


Glimpse of Symbolic Egalitarianism

Social equality, which the organizations are highly concerned about, is considered a key concept for the betterment of mankind. Assigning power to various 'managerial positions' in the organizations inevitably initiates a gap among employees, which carry the potential of affecting the confidence of the employees; predominantly, the ones in the bottom levels. Symbolic egalitarianism, in this context, provides a somewhat successful solution. Symbolic egalitarianism, as Iddagoda & Opatha in 2018 identifies, is a competitive advantage and at the same time a high performance work practice. Our main focus is on the symbolic egalitarianism in the business as well as in the military contexts.

Symbolic egalitarianism is using symbols to minimize the differences between the levels of employees, whose purpose is achieving a common organizational goal. The symbols include visible signs, such as dresses and dress codes, use of physical space such as common cafeteria, common parking area and constant office arrangements. These are some of the most frequently employed ways of implementing symbolic egalitarianism.

Pfeiffer (1994) and Bolman & Deal (2003) highlight the fact that in the New United Motor Manufacturing, everyone dines in the same cafeteria, where no special allotments for executive dining rooms are allocated. Everyone in this organization, wears a blue smock and parking spaces are not reserved for the individuals; the motto of NUMMI is 'There are no managers, no supervisors, only team members'. In the military context, all the military personnel wear a uniform with certain commonalities which represent the military. i.e. Army, Navy and Air force. For instance, in Sri Lanka Navy the uniform colours are Navy blue and white. Egalitarian symbols are found in different forms and versions. As Pfeiffer (1994) states, in certain organizations, it is 'dress'; hardly any worker in a manufacturing facility is not familiar with the phrase 'the suits are coming', which refers to people from headquarters who are usually more formally dressed. Pfeiffer (1994) stated how pins with the organization's insignia or logo are used by Japanese organizations, which is worn by everyone to indicate that the person is a part of the organization. When it comes to naval context Sri Lanka all the officers and sailors wear a common logo representing



The symbols include visible signs, such as dresses and dress codes, use of physical space such as common cafeteria, common parking area and constant office arrangements. These are some of the most frequently employed ways of implementing symbolic egalitarianism....

Sri Lanka Navy, irrespective of their ranks. That common Naval logo consists of Dhamma Chakkraya, anchor of a ship and the lion, mainly.

Another effective way of implying 'commonness' is the physical space. According to Pfeiffer (1994) "the CEO of Solectron, a contract manufacturer that won the Malcolm Baldrige award, does not have a private office, and neither does the chairman". As same as everything else, symbolic egalitarianism, that is in practice in some private sector organizations Sri Lanka, too has its advantages and disadvantages.

Egalitarian structure an ideal recruiting tool in terms of motivating employees who are dissatisfied with traditional workplaces. An egalitarian company provides employees with the opportunity to equally contribute as well as share recognition for success; one of many advantages of an egalitarianism system. In such a system, an individual worker, while being responsible for personal and team tasks, is not shackled by the chain of authority or by no means disadvantaged by another claiming the responsibility for the positive results of someone else's work, as more freedom in an egalitarian company promotes individual accountability. As a result, egalitarian companies can use this structure as a recruiting tool, in order to persuade employees who are dissatisfied with traditional workplaces.

Another advantage of symbolic egalitarianism, according to Pfeiffer (1994), is the across-level communication enhanced by the opportunity to interact and meet in less formal settings. Meetings in a less formal setting is observed in certain military contexts as well, which is an indication that the senior management is aware of the real events and is capable of communicating directly to everyone in the facility.

Reduction in the number of social categories tends to decrease the salience of various subdivisions in the organization, diminish the thinking pattern of 'us' by substituting 'them', and create the sense of a common goal. Symbolic Egalitarianism makes cross-movement easier due to fewer status distinctions to overcome.

Every business is guided by the rationale of providing services to the society while making profit. Symbolic egalitarianism creating numerous opportunities for cost saving is an advantage for the managers. As managers do have identical efficient spaces same as those of other workers, the company may focus more on facilitating the workers, instead of large fancily furnished offices, executive washrooms and dining rooms. Expenditure on facilitating for top-level employees can be diverted to improve common workplace facilities for everyone or strengthen the company's bottom line.

As no concept, including symbolic egalitarianism, is 100% perfect, an egalitarian company may also face problems when the employees adapt to the structure; especially the employees who are used to traditional work backgrounds of hierarchical companies. For instance, those who had held high-level managerial positions and those who worked in entry-level positions may feel somewhat uncomfortable in the setting, and as a result it is unlikely that they will constructively engage with colleagues. Hence, leadership needs to play a major role in achieving the fullest benefits of symbolic egalitarianism, for lack of careful planning and leadership can lead an egalitarian company into considerable problems. Hence, Pfeiffer (1994) emphasizes that although the problems in the new office arrangements include, but are not limited to, an absence of acoustical privacy at times, they do signify more equality.

Hence, leadership needs to play a major role in achieving the fullest benefits of symbolic egalitarianism, for lack of careful planning and leadership can lead an egalitarian company into considerable problems...

An egalitarian company provides employees with the opportunity to contribute equally as well as share recognition for success, which is one of many advantages of an egalitarianism system. In such a system, an individual worker, who is responsible for personal and team work, and he or she is not shackled by the chain of authority or disadvantaged by the fact that some other claims responsibility for the positive results that others worked for, since egalitarian company culture promotes individual accountability by giving the workers more freedom.

According to Dunham (1984) a person who is high in this component of involvement makes frequent reference to work or the job when he/she answers to the question “what kind of a person am I?” and refers to work or job related factors; for instance, some may answer “I am a human resource manager”, “I am a naval officer/sailor” or “I am from Sri Lanka Navy”. Authors of this paper establish that symbolic egalitarianism ensures employee’s self-concept, enabling them work in their organization with dignity.



Dr. Anuradha Iddagoda
Senior Lecturer
Management Science Unit
Faculty of Applied Sciences
University of Sri Jayewardenepura



Commodore Rohitha Abeysinghe
Officer in-charge
Welisara Naval Complex
Welisara

