“Culture is a tool used by management to limit resistance”. Consider this statement in relation to how we understand and make sense of power in the post-bureaucratic era.

Due to the shift in socio-economic factors in organisations such as the expansion of the services industry, practices of organisations have also shifted away from the traditional bureaucratic style of management (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004). Consequently, different modes of control have been implemented in an attempt to maintain power in the post-bureaucratic era, such as focusing on the values, beliefs and norms within an organisation, in other words, culture (Brewis, 2007). In this essay, I am going to argue that culture is certainly used as a tool by management to maintain control and hence limit resistance. However, this may have both positive and negative implications. According to Kärreman and Alvesson (2004), managers tend to create an excessively strict culture which can be counter-productive to limiting resistance. The positive effects of culture will also be examined by drawing upon Rosen (1988) and Brewis (2007) to examine how culture can bring employees together to form a more collaborative environment as well as to provide a positive sense of identity for employees. In addition, the concern of whether this form of control is considered to be manipulation and therefore unethical is also explored by studying ideas covered by Ogbonna and Wilkinson (2003).

Culture is used as a tool to limit resistance in the post-bureaucratic era, focusing on the values, norms and beliefs or organisations. However, if enforced too heavily, it can have adverse effects on the organisation, increasing employees’ resistance (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004). Kärreman and Alvesson (2004) explore this notion and discover that in many cases, employees feel trapped by the intense focus placed on culture within their organisation. In order to maintain a certain level of personal identity, employees may become internally hostile; their loyalty to the organisation becoming only an act (Brewis, 2007). Interviews of employees from “Big”, presented by Kärreman and Alvesson (2004), shed light on the pressure of prejudice that can also arise from an excessively strict culture. The prejudice shown towards fellow employees who conform to the organisational culture can go so far as employees receiving insults such as “traitor” or “brownnose” (Brewis, 2007). Both articles demonstrate this behaviour stemmed from employees with strong personal identity and individuality. Although these employees may enjoy the work they do, for instance the employees interviewed at High Technologies Corporation (Tech), they also “routinely distance themselves from organisational ideology, describing it as ‘the bullshit that comes
from above” (Brewis, 2007, p. 367). It is clear that an environment that combines strict culture as well as employees who already maintain strong identities of their own, can cause rebellious attitudes to arise, whether it is displayed internally through hostility or externally through prejudice and discrimination to those who choose to conform. Therefore, culture is indeed used as a tool to limit resistance; however, when employees already have a strong sense of individuality, it is much more difficult for an organisation to maintain power in the post-bureaucratic era.

Culture is indeed used as a tool to limit resistance in the post-bureaucratic era. However, it proves to be more easily accomplished in environments where employees are seeking a source of identity (Brewis, 2007). Culture is constructively used as a tool to bring employees together, building a sense of “collective community” (Brewis, 2007), therefore increase employees’ commitment to the job and so, limit resistance. The Christmas party, “a great choreographed event, a collective gesture”, described by Rosen (1988, p. 470), effectively manipulates organisational culture in order to build a sense of belonging amongst the employees. This is evident from Rosen’s observation that “one can have friends here, bonds can exist” (Rosen, 1988, p. 470), demonstrating that the party was effective in building a sense of security and comfort for employees of belonging to the organisation. By developing culture in an organisation, the ways in which people act and think can also be integrated and shaped to be more consistent, allowing for less conflict to occur (Brewis, 2007). Culture is certainly used as a tool to limit resistance by providing a strong sense of identity and collectiveness. By shaping culture in this manner, managers are enabled to shape a sense of belonging and commitment to the organisation in order to limit employees’ resistance as there is less chance of conflict.

However, shaping culture within an organisation in this manner has also been referred to as “cultural engineering” (Brewis, 2007, p. 348), which raises the question as to whether culture used as a tool to limit resistance is actually manipulation, and therefore, unethical. Ogbonna and Wilkinson (2003, p. 1171) raise the concern that employees may be shaped into “corporate actors.” Also, that cultural change can be used as an excuse to enforce structural changes, which threatens the jobs of employees “as a deliberate attempt to eliminate” (Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003, p. 1169) those who do not fit the “culture” (Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003). This issue arises from the notion that post-bureaucratic management styles rely much more on flexibility and professional judgement (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004) as
opposed to bureaucracy which is limited and more standardised. The flexibility allows for abuse of power and so, results in “threats to the livelihood of managers who fail to conform” (Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003, p. 1174), such as job security and career progression. Therefore, although culture can be presented in a positive light, if manipulated to engineer structural changes to organisations under the excuse of building culture, it may also be considered to be unethical as it is being dishonest and providing a false promise (Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003). Culture is certainly being used as a tool to limit resistance; however, the ethical implications that can arise from abusing the flexibility of post-bureaucratic power are also an issue to be considered.

Shifts in organisational management from bureaucratic to post-bureaucratic management have allowed for a greater focus on the values, beliefs and norms of an organisation, in other words, culture (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004). By examining the different aspects of culture in the post-bureaucratic era, it is evident that culture can certainly be used as a tool in order to limit resistance. However, it also raises concerns such as the prejudice and rebelliousness that can result from employees with strong personal identities refusing to conform to a new culture (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004), as well as the ethical issues which arise from the flexibility in the post-bureaucratic style of management which heavily relies on professional judgement (Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003). By introducing more flexibility and reliance on professional judgement, the best way to shape culture to limit resistance may not always be clear and may also provide the opportunity for management to abuse such power (Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003). Although there are concerns regarding culture being used as a tool to limit resistance, it is also capable of effectively limiting resistance by bringing employees closer together and building a more stable and consistent organisation, while also providing a sense of identity and comfort to employees as demonstrated by both Brewis (2007) and Rosen (1988).
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