

An Organizational Behavior Study of a Long Term Health Care Facility

Brooks Barton & Donna Roberson

*The actual name of the company in this paper has been changed to conceal its identity.*

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to analyze the organizational behavior and structure of a Long Term Health Care Facility. The paper looks at several key components of this particular organization including certain ethical values that comprise the company's general mission statement and cornerstones. Lack of clarity regarding these ethical standards are at the heart of many systemic issues that occasionally cause problems within the day to day operations of XYZ Company in terms of the sometimes dichotomous relationship between profitability and clinical stability of residents. While care is never compromised at XYZ, it is important to note the ambiguity that allows for such a relationship to exist in the first place.

## **Introduction**

XYZ Company is a Long Term Health Care Facility that employs about 6,000 people nationally. They have communities in 46 states with home offices in three states. The organization was formerly known as ABC, but was bought out by XYZ in 2005 due to financial difficulties of the former company. Since XYZ took over as the parent company, many acquisitions have taken place that has caused many paradigm shifts within the counter-cultures of different facilities within the various companies. Formalized branding changes have still not taken place after almost 18 months of the transition and this has caused anxiety among some employees of XYZ Company concerning customer loyalty and name recognition issues.

XYZ Company is one of the largest industry providers in the United States and because of this is often looked at as the industry standard concerning the care of geriatric patients. In fact, XYZ has been responsible for some of the legislative acts that have become laws throughout the U.S., especially concerning the care of memory impaired patients such as Alzheimer's sufferers.

## **Organizational Behavior Trends**

As McShane and Von Glinow (2005) point out in their text, one major component involving "an organization's moral obligation" (p. 17) is its corporate social responsibility (CSR). This refers to a company's policies towards its stakeholders. Being a public company, XYZ Company must maintain ethical practices and avoid as much public scrutiny as possible in order to remain in good graces with its shareholders, customers, and government oversight committees. With these considerations in place, XYZ has stringent internal audits done on a regular basis in order to ensure that corporate guidelines are being followed on a consistent and uniform basis from building to

building. However, these inspections are only beneficial in a very limited sense because they are obviously performed on an infrequent basis. Therefore, it remains the responsibility of the management team to ensure ethically sound practices are being followed on a regular basis. This leads us to some of the more dynamic aspects of the company's work environment.

### **Workplace Values**

The value system of XYZ Company is one that involves both elements of conservatism as well as self-transcendence. They are conservative in the sense that the vast majority of the company's consumers come from backgrounds that require a stable and self-monitoring environment for reasons of safety, security, and feelings connectedness. This is a necessary component of XYZ's success with its patient population. People living in this facility must have a feeling of stability because it is paramount to their physical and mental well being. Employees are expected to maintain appropriate conservative attitudes regarding patients' historical perspectives. These include maintaining respectful attitudes, care toward residents' privacy, and above all else, discretion in their care.

Since the nature of XYZ's business is the welfare of others, self-transcendence is also a vitally important component of the company's value system. Nothing describes the purpose of this business more accurately than the need to care for others' well-being. Without this altruistic attitude, XYZ's employees would be ineffective at best, negligent and abusive at worst. This attitude is clearly visible in the organization's ethical values.

### **Ethical Values and Behaviors**

It can be argued that an ethics system is the heart and soul of any organization and XYZ Company exemplifies this assertion. As alluded to previously, this topic is one of many contradictions because it is so visceral and speaks to each individual employee in a distinct way depending on their socioeconomic backgrounds, personal belief systems, and level of maturity and self-awareness. As McShane and Von Glinow (2005) state in their text, “the number and magnitude of incidents involving corporate wrongdoing is raising serious questions about the ethical values of many corporate leaders” (p. 53). Health Care Companies are certainly not immune from unscrupulous behavior. In fact, a scathing national television news broadcast recently reported on the deplorable conditions of many facilities throughout the U.S. Of main concern was the issue of retaining patients who were no longer suitable for specific types of care settings due to advanced illness requiring a more acute clinical environment. While the reasons for this practice were not specifically mentioned in the report, it is likely that occupancies were kept at a maximum to ensure monthly budgets were maintained. The bottom line here was most likely one of moral indifference so that profit margins could be maximized. It should be noted that XYZ was not named in this broadcast and was not specifically implicated in these unscrupulous acts.

This type of moral disintegration is the cause of much concern in the corporate world. As alluded to earlier, there is some degree of ambiguity at XYZ Company regarding specific practices that will not be spoken about in detail in this paper, but this vagueness leaves some degree of subjective reasoning that must be held to a moral barometer at all times. So for this very reason, a strong moral integrity is constantly sought out in individual employees who must practice the safest of standards and

always err on the side of caution when in doubt. The question then; what drives employees to abide by these unspoken rules and practices?

### **Motivation in the Workplace**

At the heart of any well run company are the line staff who deal directly with the day to day operations of the business. These are often the hourly employees who work very structured and regimented shifts and who have very specific job descriptions. Because of this, these employees often have first hand experience of problems that may arise before management is aware of them. In this sense, they truly are an organization's first line of defense regarding potential problems and can often diffuse these situations by acting in a proactive manner. Furthermore, it is important to realize that employee satisfaction is often an indicator as to whether problems will be prevalent or minimal within a company. One reason for this is the fact that line employees often can act as saboteurs to a corporation, unwitting or otherwise, if they are dissatisfied with their jobs. Motivating these employees should be of paramount importance to any company who seeks to keep negative incidents to a minimum, and yet often corporations simply adopt an ambivalent attitude toward their most valuable employees.

During our analysis of XYZ Company, it became apparent that the company recognizes the importance of its line employees who are the care-givers to its residents and thus are the backbone of its infrastructure. These employees must stay motivated to perform their jobs with efficiency and enthusiasm, otherwise the residents will suffer. It keeps its employees motivated by taking into account their ERG needs as stated illustrated by McShane and Von Glinow (p. 141.) These include their existence needs, relatedness needs, and growth needs.

Existence needs are met through most jobs through the form monetary restitution. Of course earning a check is important for basic living needs, but it does not speak to relatedness or growth needs. These needs are met through special incentive programs that XYZ Company offers to its employees in the forms of special bonuses and recognition awards for good job performance. Further, XYZ often promotes from within which leads to growth needs being met for those who wish to move upward within the company. The effectiveness of these practices can be shown by the company's relatively low turn-over rate (20% XYZ vs. 60% *Industry Average annually*). Even so, in the dynamic and fast paced environment that is health care, it is important to monitor the emotions of employees as a measure of overall job satisfaction.

### **Workplace Emotions**

In any environment where people are living together under one roof, emotional dynamics obviously come into play. According to McShane and VonGlinow, emotional responses are based on their level of "pleasantness and activation" (p. 111). In other words, depending how threatening or stimulating an emotion is deemed will determine what specific action will be taken. For example, since fear is an uncomfortable emotion for most, it is likely that it will elicit a fight or flight response.

Within XYZ Company, the associates try to ensure that emotional responsiveness is appropriate at all times. The employees are trained to understand situations that require immediate action and those that require a more passive response. An example of a situation that would require an immediate response would be a fall from one of the company's patients. It is important that while immediate action

is taken, the employee also remember specific protocols for that particular incident. The appropriate emotional response is beneficial for a number of reasons.

First, it ensures that the residents receive the most effective care in any given situation. It also ensures that XYZ Company is not subject to any liability suits that may hurt the company's reputation or financial status. Lastly, it helps to keep a consistent attitude among employees and residents who work and live together on a daily basis. This dynamic is unique to certain care providers such as Long Term Care. Because XYZ's residents live under the same roof, it is vitally important that its employees remain at all times emotionally stable to offer the residents a feeling of comfort and stability. One of the most effective ways of ensuring this happens is by looking at the factors that cause stress and by dealing with them appropriately.

### **The Causes of Stress**

McShane and Von Glinow identify stressors as "environmental conditions that cause stress" (p. 208). These stressors can be interpersonal, role-related, task controlled, organizational and physical environment, or work/non-work related. One of the most frequently seen types of stress at XYZ Company is role-related and arises from work overload. A large percentage of XYZ's employees are hourly workers who earn a relatively low income as care attendants to the patients. The average wage in South Carolina for a care attendant is approximately \$7.50 per hour. This has led many of XYZ's employees to seek second and sometimes third jobs in order to live adequately. A considerable number of its line employees are forced to hold more than one job because they are frequently single income families and may not have any additional

support. It is interesting to note that experts point out that by the year 2030, the average employees would be “working a 15-hour workweek” (McShane and Von Glinow, p. 211.) A plurality of XYZ’s line employees is already working these hours and sometimes more.

This fact creates work overload in many cases for the care attendants and can be a source of major stress among employees. XYZ Company currently has no specific protocols in place to deal with the stress that result from these factors. As mentioned earlier, industry wide XYZ has a high retention rate among its care-givers. This is opposite of what one would expect when dealing with high levels of stress. One must be careful not to draw conclusions about the reasons for this without a proper analysis of the facts. It may well be that economic necessity and not job satisfaction is the predominate reason for high employee retention. Of course, there are many companies these employees could work for, so why do they choose to stay loyal to XYZ? It may well be a combination of factors, but at any rate some formal research should be conducted to ascertain the reason. If it is shown that there is some sense of job dissatisfaction, it may be necessary to improve certain elements of the workplace in order to cut down on overall stress levels.

### **Improving Perceptions and Behavior Modification**

A key factor to improving work place communications, feelings of connectivity and self-empowerment, as well as job productivity is how one perceives his or her place at a particular company. We all have mental models which essentially are schemas or templates regarding how we view ourselves and each other (McShane and VonGlinow, 2005). These social perceptions are often subtle feelings employees may have about one another. A unique element of XYZ Company’s work environment is the fact that its

customers are also very much part of this stereotyping because they are also patients within the individual facilities. Because of this, it is important to constantly offer guidance in the form of training modules and periodic job evaluations. The most important part of this process is one of behavior modification.

Behavior modification deals with changing actions through awareness training in which employees are asked a number of questions regarding their feelings about particular issues that may be of importance to them. These range in topic from feelings about individual job expectations to workplace dynamics involving coworkers as well as residents. It is interesting to note that the majority of complaints from care attendants revolve around the patients and not co-worker disputes. One likely cause for this may be due to the diversity between the two populations. The attendants are mostly African-American, female, and fairly young (30 years or younger). The residents on the other hand are mostly Caucasian, female, and elderly (80 years or older). Because of this, it is important for the management to attempt at times to bridge the diversity gap between XYZ Company's employees and those they are caring for.

By employing the concepts of behavior modification, the company can remain proactive by teaching the fundamentals of antecedents, behaviors, and consequences. A common example of this approach at XYZ Company is its cultural diversity awareness program that every employee must undergo before they are allowed to work. This class teaches the employees about appropriate responses to certain situations that may come up frequently due to culturally and historically different perceptions. By teaching the employees about these differences and likely outcomes or consequences of specific behaviors, a greater sense of self-awareness and self-monitoring can be achieved.

## **Organizational Change**

It seemed appropriate to conclude this paper with the topic of organizational change since the company was recently purchased and will undergo a branding change in the near future. As mentioned previously, this has left some with a sense of uncertainty in terms of what the future may hold for the company. Of particular value is Lewin's Force Field Analysis Model which is a measure of how the change process works. This model is especially instructive because it looks at the driving forces that accompany change and explains how these forces can affect corporations in the midst of change. It is essentially a business model of specific reactionary forces.

There are many reasons why a company resists change, but one of the most common and salient regarding the ABC/XYZ transition is the fear of the unknown. McShane and Von Glinow explain, "...people resist change because they are worried that they cannot adopt the new behaviors. Further, the fear of the unknown increases the risk of personal loss." (p. 507.) This fear of the unknown is one of the most obvious factors regarding the employees at ABC/XYZ because they want to ensure that personal qualities such as their ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and personal visions will be valued in the future. In order to alleviate unnecessary stress and turnover in the future, the management and executive teams should consider the development of a company wide protocol for dealing with these concerns. This protocol should be communicated clearly from the top down in order to create a sense of value among all associates.

## References

McShane, S., & Glinow, M. (2005). *Organizational behavior: Emerging realities for the workplace revolution*. New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.

