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Shared understanding across organizational divisions

A qualitative study of store managers in a corporate cultural change process

Hanna Johansson and Therese Erenius

Supervisor: Ola Bergström

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Hanna Johansson

*Master of Science in Management. Graduate School
School of Business, Economics and Law at Gothenburg University*

Therese Erenius

*Master of Science in Management. Graduate School
School of Business, Economics and Law at Gothenburg University*

Abstract

This study investigates how an organization going through a corporate culture change is performing boundary work and through that reaches a shared understanding among organizational members. During any kind of organizational change, the understanding of boundaries may be altered, hence it needs to be managed in order to steer the organization towards change. This paper applies a qualitative approach where primary data mainly consist of interviews with store managers from a retail company, revealing a previously shattered organization which has successfully reached a common understanding through their cultural change program by performing various types of boundary work. The CEO, value ambassadors of the new culture and regional managers are identified as boundary spanners performing boundary spanning activities such as store visits and culture meetings. Furthermore, the core values of the case company are defined as boundary spanning ideas contributing to boundary discourse. Together, these roles, actions and ideas contributed to the boundary crossing of organizational levels, resulting in a shared understanding which may be seen as a new wider organizational boundary in which the organization performed boundary maintenance work to preserve. By creating different experiences of involvement for organizational members across all divisions of the company through the means of boundary work, store managers experienced a feeling of integration and participation resulting in a shared understanding. Ultimately, this paper contributes to the well-proven fields of both organizational culture change and boundary work by utilizing the notions of boundary work in a cultural change process to display how a shared understanding among organizational members was reached.

Keywords: Cultural change, internal boundaries, boundary work, store managers

Introduction

The notion of corporate culture has achieved increasing attention among both scholars and practitioners in recent years (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2007; Hogan & Coote, 2014). The renewed interest in corporate culture is due to cases of prosperous companies such as Google and Apple, considered to have a solid internal culture which has influenced other businesses that organizational culture is of utmost importance (Forbes, 2018). Having a strong culture is described by many to create alignment and motivation among employees to strive towards common goals (Kotter & Heskett, 1992), function as a differentiation factor from other organizations (Williams, 2002) and is positively interlinked with organizational performance (Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Taheri, Monshizadeh & Ebrahimi Kordiani, 2015). It is therefore not uncommon for organizations to strive for cultural change (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). The changes could be means to create a whole new cultural foundation or as a way to change current structures and processes to align the culture with organizational goals (ibid.). Several studies have investigated cases of culture change in order to identify its key features (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2007; Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003; Harris & Ogbonna, 1998). However, few of these studies have been able to present successful examples of how the culture change has improved the business or how the culture has been rooted among organizational members.

Studies regarding implementation of organizational culture rather point to the problematic aspects of implementing cultural change programs. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2007) for example argue that cultural change initiatives may be seen as “paper products of utopian values”, sequentially moving from one hierarchical level to another and forced upon employees of the company. Ogbonna and Wilkinson (2003) provide another example by illustrating the difficulties of knowing whether an organizational cultural change has really taken place or not, where superior and subordinates felt monitored by the head office during the change and with fear of losing their jobs changed their behavior accordingly. As Harris and Ogbonna (1998) further argue, culture change can be an outcome of instrumental value compliance rather than a change of the values themselves. Organizational members reinterpret and reinvent the culture initiative, often communicated and enforced by top management, thus producing unintended outcomes (ibid.). Therefore, organizational members understanding of a cultural change cannot be expected to follow the organizational beliefs and values imposed by top management (ibid.).

Nevertheless, there are several examples of normative methods and models aiming at securing successful implementation of cultural change in organizations. Cameron and Quinn (2011) for example, offer an organizational culture assessment instrument (OCAI), claiming that it is possible to calculate not only the preferred organizational culture but also the desire for cultural change within companies. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2007) present the N-step model, which holds promises of an organizational wide transformation, by following a linear pattern of transformation, starting by evaluating the current and desired culture in connection to goals and strategic direction. By acknowledging a gap between the existing and the wanted culture, an implementation plan should be developed to spread the culture, including recruitment and maintenance of people favoring the new culture, as well as promotion of individuals who

express and symbolize the desired culture (ibid.). Smith and Stewart (2011) further proclaim it is top management's responsibility to impose formalized rituals in order to align employees' understanding of the intended direction set by top management. A problem with these normative ideas and models is that they tend to exaggerate the role and ability of top managers to influence or affect the norms and values of organizational members. As Meyerson and Martin (1987) suggest, there are several ways in which organizational culture may be created or how a shared understanding among organizational members may be achieved, highlighting cultural perspectives of integration, differentiation and ambiguity. However, with these perspectives and models, there is a risk of creating a limited and narrow picture of how a common understanding among organizational members is created through the changes of organizational culture. What these studies all underestimate is the significance of involvement and participation of organizational actors throughout a corporate cultural change.

This paper reports on a case study of a successful effort to create a common understanding among organizational members in the context of a cultural change program. Drawing upon the literature on boundary work, we will argue that cultural change can be seen as a way to affect how boundaries between organizational divisions are understood by organizational members. Boundary work is about what individuals define as separating one thing from another (Liberati, 2017). Culture change is about creating a shared common belief across groups, divisions and institutions (Cameron & Quinn, 2011; Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Schein, 1985). Hence, boundary work may be an appropriate analytical tool to use in relation to cultural change as they both revolve around individuals' understanding of their relation to other individuals. In contrast to previous studies of organizational culture change, this research outlines a case of how the process of developing a common understanding took place. Therefore, the aim of this research is to develop a better understanding of how cultural change programs contribute to a shared understanding among organizational members. Consequently, the research question for this paper is:

How is a shared understanding among organizational members created through organizational culture change?

In order to answer the research question, we examine a case of a retail company that is in its last phase of implementing a new corporate culture, seen as a process which successfully developed a shared understanding. Middle managers in previous change literature has been emphasized as important change recipients (Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003; Harris & Ogbonna, 1998) hence they were believed to be interesting actors to focus on for this study. The findings suggest that the cultural change program contributed to change how organizational boundaries were understood among middle managers (store managers). Various forms of boundary work are identified as means for crossing and reinforcing how internal boundaries were understood within the case company which ultimately led to their shared understanding. In the sections as follows, we will present the chosen theoretical framework of boundary work, a brief summary of the case company's history followed by the methodological approach of this study. Thereafter, the empirical findings will be presented which the following analysis will be built

on. As a final part of the paper, we will offer theoretical contributions and practical implications along with suggestions for further studies.

Theoretical framework

Boundaries and boundary work

Boundaries are separations established to separate one entity from another (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000; Gieryn, 1983), defining entities (people, groups or objects) as insiders while others are referred to as outsiders (Aldrich & Herker, 1977). The creation of boundaries derives from different types of boundary work (Quick & Feldman, 2014) thereby, boundary work is considered the creation, negotiation and maintenance of these boundaries (Liberati, 2017). Looking at cultural change from the perspective of boundary work will allow for an analysis of how the understanding of boundaries change in the context of cultural change. Lindberg, Walter and Raviola (2017) argue for a recursive relationship between practice and boundaries, where practice drives changes in boundaries. Any organizational change implies the transition of one way of working to another, thereby practices also change (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010; Lindberg et al., 2017). Furthermore, the arguments for the interplay between boundary work and practices are put forward by Andersen and Kragh (2015), Lindberg et al. (2017) as well as Zietsma and Lawrence (2010) where boundaries are shaping practices. Organizational actors react to changing environments by constructing new boundaries, therefore a change of practices may affect current boundaries (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). Hence, during a process of cultural change it can be expected that boundaries perceived to separate individuals and groups will change. This study will shed light on how this process takes place and how cultural change can be viewed in terms of boundary work.

Historical development of boundary work

Boundary work as a concept has its origin in the work of Gieryn (1983) as a mean to demarcate science from non-science. The author focuses on the rhetoric of scientists to describe boundary work and states that demarcations are discursively constructed by scientists, reflecting researchers own closest interest of legitimizing science. Since the contributions of Gieryn (1983), a wide range of research concerning boundary work has emerged where authors have used the concept to explain various phenomena such as professional identity (Liberati, 2017), knowledge sharing (Evans & Scarbrough, 2014), coordination (Kellogg, Orlikowski & Yates, 2006) and team performance (Faraj & Yan, 2009). With regards to boundary work, Quick and Feldman (2014) put forward two contrasting perspectives - a static and a dynamic view. Developing on the first perspective, early studies by e.g. Abbott (1996) view boundaries as stable and pre-existing barriers reinforcing separation. Hence, in this view boundary work aims to overcome these barriers (ibid.). In line with the static view, there is research looking at different types of boundary work independently from each other. Caldwell, O'Reilly, & Campbell, (1982) for example, investigate the work of boundary spanning isolated from other types of boundary work and its connection to individual performance, finding that individual differences affect performance where self-monitoring is a highly favorable trait that enhances performance.

As a development from the static view of boundary work, Quick and Feldman (2014) stress the latter perspective of boundary work, treating it as means for connection rather than separation. They conclude in their study that boundaries are dynamic rather than stable and that boundaries become visible and interacted when boundary work is performed (ibid.), hence opposing the previous notion of boundaries as pre-existing. Lindberg et al. (2017) state that one cannot view different types of boundary work exclusively since the interaction between social and contextual factors will then get lost. Therefore, one must acknowledge the integration of different types of boundary work (ibid.). By describing boundaries as emergent, relational and active as well as promoting boundary work practices as junctures enabling connections, Quick and Feldman (2014) argue it will ease the understanding of dealing with disruption and constrained resources and thereby support resilience. Hunter (2004) add to these arguments by outlining the notion of boundary blurring, referring to activities aimed at making boundaries more permeable. A further development in line with regarding boundary work as dynamic is made by Lindberg et al. (2017), pointing to how different types of boundary work is performed simultaneously within the same process (in the introduction of a new technology). Thus, proclaiming boundary work to be both iterative and ongoing (ibid.).

Boundary spanning

Focusing on boundary work as a tool for connection, one type of boundary work that has been given a lot of attention in previous research is the notion of boundary spanning. This type of boundary work is defined as creating a joint platform between different areas of expertise (Lindberg et al., 2017), thereby linking one area with another through the crossing of boundaries while at the same time maintaining the own identity (Mull & Jordan, 2014). Another example is the study by Evans and Scarbrough (2014) where they investigate how boundary spanning supports knowledge transition between groups. In connection to boundary spanning comes the concept of boundary spanners, i.e. the actors performing boundary spanning work (Bartel, 2001). Early research such as Aldrich and Herker (1977) focus to a large extent on boundary spanning as an information processing capability where the role of boundary spanners is to select, transmit and interpret information from the environment into the organization. The success of boundary spanners hence determines the ability for the organization to adapt to organizational contingencies (ibid.). However, Andersen and Kragh (2015) argue for the expansion of the boundary spanning concept from information processing towards becoming a management tool. In order to manage cross-boundary connections, the authors highlight the actions and interactions of boundary spanners. Thereby, boundary spanning is not fixed, but ongoing social accomplishments that emerge as boundary spanners engage with its surroundings (ibid.). Boundary spanners will in this study be seen as individuals transcending the understood boundaries and spreading the cultural change. Moreover, their actions will then be regarded in line with the description of boundary spanning activities as the boundary spanners perform various types of boundary actions to bridge different units and groups.

Continuing on the practice-based view of boundary spanners, Hawkins and Rezazade (2012) suggest a dynamic combination of four boundary spanning mechanisms in an integrative framework when examining the spanning of knowledge boundaries. They present these four mechanisms as boundary spanning discourse (content of exchange), boundary spanning practices (activities) such as translating across, aligning among and decentering differences (Quick & Feldman, 2014), boundary spanners (actors) and lastly boundary objects. The two first mechanisms are conceptually connected as boundary spanning discourse refer to the dialogue and content of the common activities that boundary spanning practices represent (ibid.). Focusing on the last mechanism, the notion of boundary objects was coined by Star and Griesemer (1989) as a response to the limitations of boundary spanners in practice, namely potential self-interest, scant social network or physical constraints. Briefly described, boundary objects are adaptable enough for individual interpretation whilst at the same time sufficiently resilient for a common understanding to be built across organizational groups (Hsiao, Tsai & Lee, 2012; Sapsed & Salter, 2004). This notion may be seen more practically as physical business tools, referring to shared documents, business processes and schedules (Sapsed & Salter, 2004) as they visualize and legitimize the work performed (Hsiao et al., 2012). The concept of boundary object has however been criticized for its ambiguous characteristics (Fujimura, 1992) making it an abstract notion to apply in the field of boundary work.

Boundary maintenance

Another type of boundary work frequently referred to is boundary maintenance. Beckhy (2003) for example investigates how occupational boundaries are shaped and maintained in a highly specialized setting, making occupational groups interdependent. Liberati (2017) also declares the substantiality of professional boundaries, highlighting the importance of organizational setting. By investigating different hospitality wards, Liberati (2017) conclude that boundaries become reinforced and sharply divided between doctors and nurses when doctors are physically present and controlling the patient's care such as in round visits when ward acuity is high, compared to if the patient has low awareness regarding the roles such as in surgery. Thereby, Liberati (2017) argues for the dependence of the setting giving prerequisites for boundary maintenance. Ashuri and Bar-Ilan (2016) further expand the research on boundary maintenance by investigating the filtering tactics of a flat, online-based organization where the organizational setting makes it hard to sort out preferable members. In their results, networking platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp etc. were determined "boundary keepers" of the organization in terms of identifying honesty, social awareness and organizational commitment. Furthermore, Faraj and Yan (2009) argue for two ways of doing boundary maintenance work when examining boundary work related to team performance, either as an external process (between an organization and its environment) or as an internal process (teamwork perspective). Suggesting that one can look at boundary work through an external research setting which includes the work of boundary spanning, but also the notion of boundary buffering which refers to the maintenance of boundaries for protection from external interference (ibid.). If boundary work is instead regarded as an internal activity, it may reveal boundary reinforcement implying that a team increases its boundary awareness and through that strengthen team identity and maintenance of its boundaries (ibid.).

Boundary work and cultural change

Summarizing the literature regarding boundary work, a tendency has been to look at boundaries in terms of occupation (Liberati, 2017) and in relation to knowledge sharing (Evans & Scarbrough, 2014). Many researchers (e.g. Abbott, 1996) have looked at boundary work as a tool to illuminate differences between organizations. This implies determining boundaries as necessary for preserving and controlling the current resources (Gieryn, 1983) and boundary spanning as an interorganizational activity e.g. shown in the study by Kousgaard, Joensen and Thorsen (2015). These studies have provided valuable insights in to specific cases but we would like to stress the need to apply boundary work on a larger scale phenomenon. Cultural change is an example of such, which in most cases is intended for an organizational wide effect. Applying the notions of boundary work to cultural change would highlight what other studies of cultural change have disregarded or overlooked in their research, namely how the understood boundaries of employees are affected by the change. Culture and boundary work both focus on individuals' recognition of their own state in relation to others, whether it is dependent on e.g. professional status or perception if united under the same cultural mindset. Applying boundary work as the analytical tool would not focus on values or rituals like in previous studies of how to successfully change culture, hence this approach may provide novel practical insights to how culture and a common understanding is successfully achieved. Looking at a cultural change program through the lens of boundary work will allow for insights to be gained of how to reach a shared understanding of an intended culture, by highlighting how organizational members' understanding of internal boundaries change. In sum, this study will add to the literature of boundary work by discussing the importance of managing boundaries as well as the role of boundary work in the context of cultural change.

Empirical setting

To better understand how cultural change may be regarded as boundary work, this research is based on the case of Wincorp, one of Sweden's largest retail companies of sport appliances, clothes etc. In reality, Wincorp has another name but requested in this research to be anonymized. In order to comprehend the choices Wincorp has made and are currently working by in an industry characterized by constant changes and challenges, one needs to have a better understanding of their past. Originally, the company stores were privately owned by single owners throughout Sweden, hence each store was locally administered with a strong sense of family membership. The workforce is characterized by employees who have been working within the company for many years within various positions (see table 1 in appendix). In 2015, in line with the generally elevated demands on the retail sector through budget and employee cutbacks (SvD Näringsliv, 2015, 15th October), Wincorp made a decision to centralize its organization. This implied that 2/3 of all stores were bought and unified under one management. The stores that remained privately owned are still a part of Wincorp, however they are not obligated to conform to head office directives as the stores being a part of the centralized function are.

According to the store managers, the centralization resulted in a separation between the head office and the stores, a “them vs us”-feeling prevailed throughout the company. In attempts to create a unitary organization, the HR department initiated several culture change programs that were spread internally. However, these culture programs remained “HR products” without real impact in the stores. In addition, throughout the years, Wincorp has been characterized by having several CEOs coming and leaving the company. This changed in 2017 when the current CEO entered the organization and provided a new perspective of what a shared culture is. After travelling around to different stores, he saw that there was no sense of “one company”, there were no values to lean on as an organization. The CEO then concluded that they urgently needed to unite Wincorp through a common culture and create a “winner mentality” in order to renew themselves and move forward together.

With the help from an external consultancy firm in late 2017, meetings were held between the CEO, top management, some chosen employees from the head office, two store managers and two salespersons in order to come up with a new culture for the centralized Wincorp. The discussions ended up in what was referred to as “Winners culture”, building on four core values (“Willingness”, “Courage”, “Winning” and “We are one Wincorp”). Each core value was thereafter assigned one meeting happening once every yearly quarter (during two hours before opening) for both the head office and the stores. Employees termed “value ambassadors” were assigned by top management to assist store managers in each meeting. These ambassadors were chosen from all organizational levels (CEO to salespersons in the stores) and given the responsibility to support either the head office or a couple of stores each. At the time of writing this research paper, Wincorp was implementing their third core value (Courage) and the aim was to have the culture implemented by June 2019. In sum, the culture change at Wincorp was described by the store managers as successful as they had moved closer to a shared understanding, which in the process had altered store managers’ understanding of internal boundaries. Hence, the case of Wincorp provides a good opportunity to investigate how their cultural change program was practically carried out in relation to the theoretical framework of boundary work.

Methodology

Research design

In order to gain a better understanding of the cultural change process at Wincorp, we adopted a qualitative approach in the form of a single-case study. As all divisions of the case company were to be incorporated under the same cultural change, its particular setting was given more emphasis with the hope of providing a deeper understanding. Furthermore, by limiting the research to one company and its internal processes, this study contributes to the less researched area of intraorganizational boundaries i.e. between different organizational levels. Even though this study empirically only concerned Wincorp, in line with Flyvbjerg (2006) thoughts on single case studies, our discussions and conclusions may provide a better understanding of cultural change as boundary work for other companies as well. According to Bryman and Bell (2013), the framework of a qualitative research method is suitable when the objective is to

understand a more complex process where perceptions of the participants are in focus. Thus, the qualitative approach was a relevant framework for this study as the aim was to analyze the process of organizational culture change with the help from middle managers' statements. The demarcation of store managers, in this study considered middle managers of their organization, was made to gain a clear focus of the research. Middle managers hold an important position between the strategic top management and the lower operational employees (Mintzberg, 1983), making them an interesting actor to focus on for maintaining or dissolving organizational boundaries.

Data collection

The primary data of this research is mainly based on interviews collected in two stages. Firstly, interviews were held with three main actors of developing the culture change program at Wincorp - the CEO, the HR-partner and the partner of the external consultancy firm. The aspiration with these interviews was to gain an understanding of what Wincorp stood for and what their purpose was with the cultural change. Moreover, these three interviews contributed with valuable background information that was further used to develop more essential and pertinent questions for the interviews to come. In a second step, the main actors of this research, i.e. the store managers, were interviewed in order grasp how the culture change practically had been carried out. Through this, we learnt how different employees were involved in different actions and how they understood the culture change. In total, 20 store managers were interviewed, four of them conducted face-to-face and 16 held over the telephone. Due to the tough time schedule of the store managers, the interviews had to be held in the mornings between 8-10 before the stores opened. Interviews were in general about 35-45 minutes long.

Since the goal of a qualitative research is to understand, it is crucial not to bring the interviewee into the academic world but to see the situation from his/her perspective (Ryen & Torhell, 2004). Thus, the interview questions were semi-structured and initially broad in order to grasp the situation and not let the interviewees theorize themselves. Hence, the interviewees were intentionally not informed of the purpose of the research in order to not limit them in their answers. Having semi-structured questions when conducting interviews is an appropriate method when searching for the personal constructs of the interviewees (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). Moreover, this format is flexible and dynamic which helps in understanding the beliefs and opinions of the interviewees as they get to elaborate more freely in their answers (ibid.). In order to address the research question of this study, the interview questions were formulated to focus on internal structures and processes on a general level, leaving it up to the interviewees to elaborate on their own about their understanding of the cultural change program. Prior to the first encounter with a store manager, an interview guide was developed in order to have a framework for the meeting. As this was early on in the process of collecting empirical data, the aim was to keep the content of the interview guide relatively broad. This procedure is furthermore recommended by Ryen and Torhell (2004) as they declare that a too determined structure will limit the research and valuable information from the interviewees can go missing. The HR-partner of Wincorp was used as an "informant" as Ryen

and Torhell (2004) define it, as she possessed key information about the company and could therefore provide suggestions of other suitable interviewees for the study.

In the latter phase of the data collection, an observation was made in one of Wincorp's stores where a culture meeting regarding one of their core values was held. Present at the meeting were ten salespersons, two store managers and one value ambassador, all familiar with the procedure of the meeting as this was the third time they had it. For this research, the observation was a valuable experience as the culture change activities from the employees' perspective was better understood and, in line with Silverman (2013), visualized the social setting of the organization. During the meeting, field notes were written down to remember the focal points of the discussions, a procedure recommended by Martin and Turner (1986) in order to grasp the essential happenings as well as own reflections of the situation. However, our aspiration in this study was to observe several culture meetings in order to get further practical insights from them, e.g. if they were held in the same way across Wincorp's stores and how discussions and reactions among organizational members were displayed. Since only one observation was made, we consider it to be a limitation of our study.

Data analysis

The data analysis was inspired by grounded theory (Martin & Turner, 1986) where the collected data was broken down into codes and categories in order to get a better, constructive and structured overlook of the data. Having this approach in mind, the collected data from the interviews was reviewed and scrutinized through different methods. Initially, without a theoretical lens through transliteration, color-coding and comparisons. In order to get an overview of the collected data, diagrams were created to summarize basic information about the store managers e.g. gender, age and number of years as store manager. Initially, we had a preconception that store managers might have various thoughts about the implementation of the cultural change program. However, during the first-order analysis, the impression of the results was that all store managers were talking about the new culture in the same positive way. Although opinions ranged from "a good new idea" to "a sensational new way of thinking", there were really no tensions in their answers. In the second-order analysis, we looked at the collected data with a more critical eye. By doing so, tensions were found in how store managers talked about previous separation and involvement related to the realization of the culture initiative. For example, it was described how store managers and top management were more aligned due to the culture change program. As value ambassadors bridged the perceived separation between stores, that relationship was now believed to be more integrated. This indicated that the change program seemed to address tensions between internal organizational boundaries on several levels. Hence, when a substantial amount of empirical data had been collected, it was divided into categories as e.g. vertical and horizontal integration, illustrating the relationship between head office and stores as well as between stores. In line with the same categories, the conducted observation was analyzed and categorized by summarizing the field notes. Based on the chosen theory of boundary work to build the analysis on, subcategories of inclusion and exclusion were connected to the empirical story including the roles and actions by the CEO, value ambassadors etc.

The results of this study, namely the actions and intentions of Wincorp and their store managers, were interpreted in line with ideas of Hawkins and Rezazade (2012) as boundary spanning activities which have intentions of redesigning current boundaries. The employees performing these activities we define, along with the definition of Andersen and Kragh (2015), to be boundary spanners who support cross-boundary connections. Ultimately, the collected data of interviews and the observation were analyzed to get a deeper understanding of them separately but also to distinguish potential patterns regarding how boundaries were understood across the gathered material.

Empirical data

Vertical integration between Wincorp's head office and stores

Development of a new culture

As described in the setting section, in order to reduce the evident “them and us”-feeling existing within Wincorp, the new CEO conceptualized his drive to unify the company through a cultural change, i.e. Winners culture. According to the CEO, the intentions of the implementation of the new culture was to get a foothold throughout all stores in Sweden, and not just have the description of the culture as a poster hanging on the wall which was just how store managers described their experience of previous cultural change programs. In order to avoid the described scenario of the culture becoming a short-lived hyped phenomenon, approximately 30 people from Wincorp were chosen to renew the company's core values and develop a new cultural foundation. People from all divisions were included, described by the CEO to be “the people expressing having a future within the company”. This group of individuals ranging from top managers at the head office to salespeople in the stores all got together and were equally involved in the framing of Winners culture. When deciding upon the core values, emphasis was put on developing them to be clearer than their predecessors, but at the same time accessible enough so that everyone in the company would be able to embrace them regardless of position. However, the HR-partner downplayed their function, stating that the words in themselves were not significant but instead, what the core values created was of most importance, i.e. being conversation starters.

One of the two store managers involved in the core value development process described how in the past there was a sense of the people working at the head office being superior to the people in the stores, as if there were two divisions not playing in the same league. According to him, there was a preconception among store managers that employees at the head office were extremely intelligent people, which made the store managers feel inferior and insecure in relation to them. This belief was contradicted, at least for this store manager, when he participated in the culture meetings at the head office, he declared:

“When I got there, I felt really involved and the CEO was just groundbreaking. We (the store managers) received applauses, all of us had dinner together in the evening and everyone from the head office wanted to talk to you. They (the head office) wanted a lot of input and they thought it was interesting and super cool that we managed the job as

store managers. So yes, I would say that Winners culture is the best thing Wincorp has come up with.”
(Store manager 5)

Continuing on the same store manager, as he was a part of developing Winners culture from the start, unmistakably he expressed deep involvement and excitement regarding the culture initiative. For him, some of the previous preconceptions had clearly been reviewed. The employees at the head office were not superior authorities, in fact they showed great interest and celebrated the work of the store managers which lifted the store managers’ spirit. The effect naturally became an increased self-confidence of the store managers and a perception of stores and head office as equals, which contributed to a reduced feeling of “them and us”. However, the opportunity to partake in this cultural development was only given to two store managers that top management had chosen. Other store managers, who were not a part of the cultural development did not express the same level of excitement about the cultural change program. One of the less enthusiastic store managers outlined that:

“I do not think this (the culture) has mattered that much to me. I have always had the same way of thinking during my career here.”
(Store manager 3)

Other store managers who expressed skepticism towards Winners culture viewed the intent to change the culture as a kind of group work top management had thrown on them, a procedure that needed to be followed. Meaning that even though Winners culture was something that was going to be implemented collectively, it was still on the command of the head office orders. Another store manager who was fairly neutral to the cultural change program informed that towards the external environment, it was showcased as a decision they had all taken together. Hence, looking at it objectively as an outsider, Winners culture was something the entire company had developed together. While in reality, only a small percentage of the store managers were actually involved in the development process, resulting in a varied amount of enthusiasm towards the cultural change program. However, the majority of the store managers, no matter what level of engagement, generally regarded the cultural change as something positive and necessary for Wincorp.

The role of the CEO

It was outlined by a majority of the store managers that the attempt to create a more united company was progressing and that the connection between the head office and the stores had become more interlinked as the implementation of Winners culture had unfolded, essentially due to the involvement and devotion by the CEO. His drive ignited the whole cultural change and brought the different stores together with their own “mini-cultures” under one cultural change program. The CEO was recurrently described by the store managers as an important symbol for Winners culture. With his clear presence and inspiring personality, the CEO set clear directives for Wincorp’s cultural ambitions. In terms of the CEO’s presence, store managers outlined examples of both more physical and non-physical contact, which was seen as a different condition compared to prior Winners culture. Various store managers described the easiness to now get in touch with the CEO. Compared to previous communication lines,

the structures had now changed, and store managers were able to send emails directly to the CEO and could expect an answer instead of needing to go through layers of hierarchy to reach top management of Wincorp. Regarding physical presence, the current CEO was by many store managers differentiated from previous leaders as he showed concern and interest in the people on the shop floor. As expressed by one store manager:

“We have had a couple of CEO changes, but he (the current CEO) is the one that is most close to us in the stores if you should compare them like that. I am sure the previous CEOs have done a really good job too, but you have not seen them. It feels like the previous CEOs were more like “desk-CEOs”. This CEO surely has a lot of administrative stuff to do as well, but he feels more present compared to the other ones”.

(Store manager 5)

Furthermore, as the CEO had taken his time to personally visit stores throughout the country and meet with the employees on the shop floor it was according to one store manager something which had not happened before:

“During all my years I have barely seen a CEO out in the stores [...] The fact that he went out to visit the stores for some months, that is huge.”

(Store manager 19)

Ultimately, this CEO had done something previous leaders at Wincorp had not. Seemingly, the personal interactions with the CEO had a positive effect on the store managers and contributed to a shared understanding of each other’s work as differences between the organizational levels decreased. As outlined by one store manager:

“It is one thing to be at the head office and a completely different world to be in the store [...] but my feeling is that we have a lot more understanding for each other now.”

(Store manager 12)

In summary of that comparison, many of the store managers agreed that when the CEO went out to meet employees in their everyday working environment, the view of head office on one side of the company and stores on the other had decreased. As outlined by several store managers that compared the current CEO to previous ones, this CEO gathered the company in a completely different way. Thus, the impact of the store visits was evident among many store managers. Additionally, another store manager who was just a couple of months into the position had already managed to meet with the CEO, a fact which reinforced that the CEO was not an anonymous person at the head office. Also, store managers remarked on the recently lost feeling of family membership which historically had been very strong. However, the sense of family seemed to be on its way back due to the visible involvement of the CEO, underlined by the following store manager:

“I feel like I know the CEO. It feels like we are a family”

(Store manager 5)

The feeling of being seen and acknowledged by the top management thereby seemed to have influenced the linking of the head office to the store managers through the culture change program.

Value ambassadors

Another way Wincorp attempted to spread Winners culture and unite the different divisions of the company, was through the internally invented notion of value ambassadors. The initial idea with the value ambassadors was outlined by the HR-partner as:

“They should always be present as support in the implementation, someone who is responsible for this (culture meeting) to be managed in the best way. You are supposed to have a dialogue with the ambassador the whole way.”
(HR-partner)

In other words, each store should have a value ambassador close at hand during the implementation of Winners culture. Since the value ambassadors had gone through a special education of the new culture, their purpose was to attend store meetings dedicated to the cultural implementation where their role was to make sure the structure of the meeting was kept and to be a helping hand if the store manager faced any problems along with the discussions. Many store managers underlined the support in the change process that value ambassadors provided and how value ambassadors during the culture meetings reinforced the impression of the meeting. In general, a positive attitude was expressed regarding the practice of value ambassadors, as exemplified by two store managers:

“The ambassadors have been great. You have had people from the head office coming out to the stores, and it has worked out really well.”
(Store manager 15)

“They filled in with great discussions, having their point of view being completely different from our view since we work in the store and we work with each other all the time.”
(Store manager 12)

Additionally, not only people from the head office visited stores as ambassadors, store managers also visited the head office as ambassadors which displayed how the role of value ambassador was not tied to usual organizational roles. The fact that these value ambassadors were all chosen from inside the company was described by the CEO as a deliberate choice in order to “keep the internal knowledge”. One store manager described his thoughts about the exchange of value ambassadors:

“It was a really great thing that they (from the head office) got to come to the store, because it is one thing to be at the head office and a completely different world to be in the store. In the same way, many store managers were ambassadors for the head office and were sent there. In that way we did the same thing at the head office to sort of get it together. I have not been an ambassador myself, but my feeling is that you get a lot more understanding for each other.”
(Store manager 12)

Through this exchange, store managers became a support for the head office and the head office became a support for the stores in an equal way. A common feeling among store managers was that due to the mutual exchange of employees from all levels, a greater understanding for each other's work was developed. A flow of information was exchanged between these domains which in turn developed into an exchange of knowledge regarding the culture program, a better understanding of other colleagues' perspectives and their common contribution to Wincorp and its current change initiative.

Horizontal integration between Wincorp's stores

Regional integration

Prior to Winners culture, the atmosphere between stores was competitive as a result of their history of being privately owned. Stores were described to mainly have been concerned about their own well-being with a selfish way of thinking. When asked to define the current relationship among stores of Wincorp, the opinions among store managers varied depending on geographical location of the stores. Store managers in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmo illustrated an already obtained sense of unification before the new cultural change began. As portrayed by one store manager on how the Winners culture initiative affected the store in question:

“I have always experienced that we are one Wincorp for obvious reasons, that we have been a clustered group here in Stockholm for a long time.”
(Store manager 17)

Another store manager expressed similar thoughts:

“We already had that ‘we are one think’ in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmo.”
(Store manager 11)

Hence, these store managers showed how in the larger cities where stores are clustered, the introduction of a new culture had not changed the relationship between the stores regionally. However, this result was only valid for the three largest cities in Sweden. Among other stores spread throughout the country, the same impression of a shared regional culture was not expressed to have been prevailing prior to the initiative of Winners culture. Furthermore, the cultural change program seemed to have had a greater impact in smaller cities. One store manager running a store in a smaller city explained:

“Prior to Winners culture, my store and the store located next to us, which is about 10 km away geographically with different stores managers and different personalities, ran our stores in our own ways. You did not mind the business of the other stores. It was more like I am doing it my way and others are doing it their way. We could never borrow employees from each other in case we were short of staff. The reason for that is that we had a huge difference in culture, how we viewed everything from group constellations to hygiene questions. That became a collision for us [...]. Today you are able to work in any shoe department without having to learn the internal culture in each store.”
(Store manager 20)

Hence, this store manager displayed that the ability to swap employees between stores is one aspect of closeness between stores which the work of a shared culture contributed to. In fact, the same store manager previously owned three stores together with five family members, and despite being family, the separate cultures put up barriers for collaboration between the stores. Winners culture made a difference for that store manager since the movement towards a shared culture opened up for possibilities that were previously closed. Various store managers explained how nowadays, the support and helpfulness between stores was more prevalent e.g. stores helped each other out by sending products between them which was not an obvious action before the introduction of Winners culture. A joint opinion among store managers was how other stores no longer were seen as competitors, under the name of Wincorp, they were now all united. As distinguished by one store manager referring to the prior separateness:

“That is not the way it is supposed to be anymore. We must see profit for the company, open up and collaborate [...] So it has become a major change, it is a completely different jargon between the stores. You help each other out in a different way, a very nice and friendly way.”

(Store manager 15)

Ultimately, the relationship among store managers during the spreading of Winners culture was characterized by an attitude of helpfulness towards each other. An attitude which already existed in larger cities, had now emerged among more stores when the possibility of sharing a culture was presented.

Regional managers

Acknowledged by several store managers as essential actors for bringing stores closer to each other were the regional managers. According to the store managers, the regional managers had through their work opened up communication channels between the stores and enforced the message of being “one company”. Thus, they had fostered and enhanced the intentions regarding the culture by the head office, resulting in closer bonds between regional stores. From the head office perspective, the HR-partner described that each regional manager was in charge of approximately 15 stores and that they were viewed as important intermediaries between the head office and the store managers. From the store managers’ perspective, the regional managers had implemented the now daily communication among fellow colleagues with the same regional manager which contributed to clusters of store managers actually knowing each other. The increased frequency of communication in general between stores was presented by many store managers, one of them described it as:

“A day does not pass without me talking to another store manager. Everybody communicates about small things. Previously you called some type of central function, but today you call a colleague.”

(Store manager 20)

Hence, horizontal communication was more common now than prior to the cultural change program, as the regional managers opened up for and promoted channels of communication between store managers. One store manager stated the tremendous impact the regional manager had had on her:

“The regional manager is the single largest contributing factor to the development of the group of store managers. She came in about a year ago and I probably would not have stayed in this company if it was not for her.”

(Store manager 18)

The above store manager continued by explaining that the communication initiated by the regional manager could be anything from feedback and ideas in emails to “love bombing” through social media applications like Snapchat, all contributing to a reinforced feeling of being a close group. Ultimately, through the cultural change program, regional managers worked to connect different regional stores. Hence, store managers now experienced their stores to interact more frequently with each other and through different means post the implementation of Winners culture.

Internal integration between employees at Wincorp

Culture meetings

The introduction of a new culture also had effects on the relationship internally between store managers and salespersons. This was manifested when talking about the culture meetings devoted to discussing Winners culture and each of its core values. These meetings provided an opportunity to meet fellow colleagues from other parts of the company through the above described value ambassadors. Furthermore, since Wincorp like many other retail companies mainly consisted of part time employments and have tough work schedule as stores are open all days of the week, it was very seldom that employees of the same store got to meet. However, as these culture meetings were scheduled before stores opened, employees got the chance to meet and connect with fellow representatives of the same store. Hence, the culture meetings served as a type of internal juncture. The HR-partner defined these meetings as “dialogue starters”, a statement that was reinforced by several store managers as they described an increased closeness between employees in the stores through the culture meetings:

“I think this openness has led us to become more of a group. The staff meetings held before were also good, but many employees express that these (culture) meetings have a meaning, you get things out of them. People simply dare to talk. That is a big difference for us now, we talk more, we are more open, people say something if they notice something is wrong. We already have high ceiling in our store, but now it feels like we have taken another step forward.”

(Store manager 12)

Moreover, group dynamics and individual perceptions of the new culture were exemplified at the observation session in one of the stores. During this observation of a culture meeting, the salespersons individually scored themselves on a scale of 1-10 based on a statement given by the store manager e.g. “I dare to challenge myself and others”. The scores were laid out on the

floor and the participants were told to stand by the appropriate score. The results showed that all participants clustered around score 7-9 (high level of agreement with statement). As nobody stood out from the crowd in their opinion, there was almost no resistance or disagreement in the discussions taking place after scores were revealed. However, one store manager who was not a part of the observation expressed the uncertainty of salespersons scoring themselves in this way, indicating potential biases with this type of valuation by highlighting the risk of peer pressure. Furthermore, it was argued that the successfulness of such an exercise depends on the composition of individuals in a group. As outlined:

“The risk with this exercise is that one thinks that all my friends are giving themselves this score, therefore I am also doing that. I have had the advantage at my (culture) meetings that people have dared to score themselves as a 4 even if everyone else scored themselves as a 10.”
(Store manager 8)

Continuing on the observation, one of the discussed themes was giving and receiving feedback. The general opinion of the group was that the salespersons received more feedback than they gave to others. It was also discussed that it was easier to give positive feedback than more negative and constructive comments. In the past when something negative had happened, the information had been given to the store manager instead of the person involved, which was something that the store manager hoped would change in line with Winners culture. Having these discussions regarding feedback was described as a new phenomenon for this store and exemplified what many store managers had mentioned in previous interviews, namely how the culture meetings opened up for discussions that would otherwise not take place. Generally, assessing colleagues had not been very common in the stores, but as the subject was lifted during the culture meetings, it was described as important in order to foster individual development.

Lastly, by the end of the culture meetings, all employees decided on personal commitments for themselves that they were going to work on in accordance with the directives of the new culture initiative. These commitments to improve were then put on a whiteboard in the lunchroom, visible to everyone and serving as a reference point to what had been discussed during the culture meetings. As pointed out by one store manager, the visibility of the commitments had an effect of spurring employees to be better than colleagues in a friendly matter. The fact was that the individual commitments engaged both store managers and salespersons collectively. One store manager summarized the effect of the activities during the cultural meetings as:

“You do not get caught in this tunnel vision. You have the courage to speak up to one another in a completely different way now [...] The end discussions, that is where we take it one step forward, that is where we become united. You have been sitting there, everybody has thrown out words, and then in the end you unite. That is where it happens.”
(Store manager 12)

Hence, the culture meetings were designed to discuss the new culture and what the core values meant on a store level. In the process, these meetings opened up for other kinds of discussions which made store managers and salespersons integrate with each other in a different way. As stated by several store managers, the culture meetings main contribution was providing a sense of being all together within one store.

Recruitment tool

In an attempt to uphold and maintain the newly set directives of Winners culture, store managers used the core values as prerequisites for employment and continuous development. According to the CEO, Wincorp needed employees who were passionate about their job, people with good energy, innovation and creativity that are all running in the same direction. In accordance with the desire of the CEO, many store managers disclosed that Winners culture was a tool for them to fall back on during processes of hiring. By using the culture framework and its core values early on in processes of recruitment, the aspiration was to obtain employees that were prepared to embrace and live the culture in their everyday work. Prior to Winners culture, store managers felt that the demands for potential employees to be employed at Wincorp were ambiguous. Store managers did not know what they hired people for besides selling products. Winners culture in itself did not provide a step-by-step manual to follow in the recruitment but supported as a foundation to lean towards. Furthermore, several store managers signified the importance of how Wincorp's culture should permeate the atmosphere in the stores. Therefore, it was of high priority that people applying for a job in the stores shared or understood the values Wincorp was currently in the process of implementing. One store manager exemplified this:

“If you do not like this, maybe you should not work here [...] We should breathe the culture in our store.”
(Store manager 18)

Thereby, Winners culture and its accompanied mindset had become a prerequisite for employment at Wincorp. Seemingly enthusiastically received among many store managers as it provided them with easier guidelines to utilize in the process of hiring new employees.

Demands on current workforce

The culture program did not only serve as a tool when hiring new employees. Some store managers regarded it as a criterion among existing employees in order to maintain those who embraced the new cultural path Wincorp had chosen. Thus, with Winners culture as a basis, store managers found it easier to know what to expect from their salespersons, outlined as:

“Through Winners culture I can put other demands on my salespersons. Have you signed a contract at Wincorp, you are expected to follow what it takes to work here.”
(Store manager 16)

Hence, by going through the core values with the employees, store managers described to be assured that they had people on the floor working towards the same direction that Wincorp had decided on. Furthermore, it was stressed how the shared culture should be felt in employees'

hearts, illustrating the significance of the initiative and how it was aimed to be embedded within employees. If someone did not share the same mindset and worked accordingly - they might as well quit. One store manager exemplified this by declaring that the ones who were only in the store to receive a paycheck would not be working there for long. By having only the committed employees left in the company, another store manager described how the cultural change initiative worked as a sort of natural selection since individuals who did not agree with the set direction quit by themselves. In that sense, it was the dedicated employees who aligned with the change process and mindset of Winners culture who stayed in the company.

Discussion

A shared understanding

The analysis of this study reveals that Wincorp through their cultural change program performed various types of boundary work and by performing these various types of boundary work simultaneously, store managers' understanding of organizational boundaries changed for a common understanding to be developed. Firstly, boundary spanning ideas were identified in the core values of the cultural change program, i.e. the foundation of the culture. In similarity with boundary spanning objects, which will be further discussed below, our own invented notion of boundary spanning ideas served as connecting junctures in which employees collectively built a common cultural platform. Furthermore, the core values as boundary spanning ideas were expressed through boundary discourse, following Hawkins and Rezazade's (2012) definition of boundary discourse as the content of exchange in dialogues. Secondly, the actions of several employees, mainly the CEO, the regional managers and the value ambassadors were boundary spanning activities in line with the definition by Quick and Feldman (2014) as activities creating co-engagement of individuals from different domains. Whilst the CEO in his pursuit to unify the head office with the stores performed boundary spanning activities in a vertical direction, the regional managers mainly had a boundary breaching function on a horizontal level between regional stores. However, the most interesting actors with regards to creating a shared understanding, the value ambassadors, performed boundary spanning activities across several relational levels in their work towards unification. Thirdly, as all of these employees from different organizational levels carried out boundary spanning activities, consequently they possessed the role of boundary spanners, following the definition of Bartel (2001) as actors performing boundary spanning work.

In sum, the cultural change program created communication platforms through culture meetings (boundary spanning activities) about the newly developed core values (boundary spanning ideas) which resulted in that organizational members of Wincorp who normally did not interact were brought together and had discussions about a common purpose. The success to how they created a shared understanding among organizational members was grounded in how they created involvement and participation. To engage their own employees in the development of the cultural foundation, to appoint employees from all organizational divisions to spread the culture as value ambassadors and to let all employees regardless of position voice their thoughts and opinions during the culture meetings - all made the employees feel involved

in the culture change program. That participation, or at least feeling of participation, was developed out of the conversations (boundary spanning discourse) across organizational levels which altered the understanding of internal boundaries and ultimately created a shared organizational understanding. In the following analysis, we will present further arguments for the boundary spanning work performed by employees at Wincorp which contributed to the creation of a joint understanding.

Boundary spanners and boundary spanning activities

The analysis of this study reveals that the CEO, the regional managers and the value ambassadors of Wincorp are examples of boundary spanners performing boundary spanning activities as their actions are in line with Mull and Jordan (2014), stating that boundary spanners link entities together through the crossing of boundaries. In the case of Wincorp, the crossing of boundaries refers to the previous understandings of separated divisions now instead seen as joint together through the various acts of the boundary spanners. Faraj and Yan (2009) define boundary spanning activities as where a team reaches out to its environment for resources and support in order to guide the team's work, similarly the CEO visited the stores in his work to connect the head office with the stores. Likened to Hawkins and Rezazade's (2012) idea of boundary spanners promoting coordination between domains by bridging gaps between parties, the CEO left his field of expertise at the head office to bridge the gap towards store managers by physically meeting them in their everyday workplace. The results showed that the CEO as a boundary spanner had a huge impact on the store managers as they described the feeling of top management reaching out to them, including them in creating a mutual understanding for each other. The CEO's motive for visiting the stores was to gain support for the cultural change program, but what he actually did was creating a closer relationship between the head office and the stores as he was physically present and committed to involving store managers. Hence, the work of the CEO as a boundary spanner brought two worlds closer to each other, resulting in a better understanding for the other part. Thereby, dissolving perceptions of the head office being at the one end of the spectrum of Wincorp and the stores on the other.

The second identified boundary spanners at Wincorp were the regional managers. Whilst the CEO seemed to be the front figure of creating a mutual understanding between head office and stores, regional managers appear to undeliberately have received the same mission but on a regional level. In line with Hawkins and Rezazade's (2012) definition of a boundary spanners as working to connect different areas together, the regional managers connected the regional stores. This role is determined to be an unintended outcome as it was not described by either the head office or store managers that regional managers had a specific purpose with regards to the culture change program. Nevertheless, as indicated by some store managers, the regional managers fostered and enhanced the intentions of the head office resulting in closer bonds between regional stores. Store managers further expressed how the stores were more integrated nowadays due to the work of regional managers as they had opened up communication channels between the stores and enforced the message of the company being one. Therefore, regional managers are believed to have promoted boundary spanning discourse by bringing store managers of the same region together and through increased communication engage them

in each other's work. Ultimately, without having a designated role within the culture change program, the work of regional managers as boundary spanners contributed to a shared understanding among stores on a regional level.

The third identified boundary spanners at Wincorp was the internally invented notion of value ambassadors. In contrast to Aldrich and Herker (1977) who argue for boundary spanners as spanning beyond organizational boundaries, value ambassadors as boundary spanners acted internally within Wincorp. Hence, instead of crossing interorganizational boundaries (Aldrich & Herker, 1977), the value ambassadors linked domains within Wincorp to each other by attending culture meetings at different divisions than their own. The work of value ambassadors is regarded to have operated in two directions. Horizontally, since they were in charge of several stores each, and vertically as they were representatives from all organizational levels at Wincorp. Since value ambassadors were represented by employees from both the head office and the stores, equipped with the same education and tasks of being an ambassador, previously separated divisions got to interact through the help of boundary spanners. Several store managers signaled that having people from different divisions collaborating across their ordinary roles and duties created a better understanding for one another. Hence, the value ambassadors created a link between the different divisions and managed in the process to alter the understanding of existing internal boundaries. The value ambassadors' main contribution to the cultural change process was to engage in the boundary spanning activity of cultural meetings held in the stores in order to manage across boundaries. In resemblance to Lindberg et al. (2017) who define a boundary spanning activity as creating a joint platform of a shared purpose, the culture meetings worked as such an activity, creating a forum where salespersons, store managers and value ambassadors met to jointly discuss the culture change program. Hence, the culture meetings worked as junctures for connection, involving the organization collectively in the same cultural purpose. Being a company within the retail business with stores open all days of the week, the culture meetings were especially significant for Wincorp as that constellation of employees who would otherwise have difficulties physically meeting all at the same time. Through the culture meetings, all employees' voices were heard as they got to reflect and discuss on their own and others work, ultimately leading to the establishment of the common understanding among organizational members.

Applying Andersen and Kragh's (2015) definition of boundary spanners as widely applicable management tools, all three determined boundary spanners of Wincorp have performed various actions to manage within the organization. As the CEO, regional managers and value ambassadors actively engaged in discussions through store visits and culture meetings, their work as boundary spanners can be regarded as ways to manage relationships among different units and different organizational members. Although their engagement in spreading knowledge about the cultural change program may be resembled to Aldrich and Herker's (1977) definition of boundary spanner as information transmitters, that definition limits the significance of boundary spanners at Wincorp as well as that role's future potential. In other words, the definition of boundary spanners as management tools holds promises of further use related to crossing internal boundaries and creating a shared common understanding.

Boundary spanning ideas creating boundary discourse

The analysis of this study shows how the performed boundary work at Wincorp is further manifested through their core values as boundary spanning ideas. The notion of boundary spanning ideas was developed as there was no other suitable match in the existing literature describing ideas travelling between perceived boundaries. Studies on the resembling notion, boundary spanning objects, mainly consider them as physical objects (Sapsed & Salter, 2004). As core values may not be regarded as physical items, but more floating objects travelling in individual interpretation, it was not justified to define the core values as boundary objects. Hence, they are instead defined as boundary spanning ideas. Disregarding the prerequisite of being a physical object, the definition of boundary spanning objects is still applicable for how we see boundary spanning ideas i.e. ideas buoyant enough to transcend barriers for a common understanding yet adaptable and applicable for the individual organizational member (Hsiao, et al., 2012; Sapsed & Salter, 2004). This definition holds a clear connection to the core values of Wincorp as they were perceived to be tangible but still comprehensible enough to create a common ground when developed at the start of the culture change program. Being a retail company within sports, we believe the core values (Willingness, Courage, Winning and We are one Wincorp) to have been deliberately designed to match Wincorp's line of business, ultimately with the hope of being more positively received and grasped by the employees. By including employees from different divisions of Wincorp in the development of the core values, an organizational wide participation in what the new culture was going to consist of was created. Hence, Wincorp reached a shared sense and understanding of the culture by jointly creating the core values as boundary spanning ideas.

More significant than the core values themselves was the setting where they were discussed - creating boundary discourse. Hawkins and Rezazade (2012) refer to this notion as the content shaping dialogue among actors from different domains and define it to be a mechanism of boundary spanning. What was discussed during the development of the culture and the culture meetings with the value ambassadors were Wincorp's core values, but what actually happened was that the frame of conversation opened up. Through boundary discourse, employees from all organizational levels met on mutual terms and exchanged thoughts and ideas about their workplace. Hence, by inviting everyone to partake in these discussions, individual opinions were acknowledged resulting in the employees feeling more involved and dedicated to the cause. Therefore, in agreement with the HR-partner, the words constituting the core values did not matter that much in themselves, it was the effect of them that mattered. Some store managers were of the same understanding regarding this statement, the core values did not possess the most value themselves, they were mainly supposed to open up for dialogue within the previously somewhat closed organization. Proven by some managers, this intent was successful as they described how employees resolved matters by communicating about things that had not been lifted before the cultural change program.

With reference to previous studies' glorification of core values as key elements to transform organizational culture, it seemed as if the group of employees at Wincorp who jointly created the culture were of the same feeling towards their core values. They believed the core values were supposed to incorporate everything the new culture stood for and that all employees should obey them. However, unlike previous studies where values and rituals are to be forced upon the organization, this study severely downplays the importance of the core values. Instead, we determine the above described boundary discourse, i.e. the conversations, to have been more important in the alignment under one common understanding as it opened up communication between distant divisions and internally within stores. Yes, the core values functioned as conversation starters during Wincorp's culture meetings however what the core values actually stood for was not of high importance. It was rather what they contributed to in terms of a conversational stage where organizational members in different positions all felt involved in the same change process.

Boundary maintenance to protect the shared understanding

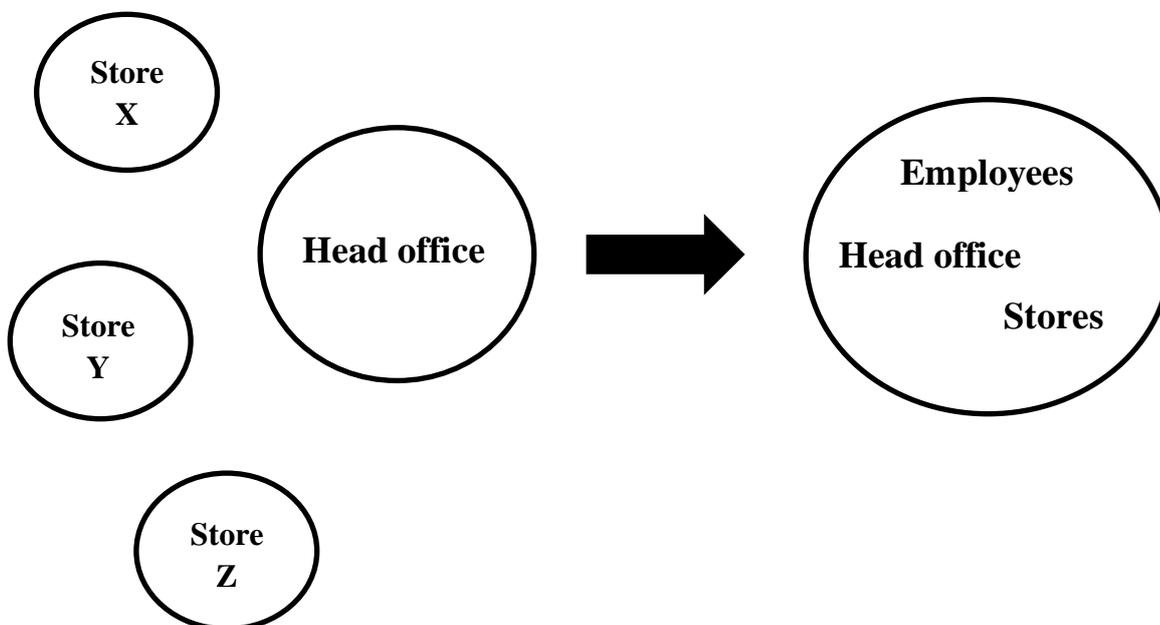
The shared understanding achieved at Wincorp may through the lens of boundary work be seen as a new organizational wide boundary surrounding all levels of Wincorp, i.e. boundary creation (picture A) in which store managers performed boundary maintenance to preserve. Ashuri and Bar-Ilan (2016) describe boundary maintenance work as a gatekeeping mechanism sorting out members from non-members whereas Faraj and Yan (2009) phrase it as "closing itself from exposure to the environment" (p. 606). At Wincorp, this is exemplified in how the store managers used the culture as a recruitment tool and as demands on current employees. Implying that the shared understanding, reached through the culture change program, needed to be kept between individuals who shared it. The work of preserving the shared understanding may be regarded in line with Faraj and Yan's (2009) definition of boundary buffering which they refer to as outward facing boundary work protecting an organization from uncertainties and disturbances whilst viewing organizational boundaries as demarcations from the outside environment. Thus, Wincorp performed boundary buffering when they used the culture as a tool for recruitment, protecting the organization from potential organizational members that would not agree with the culture, hence not be a part of the shared understanding. Additionally, using the abstract cultural notions as a more "hands-on" tool for recruitment implied adopting the culture change into the everyday work tasks of the store managers. Consequently, the culture as a recruitment tool provided a practical area of how to concretely use the culture, which spread the shared understanding among employees of Wincorp.

As store managers used the culture change program to put demands on the current workforce they are interpreted to have performed, in line with Faraj & Yan's (2009) definition of boundary reinforcement, inward facing boundary maintenance in terms of strengthening internal boundaries through awareness of the organizational identity. This became evident as some store managers regarded the cultural notions as criteria for existing employees, in order for them to maintain those who embraced the new cultural path Wincorp had chosen. Hence, store managers raised attention to what guidelines their employees should keep to but also strengthened company identity of what it meant to be a member at Wincorp, which

automatically lead to the maintenance of the new perceived organizational wide boundary the cultural change program had created. Through boundary reinforcement, a strong company identity results in a sense of belongingness which increases integration within a company as well as facilitating teamwork and member satisfaction (Faraj & Yan, 2009). This was shown at Wincorp in many of the store managers enthusiasm towards the cultural change program and how it had made them feel more as “one company”. Hence, whilst internal bonds may be strengthened as a consequence of this maintenance action, the cultural change program also sorted out individuals of the workforce. Favorable employees remained on the inside whereas employees of a different opinion were excluded. Thus, as maintenance tool, the culture change program enabled a shared understanding to be reached to some extent simply due to that the ones prone to align were the ones who stayed with the company.

Ultimately, using the culture change program as a recruitment tool and to put demands on current workforce, in a way forced employees to align their understanding. As outlined by the store managers, if understandings were not aligned potential employees would probably not get the job and current employees would quit. Hence, valuable employees perhaps needed for a diverse workforce might be lost due to the cultural prerequisite. Nevertheless, this action may be seen as a way of maintaining boundaries, showcasing that individuals needed to share and understand the cultural purpose of Wincorp in order to be employed. Using the culture change program in recruitment and for demands may be seen as means for Wincorp to maintain the feeling of sharing a common understanding.

Picture A: Understanding of boundaries prior to versus post the cultural change program



Contributions

As a contribution to the field of cultural change, instead of looking at change as a linear process such as the N-model (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2007) or accentuating the role of top management for culture change to spread and the values needed to be identified by senior managers (Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003; Harris & Ogbonna, 1998), our analysis shows the significance of having the entire organization involved in creating a shared understanding. While other studies have described the recipe for successful cultural change by over-emphasizing the role of top management and the values they communicate (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2007; Cameron & Quinn, 2011), few studies have presented actual cases of where the intended culture change has succeeded. Our study shows that by viewing cultural change programs in terms of various forms of boundary work, it reveals how cultural change is in fact an alternative way to understand perceived organizational boundaries. Hence, actions which may be regarded as boundary work contribute to a shared understanding since they infuse organizational members with a feeling of connection between organizational divisions as well as involvement in developing and spreading the shared understanding. Ultimately, viewing cultural change as boundary work contributed with valuable insights of how a shared understanding among organizational members took place.

The findings may also contribute to previous studies of boundary work. Following Quick and Feldman (2014), the analysis shows that boundaries are emerging and reconstructed, rather than Abbott's (1996) argument of them as pre-existing, since the different types of boundary work made perceived boundaries more visible while at the same time re-interpreted by the employees through the cultural change program. This study is a further development in the research of boundary work as it stresses the previously overlooked link between cultural change and internal boundaries. Earlier studies of boundary work concern e.g. team performance (Faraj & Yan, 2009), professional identity (Liberati, 2017) and knowledge transfer (Evans & Scarbrough, 2014), but none of these have examined boundary work on an organizational wide level in interplay with cultural change. As an insufficiently researched area, the benefits of looking at cultural change as boundary work are fairly undeclared, namely how the cognitive aspects of interpreting corporate culture may be understood in a different light when stemming from the individual understanding of boundaries. However, this study supports and promotes the recent direction of boundary work studies (e.g. by Lindberg et al., 2017) who claim that different types of boundary work should be studied as interrelated to each other rather than concepts isolated from each other. Rather than having the perspective of boundaries as existing between an organization and its environment (Aldrich & Herker, 1977), boundaries between professions (Beckhy, 2003) or knowledge boundaries between teams (Faraj & Yan, 2009), this study reveals how internal boundaries between organizational levels are in fact understood in the same process, not isolated from each other.

Conclusion

Studies regarding cultural change have previously directed their attention towards creating models offering linear stepwise frameworks of how to reach a successful cultural change. However, these models and methods are of normative nature and tend to overemphasize the ability of top management to influence the norms and values of organizational members. Furthermore, studies investigating cultural change have not been able to successfully illustrate how organizations reach a sense of shared understanding. With regards to the research question of this paper: How is a shared understanding among organizational members created through organizational culture change? a case of a successfully reached common understanding due to their cultural change has been examined. Through this case, it has been concluded that by creating involvement and engagement from organizational members across organizational divisions, organizational boundaries were crossed resulting in that perceived boundaries are understood in a different way. How employees together developed the culture, how the CEO and value ambassadors spread the culture through their presence in the stores and how all employees got to partake in the culture meetings all illustrate the creation of involvement and participation at Wincorp. Hence, in order to create an organizational wide common understanding, this study demonstrates the importance of making organizational members from all domains feel involved in both the development and spreading of organizational culture. Moreover, this contributes to previous literature regarding corporate cultural change by providing an alternative perspective of how a shared understanding can be reached. It is not about the cognitive change in organizational members' minds when top management try to impose a culture change, it is the experience of involvement that lays the ground for a shared understanding to be developed among organizational members.

Being aware of how to reach a shared understanding is beneficial for organizations in order to not only be able to manage what the organization want to signal to its members, but also what type of potential employees the organization wants to attract. A practical implication for organizations when attempting to create corporate culture is that it is vital with participation across internal boundaries, and not relying on the message being enforced by top management. An additional implication is that it is not about whether the employees accept or understand the company's values. It is about gathering employees and creating an arena for all organizational members to participate in for the common understanding to take form. Thereby, their understanding of internal boundaries may be altered and perceived boundaries blurred however not erased. Thus, creating a shared understanding is about modifying the perceived boundaries of organizational members.

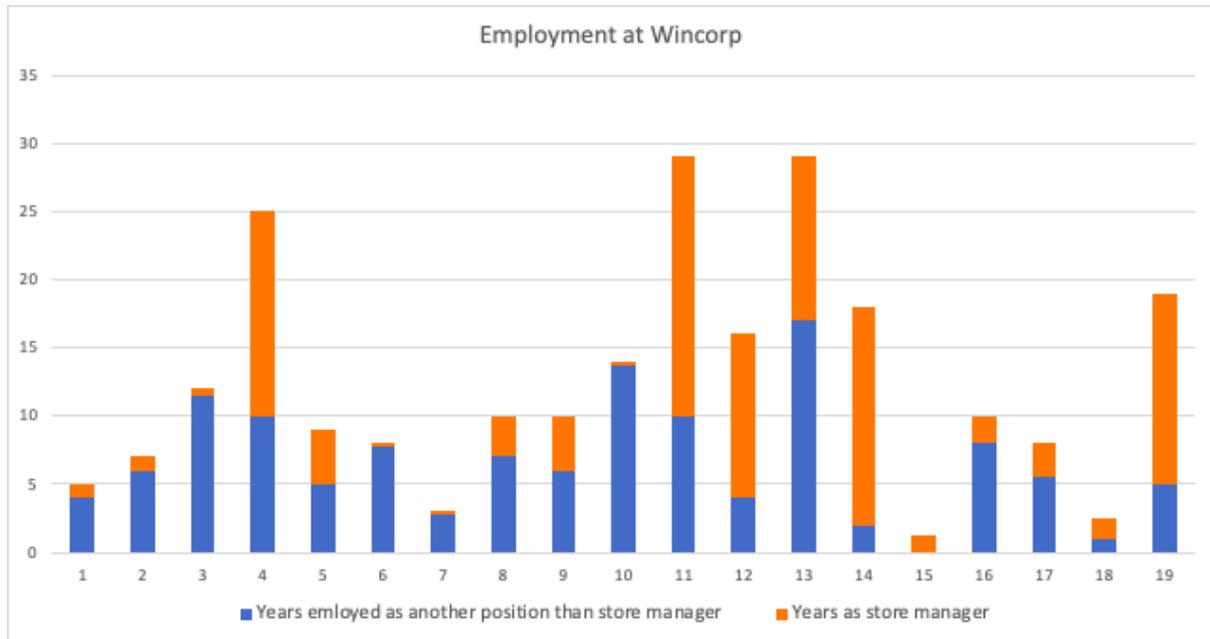
Limitations and future research

A limitation with this research is that only a limited part of the process has been studied. It is possible that the results may differ if the same study would be done a year from now when Wincorp has worked with the culture for a longer period of time and employees would be more aware of the meaning of it. Therefore, it might be of interest to conduct a follow-up study to analyze how the cultural change program developed. As the examined case is viewed from a Swedish perspective even though the company is international, further studies of Wincorp could investigate a cultural change process through the lens of boundary work but on an international level.

Another limitation to this study is its utilization of a particular case of cultural change, namely a cultural change in a centralized structured organization. In other types of organizational settings, e.g. within a decentralized structured organization other types of boundary work may be more relevant to discuss. Different types of boundary work may also be more or less applicable in studies of other business sectors. The retail sector is characterized by geographically dispersed stores, hence entailing implications of certain types of boundary work. Other business structures with more locally connected business units may indicate other forms of boundary work. Hence, suggestions for further studies could be to maintain the focus of corporate cultural change as an organizational wide process through boundary work but applied to cases of other organizational structures or within other industries to further understand how a shared understanding can be developed in different settings.

Appendix

Table 1



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