

Guest editorial

Michael Joseph Urick

Why do we need to explore the link between culture and excellence?

In my role as Graduate Director of the Master of Science in Management: Operational Excellence at Saint Vincent College in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, USA, I have had the opportunity to work with a lot of business leaders who are interested in continuous improvement, waste reduction and problem-solving initiatives with the hope of increasing excellence within their organizations.

Unfortunately, some of these leaders adopted tools to help with such initiatives that failed. These leaders are all smart people and the tools are solid ones that could help create a positive transformation in some organizations. So, why in these instances did the tools not work? In each case, it is because the cultures of their organizations did not accept or support these tools.

Through coaching, networking and consulting I hear similar experiences time and time again. But, when I look to the academic literature on excellence and how it relates to culture, there is not much that I am able to find.

Indeed, much of the focus on business and operational excellence research is concerned primarily with aspects of process and with leveraging improvement tools. While these areas of research are of course important, they miss the fundamental issue related to culture that I note above. Yet, social aspects of organizations (such as multiple and overlapping levels of culture) likely account for some variability in an organizations' abilities to continuously improve, reduce waste and solve problem effectively.

That is not to say that absolutely no research linking excellence and culture has been undertaken. As one exception, [Kassem *et al.* \(2019\)](#) explored culture and excellence together. However, they note several limitations of their approach because of their narrow portrayal of culture and call for a further understanding of the link between culture and excellence. Therefore, calls from these researchers and others suggest that there is more work to do to understand the link between culture and operational excellence.

[Ferdowsian \(2016\)](#) attempts to explain why there may be so few pieces of research examining culture and excellence by suggesting that there are challenges associated with the complexity of exploring both of these phenomena together. After all, both excellence and culture are so complex and nuanced that there is a need for a concentrated approach (such as this special issue) to examine the interplay more thoroughly. It is for this reason that I find this special issue to be both necessary and important.

Within these following pages, social elements influenced by multiple overlapping levels of culture will be more closely examined than they have been in many extant works. In doing so, this special issue will provide future researchers with a basis for further studying social elements that impact continuous improvement, waste reduction and problem-solving initiatives. It will also help to give practitioners new ideas regarding how they must consider culture as they adjust their processes and tools to promote excellence. It should be noted that this issue is merely a starting point. There is still much work to do in this area, both with regard to academic research and also practitioner understanding of the link between culture and excellence, but this special issue can serve as a starting point for furthering the conversation.

Michael Joseph Urick is based at Alex G. McKenna School of Business, Economics and Government, Saint Vincent College, Latrobe, Pennsylvania, USA.

There are five articles in this special issue, each of which considers a different aspect of the relationship between excellence and culture. Adams, for example, explores these concepts conceptually within the context of health care in “Leadership for Reducing Medical Errors Via Organizational Culture: A Literature Review.” Likewise, in “Fostering Resilience through the Culture of Excellence (CoE) Practices: Explorative Insights From a Talent Management SME,” Joseph, Totawar and Sam consider how appropriate talent practices can drive excellence so that an organization might be buoyant and tough during crisis situations. In “Reinterpreting Excellence for Sustainable Competitive Advantage: The Role of Entrepreneurial Culture Under Information Technological Turbulence,” Pratono considers how a business-building/growing culture can help organizations to better compete in their industry especially given uncertainty that may exist in their environments. Provance, Ramisetty, Wieczorkowski and I generally and theoretically explore how cultures of excellence can be grown and influenced in organizations in “Building and Evolving a Culture of Excellence: A Conceptual Exploration.” Lastly, Macias de Anda, Sawhney and Tortorella broaden the discussion of culture beyond and organization’s culture to include geographic and national considerations related to excellence in “Developing a Robust Measurement Instrument for the Influence of National Culture on Lean Production Systems.”

Taken from the “call for papers” to which all authors submitted and underwent rigorous peer review, these articles collectively serve the following three aims of the special issue:

1. to understand the influence that organizational and geographic cultures have on continuous improvement, waste reduction and problem-solving activities in organizations;
2. to assess specific cultural elements that are most closely related to excellent business practices; and
3. to make recommendations for ways in which organizations can create their own cultures of excellence despite potential limitations that they might face.

It is my hope that this special issue and the articles herein will help you to think about the relationship between culture and excellence. Furthermore, hopefully the ideas presented in these articles can help you to think about how you might consider the interplay between excellence and culture in your upcoming projects and in your current context.

References

- Ferdowsian, M.C. (2016), “Total business excellence – a new management model for operationalizing excellence”, *International Journal of Quality & Reliability Management*, Vol. 33 No. 7, pp. 942-984, doi: [10.1108/IJQRM-08-2014-0109](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJQRM-08-2014-0109).
- Kassem, R., Ajmal, M., Gunasekaran, A. and Helo, P. (2019), “Assessing the impact of organizational culture on achieving business excellence with a moderating role of ICT”, *Benchmarking: An International Journal*, Vol. 26 No. 1, pp. 117-146, doi: [10.1108/BIJ-03-2018-0068](https://doi.org/10.1108/BIJ-03-2018-0068).