Strategic Thrusts had been launched and just prior to the drafting of the new Strategic Plan that heralded the institutional change of gear with its focus on global excellence and stature. The participation rate was 30%. The 'culture index' stood at 69%. This caused executive cartwheels and ululations. It represented a massive increase in the sense of wellbeing enjoyed by the UJ workforce. Although still short of the magical 70% mark, there was much to be satisfied with. The themes scores ranged from 61% (for *Fairness and Equity*) to 76% (for *Values and Vision*).

It is possible to draw the following general conclusions from a comparative analysis of the first three surveys (interesting detail conclusions, based on responses of staff with different demographic, work-related and seniority profiles, were also drawn, but will not be discussed in this presentation):

- The majority of UJ staff felt proud to work at UJ and were happy to promote it as an employer of choice. This sense of pride grew over time and peaked at 91% in 2012.
- There was a general sense of job satisfaction and a sense that core academic values (such as academic freedom and creativity) were valued. This too increased over time and peaked at close to 80% in 2012.
- Acknowledgment was readily given by the participants to institutional efforts to achieve transformation of the staff and student profile of the institution that better reflected the

race and gender composition of broader society. Similarly, there was appreciation for efforts aimed at acknowledging and celebrating diversity.

- Against these broadly positive results the following consistently negative responses were recorded:

  o Staff from different race groups did not trust each other;
  o A culture of trust was absent in the institution;
  o Staff from different race groups did not feel equally valued;
  o Staff from different race groups were not viewed as equally competent.
  o

The responses for each of these statements 'scored' consistently below 50%. In general, responses within the themes of *Fairness and Equity*, *Transformation* and *Trust, Respect and Support* scored consistently lower than the other themes.

A conclusion that can be drawn from the three surveys is that scores were high where respondents were asked to evaluate managerial and executive steps taken to instil in the institution a sense of direction and purpose and to put formal structures, rules and policies in place. The scores were low where respondents were asked to evaluate inter-personal relationships and individualized execution of formal policies and frameworks. Thus: good marks for formal management, poor marks for execution and 'living the values'.

*2014 survey*

Subsequent to the 2012 survey the new UJ Strategic Plan was launched with much fanfare and executive 'sell'. At national level the Minister of Higher Education and Training established a national Transformation Oversight Committee in 2013 with the brief to monitor and report to the Minister on the pace and extent of transformation in the racial and gender composition of the students and staff at South African universities. A (controversial) 'transformation barometer' commissioned by the Committee was published in 2013. It analyzed official data submitted for government subsidy purposes by universities. It used a range of variables in the analysis, such as staff and student composition, pass rates, graduation rates, success rates, staff academic and support profiles, academic staff seniority, productivity and qualifications. The results showed that UJ was among the universities that had been most transformed in the country and had done so while also improving its academic productivity in terms of research output and graduation rates. Prior to the 2014 survey the QS Ranking System had once again placed UJ in the 650-700 category of universities worldwide.

It was against this background that the 2014 survey was conducted. The participation rate was 37%, the highest for all the surveys. The 'culture index' had dropped to 54% and the theme scores diverged widely: the highest score was 78% and the three lowest scores were below 40%. Significantly, the respondents expressed strong negative sentiment towards statements associated with trust, respect and support in the institution. The unremitting pressure to perform at the global level while retaining local relevance had clearly begun to tell.

The 2014 survey results, although different in many respects from the previous surveys, allow similar conclusions to be drawn:

- Staff were impressed (in fact mightily impressed) with:

  o the (new) strategic direction of the university and executive efforts to promote its global excellence and stature;
  o with its vision, mission and values statements and attempts to embed this in the institution;
  o with their employment circumstances ('job satisfaction');
  o with the extent of transformation in the institution and the active promotion of diversity; and
  o with the institutional commitment to academic freedom, individual thinking and creativity.

- Staff were unimpressed (in fact mightily unimpressed) with:

  o the lack of a culture of trust in the institution;
  o the lack of trust between races;
  o the lack of fairness in the way they are treated individually (in respect of such matters as remuneration, performance assessments and ethical behaviour);
  o with the extent of victimization in the institution (in respect of such matters as bullying, sexual harassment, blaming, stereotyping, verbal abuse, 'back-stabbing' and humiliation); and
  o managers adopting a dictatorial rather than a consultative style.

Again it seems clear that a distinction can be drawn between a general sense of appreciation for formal, structural and strategic arrangements that are in place for the institution to flourish and a sense of disgruntlement with inter-personal relationships and their proper or adequate management.

**Lessons Learnt From The Uj Culture Surveys**

Granted, in many respects the University of Johannesburg is a uniquely-situated institution. Its size, its demographic profile, its location, its history, its academic remit, its ethos as a product of and torch-bearer for the new democracy in South Africa, all mean that race, transformation, diversity, challenges to the status quo and muscle-building will feature prominently in any assessment (whether internal or external) of its cultural wellbeing. Despite this distinctiveness, though, we believe that some lessons can be extracted from the four culture surveys conducted at UJ over the period 2008-2014 that can be generalized to produce an improved understanding of the role of organizational culture in medium and large organizations.
We propose the following:

1. *An organization's workforce has two levels of cultural awareness*

Workplace awareness manifests itself at two distinct levels, at two frequencies, if you will. The one is at the *formal, core-function level*. There is general recognition that a job needs to be done and the resources and means need to be in place for it to happen. An effective and efficient management and an effective and efficient workforce generally produce measurable, recognizable

results that reflect a go-get culture. It is the domain where *thinking* and *doing* dominate. At this level of awareness the frequency level of the mind is low, it reflects active intellectual (and/or physical) engagement with the immediate concerns of the workplace. It is where common sense prevails and where matter-of-fact activities take place.

The other is the *situational, inter-personal level*. This is the fragile, sticky domain of trust, respect, fairness and equity. At this level people primarily *feel*. The transient, fragile nature of *feelings*, of emotions, passions, sentiments, sensations and attitudes, means that they tend to become (or to be) submerged beneath the activity level where process, structure, timeline, work schedule, goals, instructions and decision-making dominate. At this level of awareness mind frequency is high. The feelings inhabit a realm of the mind that transcends the material realm of job-related activity. Because they are so readily submerged, they are not easily identified. Attempts to apply to them the very processes, structures and schedules that produce their submersion will not and do not succeed. They are as it were drowned out by the noise at the lower levels of frequency. And even if they are identified the tendency is to process them, to structure them, to schedule them, to harness them in the cause of common sense. Common sense is not sympathetic. When these feelings are negative – and they often are - they lie dormant, they fester and their negative influence on workplace contentment and productivity is not recognized or acknowledged (Wang, Su & Yang, 2011). Demotivation and resentment result in patchy performance and high turnover and the application of ever more managerial pressure and artifice to achieve success (Awadh & Saad, 2013).

The UJ Culture Surveys provide evidence of this. Racial and gender transformation of the institution is praised, and the active promotion of diversity acknowledged, yet at the same time the lack of inter-racial trust is indicted and a perception surfaces time and again that competence is equated with racial profiling. The Values Charter is praised for its progressive statements and its capturing of essentials, yet the surveys provide evidence of a pervasive lack of a culture of trust in the institution. Incisive strategic management and the creation of an environment where job satisfaction flourishes is approved, yet serious concern is expressed at wide-ranging instances of harassment, victimization, rank-pulling and blaming.

    *2. Commonality between organizational culture and organizational transformation*
There is a commonality between 'culture' and 'transformation' that is often overlooked or at best underplayed.

An organization's culture is sometimes facilely defined as 'the way things are done around here' (Bartlett, 2014). A static definition, therefore, one that describes patterns of behaviour within a community cohered by a shared business purpose. Yet the root meaning of the word 'culture' ('cultivation') has a *dynamism* attached to it. It denotes animation, development, improvement, growth, formation, attainment of a higher state of being than the present (Büschgens, Thorsten Bausch & Balkin, 2013). In this sense it shares much with 'transformation'. Transformation, too, whether used in the narrow sense of racial and gender redress or in the broader sense of a qualitative process of institutional and personal development, denotes *mobility*. It denotes movement from one institutional state to another that better reflects the social, political and economic environment within which that institution exists. In a well-functioning organization there is natural progression at play rather than an imposed, managed transfer from one time- and

place-bound institutional state to another time- and place-bound institutional state.

If, beyond the descriptive meaning attached to 'organizational culture', one were to use more regularly as a tool of analysis its normative sense of development, growth, attainment, then, we submit, deeper managerial insights would be obtained. An organization's culture would then also be an indicator of the urgency or importance attached to transformation of the organization to enable it to remain competitive. It would then become possible to make sense of the two levels of cultural awareness discussed in 1. above and which the UJ surveys so trenchantly highlighted.

Patterns of behaviour that statically reflect an organization strategically placed to successfully pursue success through process, structure and decision execution readily translate into a positive, healthy organizational culture. But it is in the analysis of the dynamic interaction between members of the workforce in the execution of their duties, of the manner in which engagements take place – rather than of the achievements that result from those engagements – that the important, underplayed second level of cultural experience manifests itself. Such an analysis cultivates an understanding of how patterns of behaviour can be elevated, improved, developed, to pursue a higher and better state of behaviour. It is at that level that the stuff of authentic transformation lies: In the greater or lesser exhibitions of fairness, trust, respect and support lie true (or artificial) accountability, true (or artificial) transparency, true (or artificial) sustainability and the creation of wealth (or the mere pursuit of material gain).

3. *Organizational culture/organizational transformation directly affects, not the pursuit of material gain, but the creation of organizational wealth*

'Culture' and 'transparency' share another commonality and a strange one it is too. This is namely that there is no *direct* or *necessary* correlation between an organization's dynamic, normatively determined culture and the successful achievement of an organization's core goals; nor between the extent or otherwise of its institutional transformation (both narrowly and broadly defined) and the successful achievement of an organization's core goals. As the UJ culture surveys have highlighted, even within a perceived culture of pervasive unfairness, lack of trust and interracial tension an organization can still perform successfully. An organization can remain fundamentally at odds with its social, political and economic environment and still achieve market success.

Equally, though, success achieved under such conditions cannot be sustained (Shahzad, Luqman, Khan & Shabbir, 2012). The artifice and managerial pressure required to achieve success becomes too heavy a burden for an organization's executive to manage and for its workforce to endure (Tsai, 2011). Progressive organizations have recognized this. In these organizations importance is attached to the core role played by the 'submerged', dynamic, fragile components of workforce culture. Those interactions, where trust is earned and lost, where fair decisions breeds contentment and unfair decisions resentment, where managers make decisions and execute policies mindfully and empathetically or abusively and humiliatingly, where colleagues share and support or victimize and harass, become areas of dedicated focus

They are recognized as the 'hard' issues they in fact are rather than as the peripheral 'soft' issues most management believes them to be. They are embedded into the interstices of the organization

rather than imposed or regulated by means of processes and structures. In an environment where time, energy and resources are spent on these issues - at the expense, let it be said, of more material gain - accountability, transparency and sustainability are genuine building blocks of organizational success. They are not mere instruments of formal compliance. 'Success' is no longer narrowly defined as the extent of profit or material gain or material wellbeing. It is defined more broadly, more *deeply*, as *wealth creation*, the organization's ability to produce abundance of value: for its workforce, its shareholders and other stakeholders, for society more generally.

An organization that is mindful – institutionally mindful – of the fragility of trust and of perceptions of fairness and the effects thereof on workplace productivity; of how layered, multi-dimensional, proportioned and interpretative decisions and actions really are; of how fundamentally – rather than peripherally - important *attitude* is, is an institution on the move. It is transformative, cultured and open in its practices and decision-making. It is open to knowledge sharing (Allameh, Zamani, & Davoodi, 2011) and innovation (Abdi & Senin, 2014). It forsakes short-term material gain for long-term wealth creation. It recognizes that material gain is not an end in itself, but rather a means (a crucial, vital means, but a means nevertheless) to a deeper purpose, namely to create an abundance of value.

Too often, though, organizations that function within an ultra-competitive, resource-scarce global environment do not engage with these issues with the dedication demanded. Too often the need for efficiency and effectiveness trumps the time, energy and resources required to be truly accountable and transparent and to pursue long-term sustainable business strategies. It is within such business environments that sub-cultures develop, where the higher cultural frequencies of the mind and the spirit are submerged within the lower frequencies of material process and material gain. In such environments the insidious effects of these sub-cultures on organizational wellbeing are recognized only too late or engaged with only sub-optimally.

**Conclusion**

The UJ culture surveys starkly highlight two distinct levels of organizational culture. At one level there is a goal-driven culture of performance, where executive management, structure and process guide patterns of behaviour geared towards the achievement of maximum material gain (Martinez, Beaulieu, Gibbons, Pronovost, & Wang, 2015). At another level there is a culture of attitude, one where trust, respect and support exists either wholly, partially or not at all, where a sense of injustice can cause numbing resentment, where proportions and perspectives determine levels of understanding and execution, where passions and feelings materially influence performance (Awadh & Saad, 2013).

These manifest in two distinct sub-sets of organizational culture. Invariably, the one subsumes or submerges the other; invariably the one that best contributes to the achievement of material gain dominates. Our contention is that such a manifestation is indicative of an outmoded business paradigm. It is a paradigm in which those attributes, attitudes and competencies in the workforce that most directly contribute to profit or material gain are privileged above those that make no such contribution. The latter are treated as 'soft' concerns to be managed away or harnessed in the service of material gain (Prajogo & McDermott, 2011).

We argue that in a progressive business paradigm there is no duality of organizational culture of the kind highlighted in the UJ culture surveys. There is no 'hard' and 'soft' culture; there is no distinction between a practical and an idealist mindset; no difference between material and spiritual approaches; no distinction between a public persona and a private persona; no artificial categorization between mind, body and spirit; no ultimate substance to the distinction between those who wield power and influence and those who do not.

There is but one integrated culture in which trust, respect, support, fairness and equity – *mindfulness*, in a word, enjoy as much dedicated, resource-rich attention as managerial prowess, strategic guidance, process and structure. This concept of *mindfulness* is well captured in the southern African philosophical concept of *ubuntu* ("a person achieves excellence insofar as she or he shares a way of life with others and cares for their quality of life"). Each individual employee is a whole being whose wholeness is recognized and developed. Each organization functions optimally if the guiding principles of accountability, transparency and sustainability reflect the wholeness of the organization's culture, where there are no dominant and submerged elements. An organization contributes most to its own and society's wellbeing if it has the same integrated, holistic approach. Compartmentalized, segregated organizational units that serve to bolster an organization's earning capacity and its reputation have no place in a progressive business paradigm.

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