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Organisational Culture in Polish Small Private Enterprises as an Inspiration for the Public Sector

Abstract

Objective: This study seeks to identify and adapt elements of organisational culture from small enterprises in the apparel industry that can strengthen the functioning of public institutions. The objective is to provide guidelines for improving efficiency, ethics, and adaptability in organisations such as universities and the police, where formal structures alone are insufficient to meet the demands of the dynamic socioeconomic environment.

Research Design & Methods: The study employed semi-structured in-depth interviews with owners, directors, and managers from micro and small enterprises in the Polish apparel industry, allowing for the collection of detailed qualitative data on organisational culture. The collected data was analysed thematically, enabling the recognition of recurring patterns in the respondents' answers.

Findings: The analysis revealed practices such as participatory management, trust-based relations, and openness to innovation, which, although rooted in the private sector, can serve as inspiration for enhancing the organisational culture of public institutions.

Implications / Recommendations: The findings indicate that cultivating humanistic values, strengthening transparent communication, and integrating modern technologies can significantly improve the effectiveness and adaptability of public sector institutions. Such practices can foster employee trust, organisational efficiency, and broader social engagement.

Contribution / Value Added: This study contributes to both academia and practice by applying elements of organisational culture from small enterprises in the apparel industry as a benchmark.

Keywords: culture, organisational culture, private sector, public sector

Article classification: research article

JEL classification: M14

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Introduction

Organisational culture is intricately linked to its major influence on various areas of organisational life as well as its environment. Organisational culture affects individual performance, organisational efficiency, job satisfaction and engagement, strategy planning and task execution, recruitment and selection of employees as well as their acceptance by the company, the scale of resistance to change and organisational conflicts, socialisation and the nature of interactions, innovation and the development of new products, marketing, and sales. Therefore, organisational culture eliminates organisational ambiguity in behaviours and promotes pro-efficiency behaviours among employees and the company's environment.

In the public sector, formal structure alone is not sufficient, and organisational culture plays a key role in shaping the attitudes, motivation, and effectiveness of employees. A better understanding of organisational culture can improve the functioning of these institutions and enhance the quality of services provided to citizens.

This article aims to present the shaping of organisational culture using the example of private companies in the apparel industry; some of these practices can be applied as recommendations for the public sector.

In Poland, there is a noticeable research gap – in the public sector, studies on the analysis of organisational culture are less developed than in the private sector (Grodecka & Gierczak, 2014; Grzebyk, 2020; Podgórniak-Krzykacz, 2021). Most models of culture have been created based on business environments; therefore, efforts should be made to adapt these models to the realities of public administration. The market reforms of New Public Management sought to transform public organisations into more business-oriented and market-driven entities by implementing management methods and tools commonly used in the private sector (Podgórniak-Krzykacz, 2021).

Modern public institutions operating in a dynamically changing socioeconomic environment require reforms not only within their structures but also in organisational culture. This is important as the behaviours and attitudes of employees in individual institutions affect the effectiveness of actions and ethics as well as the quality of relationships with citizens (Krukowski, 2023).

Literature review

Every organisation, be it a private enterprise or a public institution, has its own organisational culture. Often, it emerges spontaneously over the years as the organisation operates and undergoes changes. The concept of organisational culture consists of factors such as norms, values, beliefs, and patterns of behaviour. Over time, organisational culture may change, influenced by both external and internal factors. It is also important to note that the concept of culture in management can refer not only to organisations but also to individual professions or even individuals who possess the charisma to influence the behaviour of others. Typically, organisational culture does not undergo revolutionary transformation – these are subtle changes introduced gradually, influenced by the employees of the enterprise, who are its most valuable resource. In larger enterprises, culture is often imposed top-down (such as the company logo or the colour of employees' uniforms) (Białas et al., 2023; Pawłowski et al., 2019).

One of the first definitions of corporate culture is the one created by Elliot Jaques in 1951: "the culture of the factory is its customary and traditional way of thinking and doing of things, which is shared to a greater or lesser degree by all its members, and which new members must

learn, and at least partially accept, in order to be accepted into service in the firm" (Jacques, 1951 cited in Aniszewska, 2007). Significant interest in the topic has resulted in the current difficulty of providing a single, universally accepted definition of organisational culture. For this article, organisational culture is understood as a pattern of basic assumptions developed or evolved by a group as it copes with problems of external adaptation and internal integration. It consists of many factors and their coexistence and proper interaction is key to the image of the organisation (Sidor-Rządkowska, 2021).

Every organisation has its own model of organisational culture and, in fact, there are no two identical models. It is created by people, their habits, and behaviours. Sometimes, its model is imposed by a charismatic leader. Organisational culture is born in people's minds, which is why some of its elements are difficult to capture. Its essence and models have been the subject of much research for years. Among all, the models of three researchers are discussed in more detail, namely Schein, Hofstede, and Davies (Sułkowski, 2020). Despite visible differences, common denominators can be found among them. All the researchers claim that organisational culture is extremely important for an enterprise or organisation at every stage of its operation. When organisational culture functions properly, there is a high chance that other components of the enterprise or organisation will also function properly. The primary goal of the models and research on them is to show the relationships between the various elements of organisational culture, from perspectives such as the ease of observing them or the role they play in managing an enterprise. These models were created based not only on theoretical knowledge but also on practical examples. Therefore, the results are reliable and show what organisational culture really is. However, these models are only auxiliary, as organisational culture in each enterprise is often unique. Defining organisational culture based on a single model can be misleading, as it leads to an oversimplification of the subject (Pawłowski et al., 2019).

Regardless of the adopted model, it is possible to distinguish components that make up organisational culture. These include basic assumptions, rituals, cultural values, social and organisational norms, ways of communication, narratives, stories, myths or metaphors, organisational stereotypes, cultural patterns, cultural artefacts, customs, traditions, symbols, organisational heroes, subcultures, and taboos (Sułkowski, 2020).

Organisational culture is widely recognised as a key factor in organisational effectiveness, adaptability, and innovation (Schein, 2010). In Poland, the transition from a centrally-planned economy to a market-based one has significantly influenced organisational culture, especially in the private sector. It can be observed that, although the Polish public sector continues to struggle with challenges such as bureaucracy and limited innovation (Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2019), there is growing interest in drawing inspiration from the more dynamic and flexible cultures present in the private sector. Differences in organisational culture between the private sector and public organisations are shaped by institutional frameworks, legal regulations, and cultural norms.

Private companies in Poland are fundamentally profit-oriented, prioritising market competitiveness, efficiency, and innovation. Ownership structures are tied to shareholders or private entities. In private companies, the flexibility of structures, decentralised decision-making, and rapid response to market needs are also essential. In contrast, public organisations are funded by the state and focus on public service, stability, and equality. These institutions are dominated by hierarchical, highly formalised structures based on protocols and managed in a bureaucratic manner (Dębski et al., 2020; Cieciora et al., 2021). Legally, private companies are governed by commercial law, which allows for flexible human resources policies. Public organisations, on

the other hand, are subject to administrative law, civil service statutes, and heightened requirements for transparency and accountability (Dębski et al., 2020).

Culturally, private companies in Poland exhibit market-oriented cultures, with a growing emphasis on innovation, customer focus, and performance-based rewards, as well as a communication style that is direct and critical. In contrast, public entities are dominated by hierarchical cultures with bureaucratic processes: employees in these environments value stability but often express a preference for more collaborative, clan-oriented cultures. It is worth noting that nepotism and favouritism occur at similar rates in both the public and private sectors in Poland, which distinguishes the Polish context from some neighbouring countries. In many public organisations, there is a lack of tradition in hiring professional managers, and managerial positions are held by specialists in a given field (e.g. teachers, doctors), which affects the specificity of organisational culture and limits the possibilities for implementing modern management styles and empathetic leadership (Grodecka & Gierczak, 2014; Vveinhardt & Sroka, 2020).

According to Markethub Sp. z o.o., the Polish apparel market constitutes one of the largest in Central and Eastern Europe, with revenues for this sector in 2024 estimated at 15.51 billion USD. The market is characterised by a high level of competitiveness, increasing consumer awareness, and a growing emphasis on innovation, sustainability, and digitalisation (Kalinowska & Żyliński, 2023; Wysokińska, 2019). It encompasses a broad spectrum of enterprises, ranging from international brands and domestic market leaders to an expanding e-commerce segment. Data provided by the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (PARP) indicates that in 2022, the Polish fashion and innovative textiles industry comprised over 36,000 entities. Among them, several thousand small and medium-sized clothing companies operate, including local manufacturing workshops, boutiques, and niche online brands. However, detailed statistics concerning the number and market value of small Polish apparel brands remain difficult to determine due to the dynamic nature of this sector (Wysokińska, 2019).

Within the Polish apparel industry, an increasing significance is being attributed to soft management aspects, particularly organisational culture, which is regarded as a key factor in attaining competitive advantage. Small enterprises play a particularly important role in this regard, as they are characterised by the absence of rigid organisational structures (in contrast to large corporations) and greater flexibility in responding to market changes (Białas et al., 2023; Borkowski, 2014).

Research methodology

In the study, the in-depth interview method was employed, enabling the collection of detailed qualitative data regarding the experiences of employees from selected companies regarding their organisational culture. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted according to a scenario covering key areas of cultural functioning within the organisation. The data was analysed using thematic analysis, which made it possible to identify several patterns of responses (Miński, 2017).

A total of twelve interviews were conducted with owners, directors, and managers – representatives of companies from the Polish apparel industry. The respondents were drawn from micro and small enterprises operating in southern and central Poland. The respondents' ages ranged from 28 to 49 years old, and all held higher education degrees. The selection of the respondents was purposeful – individuals holding key managerial positions were chosen, as they possess

extensive knowledge of the organisation's functioning and the impact of organisational culture on everyday management practices.

Analysing the results of research conducted among the representatives of clothing companies in the private sector reveals several elements of organisational culture – such as trust-based relations, the social mission of the company, social values, and ways of communication – that could be effectively adapted and implemented within the public sector. It should be noted that public institutions, such as universities or the police, resemble corporations in their structure. Therefore, the importance of organisational culture is growing in enhancing the efficiency, ethics, and adaptability of public institutions operating in a dynamic socioeconomic environment (Grześ-Bukłaho, 2022).

Results and discussion

Humanistic values (trust-based relations)

The first aspect observed in the analysed companies is prioritising people and their well-being, whether it involves the client, producer, or anyone else involved in the production process. They strive to treat all contractors and collaborators with respect. At the same time, proper coordination of work and efficient planning of all activities are essential, ensuring that tasks are completed on time. In smaller enterprises, it is often the owner who manages all production-related activities at every stage.

The fundamental principle of a public organisation is to put people and their well-being first, regardless of whether they are beneficiaries of public services, employees of the institution, or partners involved in the implementation of a given project. The goal is to build relationships based on mutual respect and effective communication, which facilitates the smoother coordination of activities and the planning of administrative processes. Clearly defining the scope of responsibilities and deadlines for task completion promotes operational efficiency and strengthens the sense of responsibility among employees. The management of a public institution plays a significant role in coordinating activities at every stage of public service delivery, ensuring high quality and accessibility (Młodzik, 2014; Cichorzewska & Kostecki, 2021).

In the analysed companies, the management approach in some ways resembles the Kaizen philosophy. The most important thing is to focus on daily tasks and to consistently implement the company's development plans. It is worth noting how crucial planning is in the management process – not only in business, but more broadly. Nowadays, there are many tools available that facilitate this task. It is relevant to mention that local government units (LGUs) with limited resources may also benefit from implementing Quality Management Systems such as ISO 9001 (Ćwiklicki et al., 2021).

The owners and managers of small businesses highlighted the connection between the way in which the company is managed and their private lifestyle. It is extremely important to maintain a balance between professional duties and private life, so as not to fall behind on projects, but also to ensure that relationships with loved ones and health do not suffer. The value system professed by the company's leadership determines the management process. For example, a representative of one of the analysed companies bases their values on beliefs rooted in the Christian faith and strives to ensure that all actions are consistent with these values. In contrast, the head of another analysed company is passionate about sport, and efforts are made

to reflect this in the company's activities by motivating people to engage in physical activity. Of course, it would be difficult to convey these values and beliefs without the active participation and example set by the company's management, who lead a highly active lifestyle themselves. The other analysed company runs educational projects aimed at increasing public awareness, making people realise how important good nutrition and exercise are for health and well-being.

An essential element of the activities of public organisations, beyond the fulfilment of statutory tasks, is the promotion of social values such as respect, solidarity, a healthy lifestyle, and the development of civic competencies. Institutions use modern communication channels, including social media, to conduct educational and informational campaigns targeted at various social groups, with a particular emphasis on young people. For example, values that foster the building of civil society – such as physical activity, healthy eating, and responsible social attitudes – are promoted (Kożuch, 2005).

The social mission and social values

The second aspect that undoubtedly forms part of the essence of the company's activity – beyond the obvious goal of generating profit – is fulfilling a social mission and promoting positive values, especially among young people. For example, one company features the slogan "Make love not war" on the back of its hoodies. These attempts also include active engagement in social media. Companies offering sportswear promote values such as sport and healthy eating. This is extremely important nowadays, as there are many negative – sometimes even pathological – patterns being directed at young consumers. The promotion of positive values takes place on well-known platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, or TikTok. Their messaging must be consistent and carefully prepared, as it forms an integral part of the company's mission and vision.

For example, one of the analysed companies focuses on inspiration, education, motivation, and providing a daily example of what the company's work looks like. Through such actions, the above-mentioned company wants to show that embracing values such as kindness, respect, hard work, passion, and commitment to creating things from the heart can lead to a happy and fulfilled life. Another example is an educational series on the basics of nutrition, conducted with a personal trainer by another analysed company. Many even micro entrepreneurs also collaborate with so-called influencers, which allows them to reach a large group of potential customers.

Public organisations – through educational activities and the conscious shaping of a positive image – strive to strengthen social trust and build a sense of community. Conducting health campaigns, collaborating with experts, or maintaining presence in digital media are all integral parts of the public mission. Modern public institutions are increasingly using contemporary communication channels for educational and motivational activities to promote social values and encourage greater citizen engagement in public life (Różycka & Lisowska, 2023).

Ways of communication

Another critical point influencing company operations is honesty in communication, i.e. authenticity. This includes direct contact with customers on online platforms and through social media, listening to suggestions and ideas, and trying to involve them in the production process so that they have a real impact on the appearance of new collections. Companies must be flexible and dynamic, adapting to current market conditions and customer needs by continuously improving

products, expanding services, and introducing innovations in line with the current trends. An ongoing market analysis also allows companies to launch additional services, which provides an opportunity to generate extra income and diversify revenue streams.

An analysis of organisational culture in companies suggests that a range of practices, despite their origins in the private sector, can serve as inspiration for public institutions. Emphasising the role of the individual and relationships based on respect and transparent communication leads to increased trust and a better coordination of activities. Clearly defining duties and responsibilities, caring for the ethical dimension of operations, and social engagement are elements that can effectively support the fulfilment of the public mission. In the public sector, this means the need to strengthen the humanistic dimension of management – one that recognises the citizen not only as a recipient of services but also as a co-creator of value (Kożuch, 2005; Schein, 2010; Grudowski & Wziątek-Staśko, 2021).

Moreover, the observation of the active use of social media by various companies – as a tool for education, the promotion of positive attitudes, or community-building – encourages reflection on their broader application in public institutions. In the context of contemporary public governance, authenticity, flexibility, and readiness for dialogue with the environment are becoming increasingly important. The ability to respond to social needs, openness to changing conditions, and integrating communication activities with the mission of the public organisation can, in the long term, contribute to increased effectiveness and social legitimacy of institutional actions (Bekkers et al., 2011; Feeney & Porumbescu, 2021; Lubasz, 2021).

Conclusions

Based on the conducted analysis of organisational culture development, the following conclusions can be drawn, which may be applicable in the public sector:

1. An organisational culture based on humanistic values has the potential to enhance the effectiveness of public-sector activities. Prioritising people and their well-being can contribute to a greater development of social trust.
2. Respect and transparent organisational communication are fundamental to effective management. A clearly defined division of tasks and greater flexibility can contribute to the improved functioning of public administration by minimising organisational disorder and boosting employee morale.
3. The social mission of public organisations goes beyond merely fulfilling statutory obligations. Like modern private enterprises, public-sector entities can actively promote social values – such as health, education, and civic engagement – through innovative methods, including the use of social media.
4. The integration of contemporary analytical and communication technologies has the potential to significantly enhance the effectiveness of public-sector initiatives. The adoption of social trend monitoring and digital marketing instruments within public campaigns can improve both the reach and the impact of these activities.

The practices such as participatory management, trust-based relations, and openness to innovation can serve as inspiration for managers operating in public institutions.

The study's limitation that could be addressed in future studies includes conducting broader research in the private and public entities in Poland in order to build a comparable knowledge base for public administration practices.

As for directions of future research, it would be interesting to investigate the organisational culture in large Polish enterprises, or even international corporations.

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Data Availability Statement
All data will be available and shared upon request.