

On the Management of Culture within Business Process Management

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Abstract

In recent years, researchers and practitioners seem to be in agreement about the crucial role of culture in the management of business processes. While the relevance of culture in business process management (BPM) is relatively widely accepted, little is known about how to get beyond this awareness to specific solutions on how to deal with cultural issues. Drawing conclusions from the results of previous studies, I report on possibilities to manage culture in BPM. Based on these insights, I call for an active management of culture in BPM practice and for in-depth studies on culture management in BPM research. With this position paper, I intend to stimulate future research on how to consciously consider and handle culture as a factor in BPM practice.

Key words: organizational culture, Business Process Management, BPM culture, cultural fitness, culture management.

Izveček

O upravljanju kulture pri menedžmentu poslovnih procesov

V zadnjih letih se raziskovalci in praktiki vse bolj zavedajo ključne vloge, ki jo igra kultura pri menedžmentu poslovnih procesov. Čeprav je zavest o pomenu kulture v poslovnih procesih prisotna že dlje, pa je manj znano, kako to zavest preseči in jo udejaniti v konkretnih rešitvah za obravnavanje kulturno specifičnih zadev. Na podlagi izsledkov in rezultatov preteklih študij v prispevku opisujemo možnosti za upravljanje kulture pri menedžmentu poslovnih procesov. Predvsem iz njih izhaja spoznanje, da je v praksi menedžmenta poslovnih procesov nujno aktivno upravljanje kulture in da se je v raziskavah menedžmenta poslovnih procesov potrebno podrobneje posvetiti upravljanju kulture. S tem mnenjskim prispevkom želimo spodbuditi nadaljnje raziskave o vprašanih, kako se zavestno ukvarjati s kulturo ter kako jo obravnavati kot pomemben dejavnik v menedžmentu poslovnih procesov.

Ključne besede: organizacijska kultura, menedžment poslovnih procesov, kultura menedžmenta poslovnih procesov, kulturna čilost, upravljanje kulture.

1 INTRODUCTION

Business process management (BPM) has become a key management approach when it comes to reaching business goals such as operational excellence and business transformation. While information technology (IT) plays an important role in realizing those targets in today's digital world, particularly soft factors such as culture represent a key driver for success or failure of respective projects. In recent years, researchers and practitioners have widely acknowledged the critical role culture plays in the management of business processes, i.e. in both process execution and process change (Hammer, 2010; Rosemann & de Bruin, 2005; Smart, Maddern, & Maull, 2009; Štemberger & Jaklič, 2007; Vukšić, Hauc, & Kovačič, 2010).

Typically, BPM projects are initiated in an organization with the intention to improve the effici-

ency and effectiveness of business processes, e.g., through IT systems or process standardization or a combination of the two. Many of such projects neglect the importance of considering the prevailing organizational culture and eventually managing required culture change along with the overall BPM project (Dixon & Jones, 2011). Under these circumstances, BPM projects are likely to fail because the principle of a holistic management, that includes cultural factors, is ignored (vom Brocke et al., 2014).

Even though researchers and practitioners have identified culture as one of the success factors of BPM some years ago (Armistead, Pritchard, & Machin, 1999; Zairi, 1997), today still little is known about how to go beyond this awareness. Only few studies

have recently tried to conceptualize the role of culture in BPM (vom Brocke & Sinnl, 2011) and to gain a deeper understanding of what makes up a culture that is supportive of BPM, i.e. a so-called BPM culture (Schmiedel, vom Brocke, & Recker, 2013). While previous studies have contributed to more in-depth knowledge on the culture phenomenon in BPM, still much needs to be learned about how to manage culture in BPM initiatives.

Thus, the purpose of this position paper is to emphasize the importance of an active management of culture in BPM practice and, at the same time, to emphasize the importance of in-depth studies on culture management in BPM research. Against this background, this paper particularly intends to stimulate future research on how to consciously consider and handle culture as a factor in BPM practice. Both researchers and practitioners may use and further develop the introduced approach towards managing culture in BPM. The approach may also serve as a general starting point for creating a comprehensive awareness that culture management is crucial part of BPM.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The subsequent section elaborates on the understanding of BPM and culture that underlies this paper. The third section explains the role of culture in BPM in-depth and introduces an approach to consciously manage culture as part of BPM. Section four expands on the implications of this approach for both research and practice. Finally, the last section concludes with a summary and outlook.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 Understanding of BPM

In recent years, BPM seems to have developed into the state-of-the-art management approach for operating and changing business in organizations. Apart from its virtual omnipresence in practice, BPM has also become an important pillar in research, which has reached a status that may even further develop into an own discipline (Dixon & Jones, 2011). While many management approaches flourished along with business hypes driven by vendors and service providers, the popularity of BPM seems to stem from its fundamental relevance for business rather than from product and service revenues.

This relevance builds on the fact that, obviously, the management of business processes is at the core

of organizational activities (Hammer, 2010). Since every business runs its operations through processes which transform input into output demanded by customers, managing processes has always been key to business. In fact, multiple management approaches have dealt with the management of processes from different viewpoints.

In the early 20th century, scientific management was concerned with the efficiency of processes, which was thought to be achieved through increased labor productivity (Taylor, 1911). Other prominent management approaches which represent predecessors of BPM include total quality management (TQM) and business process reengineering (BPR) (Crosby, 1979; Davenport, 1993). TQM focuses on the continuous improvement of business processes, constantly increasing the efficiency of process execution through incremental changes. Compared to TQM, BPR rather aims for fundamental changes and innovations in business processes to increase their effectiveness (Hammer, 2010).

The common thread of these and other approaches such as lean management, Kaizen, six sigma, and business transformation lies in operating and changing business to increase both the efficiency and effectiveness of business processes. While each of these management approaches has a slightly different focus (e.g., quality, leanness, radical change), they all contribute to the overarching approach of BPM (Harmon, 2010). The various predecessors of BPM allow deriving two key BPM objectives from their ultimate goals, i.e. the realization of both efficient and effective business processes (Smith & Fingar, 2004).

In the digital world of today, these objectives are often enabled through IT. Against this background, it seems little surprising that BPM, in its early years, mostly focused on IT systems (Davenport & Short, 1990). Particularly, supporting and enabling work flows (e.g., running automated processes from digital process models) was at the core of early BPM research and also dominant in BPM practice (Reijers, 2003). Yet, the awareness for the need of a comprehensive understanding of BPM has constantly increased.

Today, BPM is widely understood as a holistic management approach (Hammer, 2010; Kohlbacher & Gruenwald, 2011; Trkman, 2010), that goes beyond methods and IT, also considering strategic, governmental, cultural and people-related factors (Rosemann & vom Brocke, 2010). While implicitly

business processes have always been managed in organizations, BPM represents an all-encompassing approach that makes for the conscious management of processes according to comprehensive principles (vom Brocke et al., 2014). The role of culture in BPM has only been addressed in research in recent years (Schmiedel et al., 2013; vom Brocke & Sinnl, 2011).

2.2 Understanding of culture

Culture has always been a concept that is hard to grasp. Researchers have defined culture in many different ways. For example, Parsons and Shils (1951) refer to patterns of value-orientation as the crucial cultural elements, Hofstede (2005) defines culture as the collective programming of the mind, and Schein (2004) refers to shared underlying assumptions. Despite the slight differences in definitions, culture researchers commonly agree that shared values that are lived by the members of a group make up the core of culture.

Using the metaphor of an iceberg (Selfridge & Sokolik, 1975), shared values are often compared with the invisible part of an iceberg that lies underneath the surface and represents the largest part of the iceberg (see Figure 1). All visible elements of culture, however, only make up the small part above the surface. To these belong all kinds of actions and structures, such as behaviors, rituals, routines, architecture, clothing, organization charts. Schein (2004) refers to them as artifacts. Through these actions and structures, the underlying invisible values are represented, i.e. become visible.

An important point to recognize is that every group with a common history has a culture (Schein, 1990), i.e. shares specific values, regardless of whether its members are aware of it or not. While the culture concept focuses on the commonalities of people,

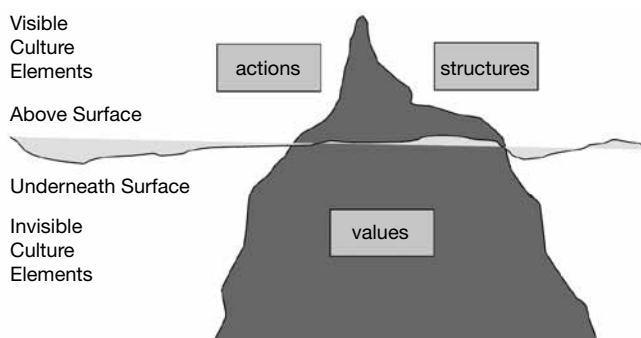


Figure 1: Illustration of culture

a group culture does not imply that its members are completely homogeneous. To the contrary, cultures typically consist of several group cultures (Schein, 1990). For example, employees of an organization share a certain understanding of how to collaborate but often this general understanding differs between employees of different departments.

People usually have multiple cultural identities since they are part of several cultural groups (Huntington, 1997). Such groups may include a region, a nation, a profession, an organization, and a department. The large number of cultural identities of a single person already gives a hint on the multifaceted nature of cultural phenomena (Straub, Loch, Evaristo, Karahanna, & Srite, 2002). The complexity of cultural phenomena becomes all the more apparent in project groups with people from different nations, professions, and organizations. Against the background of this culture understanding, the subsequent section elaborates on the management of culture in BPM.

3 TOWARDS MANAGING CULTURE IN BPM

3.1 Culture as a scapegoat and concept of good minds

BPM initiatives typically start with the clear goal to enhance process performance for reasons of efficiency and effectiveness (DeToro & McCabe, 1997). Particularly in global organizations, it is obvious that BPM projects easily become very complex due to the size of the organization. This also naturally implies that not every employee can be involved to the same extent. However, a lack of general employee involvement is found to be counterproductive for BPM success as it can lead to significant resistances and ultimately to project failure (vom Brocke et al., 2014). Further examples of mismanagement in BPM projects include a lack of transparency on the purpose of BPM projects and a lack of communication of benefits for the organization (vom Brocke et al., 2014). While there are many reasons for the failure of BPM initiatives, culture sometimes seems to be an easy way out in explaining a lack of success. Claiming that cultural resistances caused project failure can be convenient because it is difficult to grasp culture phenomena.

I caution, however, against using culture too easily as a scapegoat for insufficient project management. It is important to distinguish generally shared values, including the way they become visible in an

organization, from single interests or inabilities. Of course, cultural phenomena are difficult to decipher (Schein, 2004), but this distinction represents a first step towards managing culture in BPM. Only by recognizing the specifics of the existing organizational culture, it is possible to derive implications for culture management.

From my perspective, such culture management should, however, not be reduced to working towards a culture of mutual respect. While there are very good reasons to argue that the appreciation of each other as individuals generally supports work collaborations, culture management, particularly in the context of BPM, goes far beyond aspects of being nice to each other. If, however, culture is perceived as a topic of good minds in an organization, I argue that culture management lacks sustainable effectiveness because critical values for the success of BPM would be neglected.

I caution, therefore, against adopting a culture understanding of starry-eyed idealists when actively managing culture in BPM. Such an understanding could, also, lead to blaming culture for project failure because mutual appreciation as a value is insufficient for a culture that supports BPM. In a BPM context, culture management is about actively managing what is perceived by employees as the right way to run and change business processes. The next section elaborates on the understanding of culture as a manageable factor in BPM.

3.2 Culture as a manageable factor in BPM

Practitioners and researchers have recognized culture as a critical factor for successful BPM programs. While some find, for example, that “BPM as a discipline requires an organization to change its culture and its work practices” (Dixon & Jones, 2011, p. 12), emphasizing an influence of BPM on culture, others identify culture to be highly influential on BPM initiatives (Hammer, 2010; Ruževičius, Klimas, & Veleckaitė, 2012). Further authors refer to the notion of a BPM culture, relating to cultural requirements for a successful BPM approach (Jesus, Macieira, Karer, & Caulliraux, 2010; Zairi, 1997).

Even though such contributions imply different relations between the concepts BPM and culture, the relevance of culture in BPM is undisputed. Yet, there is hardly any attempt to go beyond the recognition of culture as a factor in BPM. Only recently, researchers have started to study culture phenomena in BPM in

more depth (Schmiedel et al., 2013; Schmiedel, vom Brocke, & Recker, 2014; vom Brocke & Sinnl, 2011). Such studies have also specified the relation between BPM and culture.

The BPM-Culture-Model (see Figure 2) that was developed by vom Brocke and Sinnl (2011), for example, illustrates the interconnection of BPM and culture. The model consists of three key concepts. At its core is the concept of BPM culture, which is defined as a culture supportive of achieving BPM objectives, i.e. the efficiency and effectiveness of business processes. It refers to key cultural values that are inherent in BPM as a management approach.

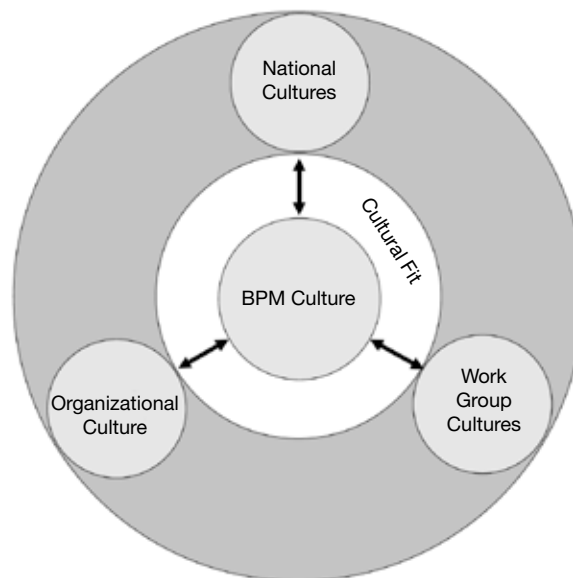


Figure 2: BPM-Culture-Model (Schmiedel, vom Brocke, & Recker, 2012b)

While a BPM culture represents a to-be culture for BPM initiatives, every BPM project faces a given cultural context (as-is culture) at the beginning. This cultural context consists of various, complexly intertwined group cultures (e.g., organizational culture, national cultures, work group cultures). According to the BPM-Culture-Model, a successful BPM initiative requires a cultural fit, i.e. a basic congruence, between BPM culture and cultural context.

Based on this model, the mutual influence of BPM and culture on each other and the relation to the concept of BPM culture can be explained as follows. BPM influences the culture of an organization if the as-is culture is not yet compatible with the values inherent in BPM. The prevailing culture, in turn, may be perceived as slowing down the adoption of BPM

in the organization, i.e. negatively influencing the BPM initiative, until it embraces the BPM supportive values of a BPM culture.

Following the insights of the BPM-Culture-Model, previous research has already specified what makes up the concept of BPM culture. Schmiedel et al. (2013) explored in a Delphi study which cultural values are supportive of realizing efficient and effective business processes. In this study, four key values have been identified, which are called CERT values based on their acronym (see Table 1). Each of these values consists of two dimensions which further specify the values.

Table 1: CERT values and their dimensions (based on Schmiedel et al., 2013)

CERT values	Dimensions	
Customer orientation	External customer	Internal customer
Excellence	Continuous improvement	Innovation
Responsibility	Accountability	Responsibility
Teamwork	Formal structures	Informal structures

Understanding the relation between BPM and culture and also understanding the notion of BPM culture in more detail represents an important step towards considering culture as a manageable factor in BPM projects. The potential conflict between cultural values generally shared in an organization and cultural values inherent in a BPM approach, i.e. required to be shared for successful BPM, is at the core of culture management in a BPM context.

3.3 Culture management in BPM

Based on the specification of BPM culture through the CERT values, previous research also operationalized the concept (Schmiedel et al., 2014). Apart from understanding the concept even more in-depth, the goal of this operationalization was to be able to assess how far an existing organizational culture supports a BPM approach. For this purpose, a survey instrument was developed which uses several items for each of the CERT value dimensions to operationalize the concept of BPM culture.

The instrument measures the degree to which an organization shares the values of a BPM culture. Based on the perceptions of employees, an organization can assess its prevailing as-is culture to understand the status quo of its organizational culture in terms of its supportiveness for a BPM approach. Aggrega-

ting the responses of survey participants, a specific cultural profile can be determined which illustrates to which percentage the existing culture is perceived as facilitating BPM (see Figure 3).

As indicated in Figure 3, several cultural profiles can be compared with each other. Such profiles can stem from various backgrounds. For example, a culture assessment can distinguish between the perceptions of employees from different departments within one organization or between perceptions of employees from different hierarchical levels. Further, a culture analysis of one organization can be compared to analyses of other organizations, benchmarking, for example, organizations within one industry or organizations of similar size (Schmiedel, vom Brocke, & Recker, 2012a).

Such comparisons of culture profiles provide a basis for deriving strategies for the development of an organizational culture (Tumbas & Schmiedel, 2013; Tumbas, Schmiedel, Bringmann, & vom Brocke, 2013). Based on the as-is culture, the to-be culture has to be determined in a first stage of culture development, i.e. the minimum degree to which each value dimension should necessarily be shared in the organization in order for a certain BPM project to be culturally supported.

The comparison of culture profiles and the identification of as-is and to-be culture then allow to derive concrete activities for the development of the existing organizational culture. While there might be some generic actions and structures how to realize the CERT values in an organization, activities for culture development should also be derived on a process level, i.e. specific to a certain process of the organization. This approach represents one concrete way how to manage culture in a BPM context. However, there may be several other ways complementing or further developing this one.

4 IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Practitioner call

From the introduced approach towards managing culture in BPM practice, three key implications can be derived which may serve as general guidelines for practitioners when setting up a BPM initiative. While the above introduced culture management approach contains some more detailed ways of proceeding, the three implications are rather abstract since the inten-

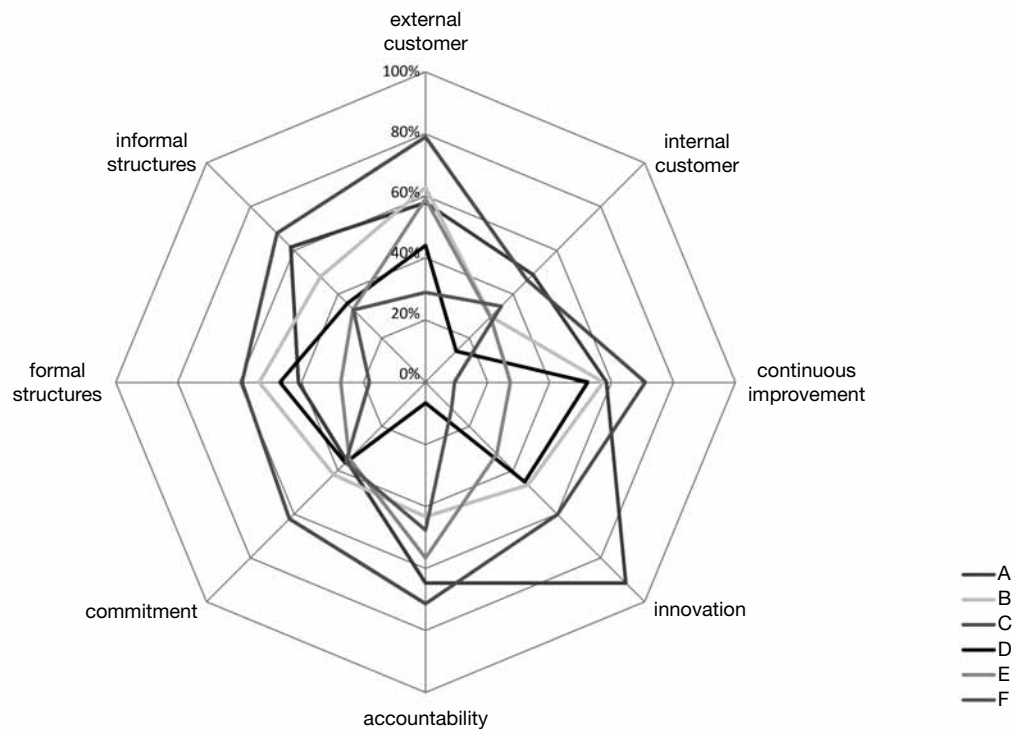


Figure 3: Exemplary culture assessment results

tion of this position paper is not to provide a well-elaborated procedural frame but a general frame of thoughts for managing culture as part of BPM.

- **Avoid passively perceiving culture as a scapegoat for difficulties in BPM projects.**

Even though various cultural phenomena can form significant resistances in BPM projects and may even contain the risk of project failure, not all project difficulties that seem to be complex to explain in the first place, should be attributed to culture simply because it is a concept hard to grasp. Thus, I call for awareness of what makes up the concept of culture and, particularly, for avoiding to perceive culture as a blurry and easy to blame marginal phenomenon.

- **Recognize culture as an actively manageable factor in BPM initiatives.**

Based on the insights of previous studies, culture phenomena can actively be managed in BPM initiatives. Such management should not build on generic measures such as top management support, but rather focus on the specific values which are inherent in BPM as an approach and must be shared, also by top management, to realize BPM success. Therefore, I call for understanding culture as a manageable factor in BPM practice and, particularly, for an active, value-based culture management.

- **Manage required culture change from the beginning of corporate BPM programs.**

While cultural phenomena do *not necessarily* influence BPM programs, BPM should include assessing potentially required cultural change at the start of an initiative through measures such as the introduced survey approach. Actually mandatory change can then build on the initial analysis to derive specific culture management strategies. Thus, I call for consciously managing culture as an integral part of BPM and, particularly, for contemplating both quantitative and qualitative measures for culture management.

These implications build on each other and, overall, form a call for practitioners to increase the awareness that cultural phenomena can and should actively be managed from the beginning of every BPM initiative independent of its size. However, practitioners should also be aware that these guidelines are limited in that they were conceptually derived from the introduced previous studies and have not been tested in practice yet. Still, they may serve as a starting point towards a conscious management of culture in BPM programs.

4.2 Researcher call

Tying in with the implications for practice, also three key implications for researchers can be derived, whi-

ch may inspire or guide future research activities in the area of culture in BPM. While some specific areas of future research are outlined, these implications are rather abstract in nature. However, this position paper does not intend to provide an elaborate roadmap for research but rather an overarching frame of reference when studying cultural phenomena in BPM projects.

- **Go beyond the recognition of culture as a potential hindrance of BPM approaches.**

Research has often identified culture as a barrier for successfully realizing BPM projects. While this is an important insight, research on cultural phenomena in BPM should go beyond analysis and description towards explanation, prediction, and design and action (Gregor, 2006). Thus, I call for building on extant insights regarding the hindering role of culture in BPM initiatives, with the particular goal to gain additional knowledge on culture in BPM in terms of Gregor's (2006) type II to V theories.

- **Learn about culture as a manageable enabler of BPM initiatives.**

Apart from the recognition of culture as a potential barrier for BPM, research has also recognized culture as an enabler of BPM initiatives. However, it seems that research has hardly focused on the transition of culture from being perceived as a hindrance towards being perceived as an enabler. Therefore, I call for recognizing culture as a manageable enabler of BPM projects and, particularly, for studying culture as a natural part of management activities in BPM, as is strategy management or project management.

- **Study concrete ways how to manage culture in BPM practice.**

While the introduced approach towards culture management offers a first possibility on how to manage culture in BPM practice, research should further examine and develop concrete methods. Thus, I call for in-depth research on culture management that offers instructions on how to generally handle culture in BPM practice and that derives specific instructions from particular patterns of culture development strategies.

Overall, the above introduced implications for research are intended to call attention towards studying cultural phenomena in the field of BPM more in-depth, particularly including studies that identify specific recommendations on how to manage culture in BPM practice. When trying to build on the introduced implications though, researchers should, howe-

ver, be aware of the limitations in deriving them, i.e. future research may test the identified implications in an attempt to validate them and possibly revise or specify them.

5 CONCLUSION

The objective of this position paper was, first, to underline the relevance of actively managing culture in BPM practice and, second, to underline the relevance of studying culture management in-depth in BPM research. Based on a commonly shared understanding of BPM and culture, previous studies have been introduced to explain the role of culture in BPM and to introduce an approach to consciously manage culture as part of BPM.

Drawing conclusions from the suggested way of culture management in BPM, I derived several implications for practice and research. Generally, I call for an active management of culture in BPM practice and for in-depth studies on culture management in BPM research. With this call, I particularly intend to stimulate future research on how to consciously consider and handle culture as a factor critical to BPM success.

The introduced approach towards managing culture in BPM initiatives may serve as a starting point for creating a general awareness that culture management is an important part of BPM. While the approach may be further developed, revised, and complemented, and while the suggested implications for research and practice require empirical validation, this position paper may help to understand culture management as a natural part of managing both process execution and process change.

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