An introduction to Culture
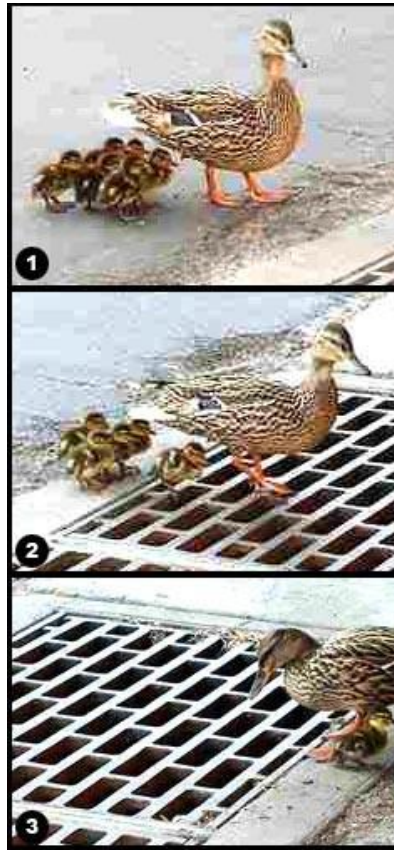
Regional Workshop on the development and implementation of effective IMS based on GSR Part 2

Jakarta, Indonesia
31 July-04 August 2023

Regulatory Activities Section
Division of Nuclear Installation Safety (NSNI)
International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)
Department of Nuclear Safety & Security

Make sure you follow!

'Culture'

Culture is about growth, something changing, dynamic.

Growth can never be controlled entirely.

Culture is created by people. It gives meaning to the world.

Culture in anthropology

- Culture, in the sense 'foreign cultures', is studied within anthropology

- There, it is emphasised that studying cultures is a question of creating understanding rather than promoting change in a certain direction

- The task of anthropology is also to facilitate communication – also with 'the natives' – around this understanding

Organizational culture: background

- USA, the oil crisis and Japan: an attempt to explain Japan's economic success

- A wave of management literature in the early 80's, e.g. *Corporate Cultures*, *In Search of Excellence, Theory Z*

Organizational culture: background
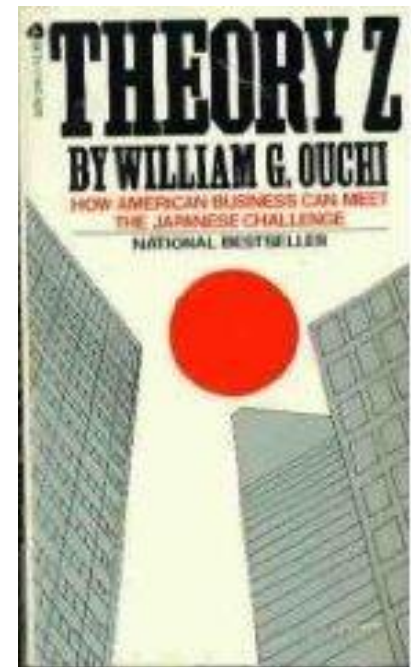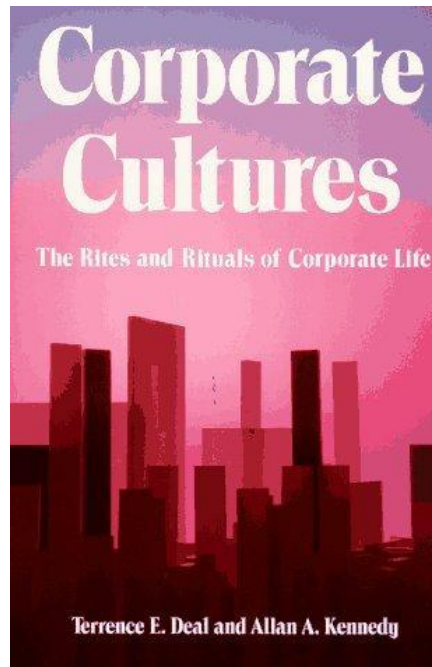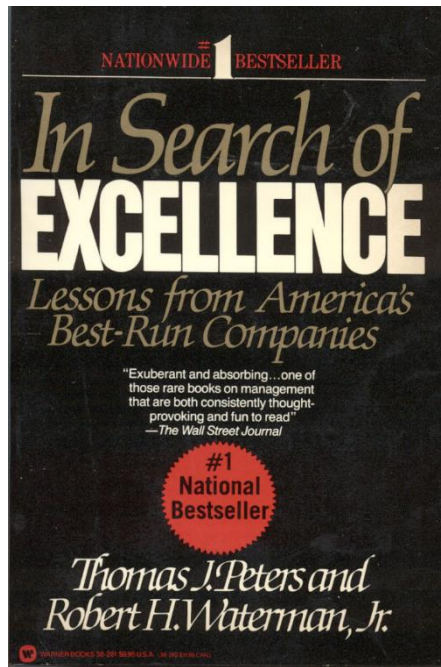
Organizational culture: background

- USA, the oil crisis and Japan: an attempt to explain Japan's economic success

- A wave of management literature in the early 80's, e.g. *Corporate Cultures* and *In Search of Excellence*

- Culture was used to explain why some companies were more successful than others

- The importance of a strong and homogenuous culture was emphasised

- Management's role was considered extremely important

Organizational culture: background

- Companies did of course have cultures before this...

- ...but now culture was considered a source of success

- Culture was something to manage and control...

- ...in order to reach 'excellence'...

- ...but the question is how one can separate the importance of culture before other factors?

Organizational culture: background

- Culture is nowadays seen as less of a 'quick fix'
- It is recognized that culture can be changed,
- but it is also recognized that this often takes
  - time,
  - effort, and
  - does not always end up the way planned.
- Culture can be seen as something we can influence, rather than something we can control
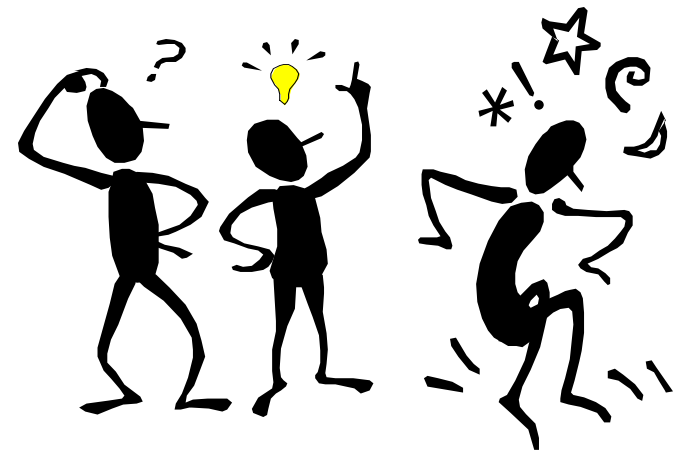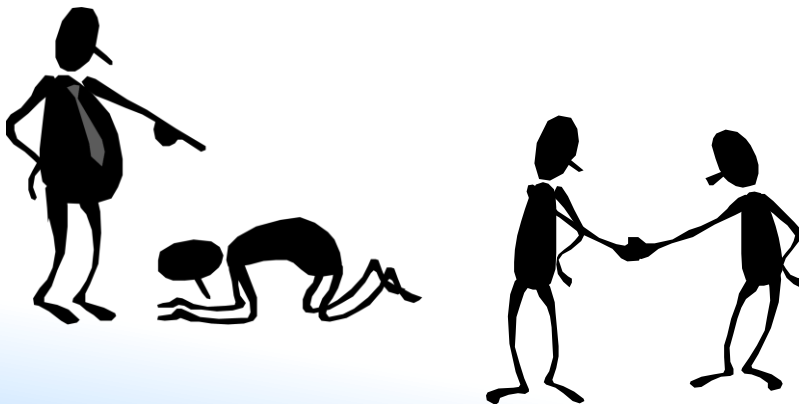
Discussion:

- How would you want to define 'organizational culture'?

- (Time: 5 minutes)

Definitions of culture

- There are many definitions of 'culture'
- Definitions generally emphasise either of these two:

...culture as patterns of behaviour and interaction

...culture as systems of thought

Definitions

- 'The way we do things around here'
  - (Deal & Kennedy, *Corporate Culture*, 1982)
- One of the most common definitions, but:
  - What 'things' are we talking about? The way we check our email? Are there different symbolic value to different behaviours?
  - Who are 'we'? Different 'we's' may do things differently.
  - Is it only a question of doing? Or is it related to norms and values?
- The definition seems easy enough, but is difficult to actually use

Definitions

'Organizational culture is the set of common norms, values and world views that develop in an organization when its members interact with each other and its context'

(Norwegian psychologist Henning Bang)

- Emphasises the dynamic and cognitive dimension of culture, but:

  - Common – for whom? Different groups may have different norms and values.

  - What is a 'value'? To put customers first by smiling, or a philosophy of life? The definition does not consider 'depth' of values.

- The definition is a good starting point but lacks some precision.

Culture as an iceberg

9/10 of the iceberg is under water...

(Image from http://sv.wikipedia.org)
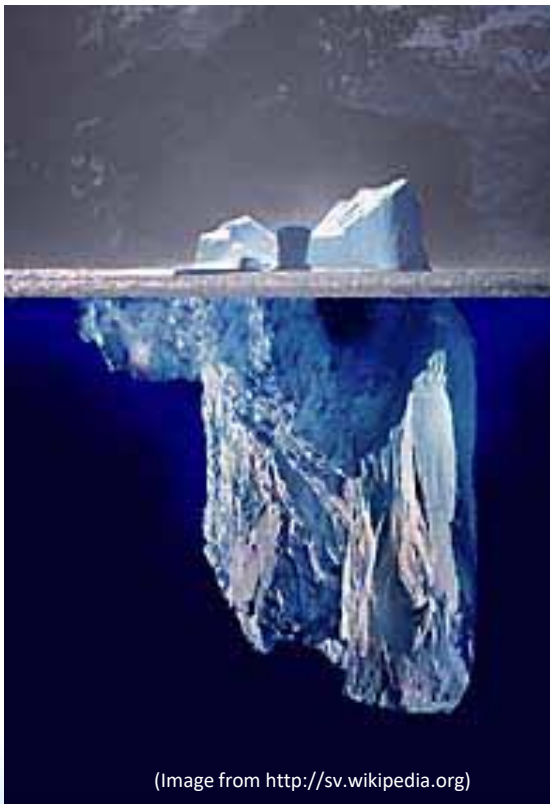
Above the surface we find visible aspects of culture: objects, actions, talk, text......

Under the surface we find:

- Norms
- Values
  - Espoused
  - Tacit
- Basic assumptions about reality

Culture as an iceberg

Generally we can say that...

(Image from http://sv.wikipedia.org)

...at the surface (or above) it is easy to make statements about things

...the deeper we get the more slowly the culture changes

...the deeper we get the less unique the culture is

Culture as an iceberg

(Image from http://sv.wikipedia.org)
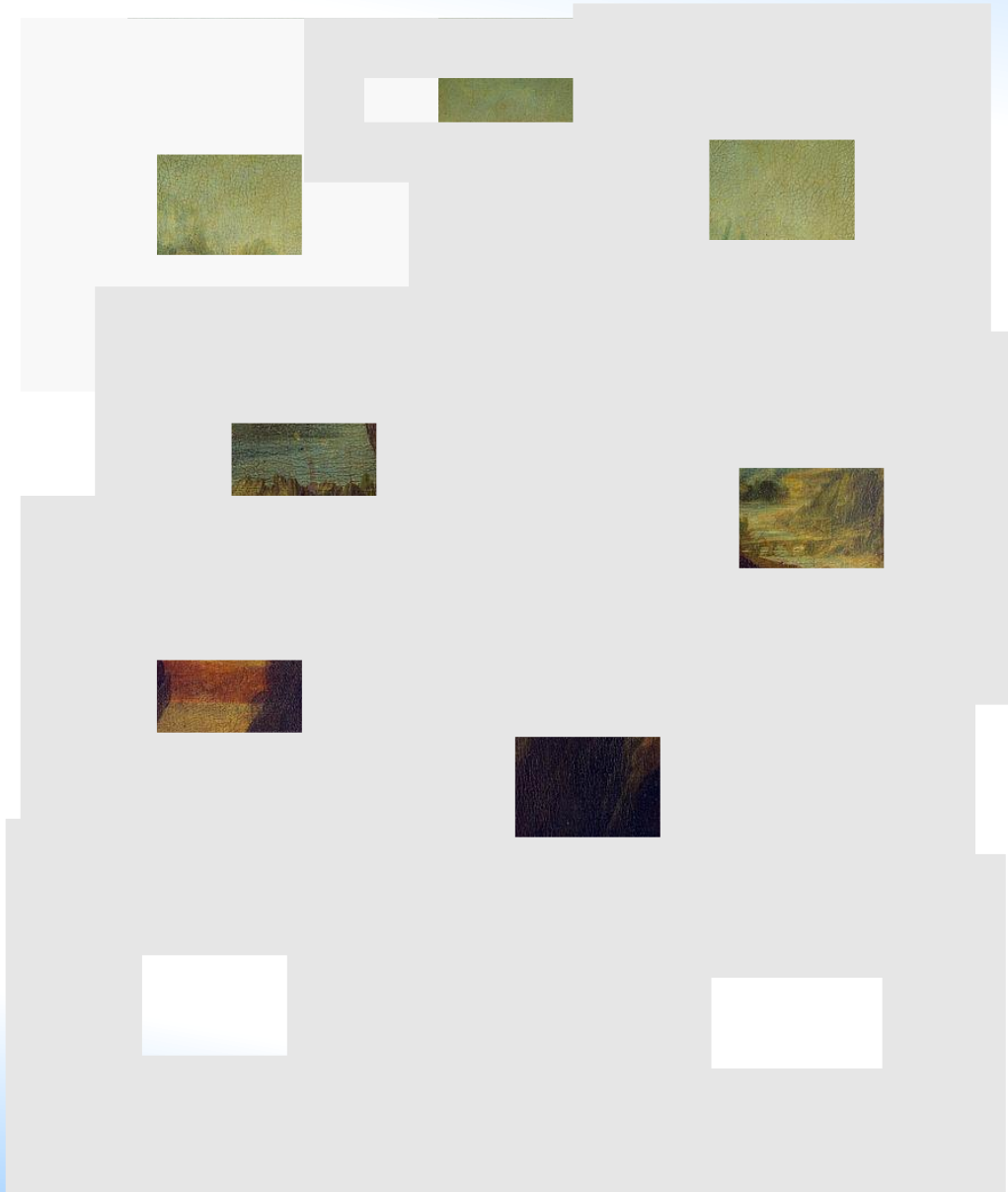
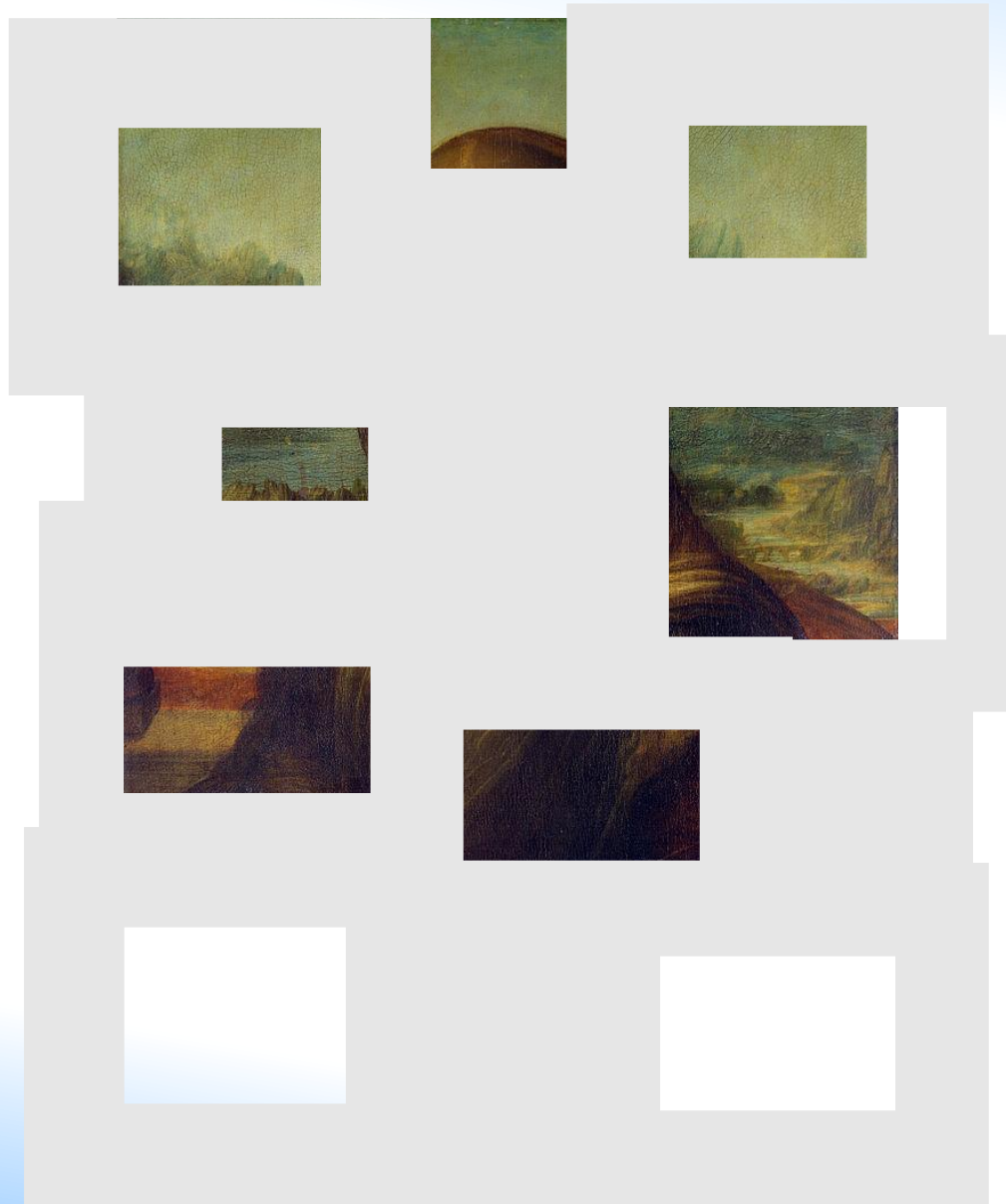The iceberg metaphor does not provide a simple definition of culture. Rather it creates an awareness about the complexity of the concept of culture.

It also highlights the importance of *interpretation* when it comes to culture, since what we can observe is only a small part.
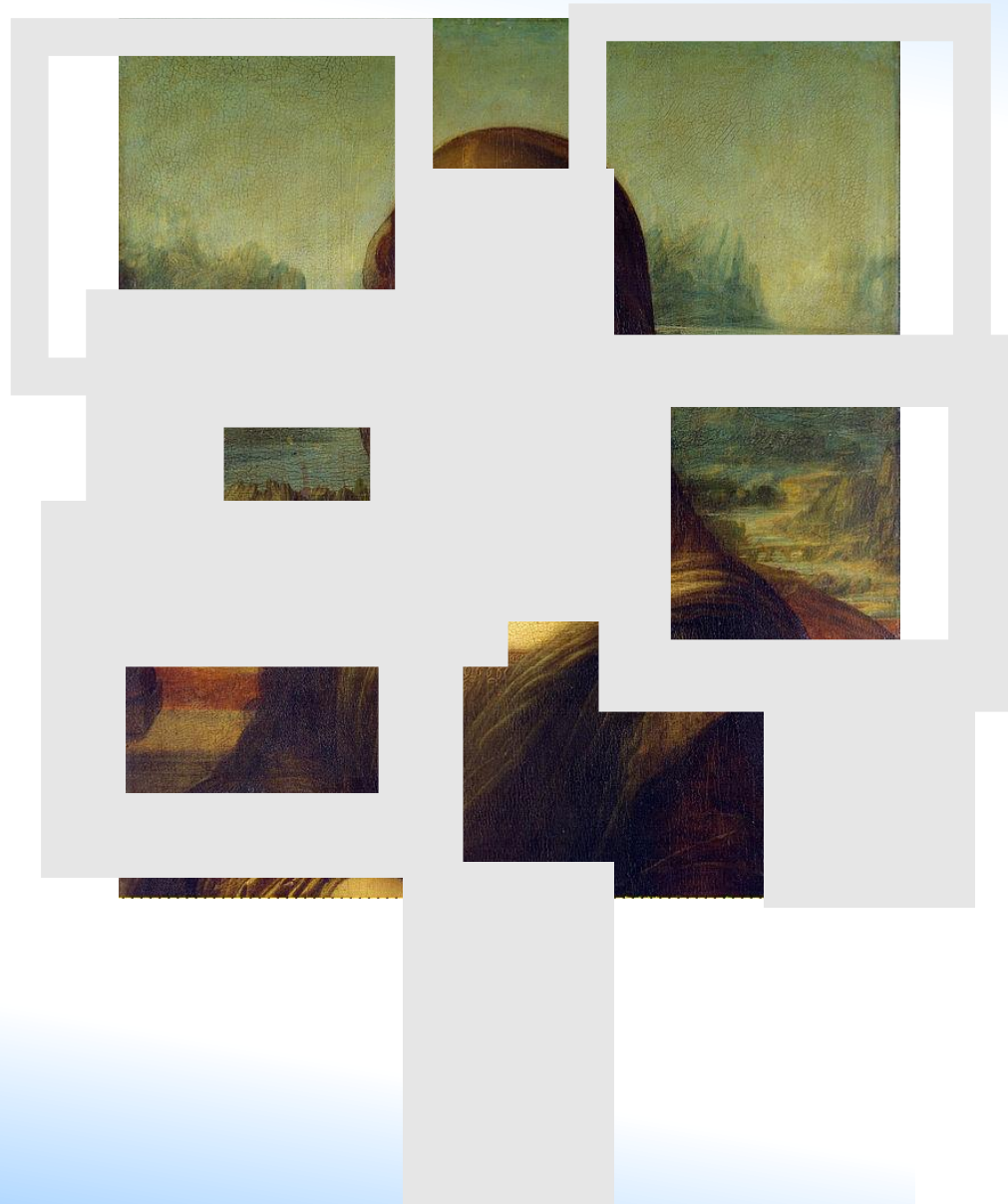
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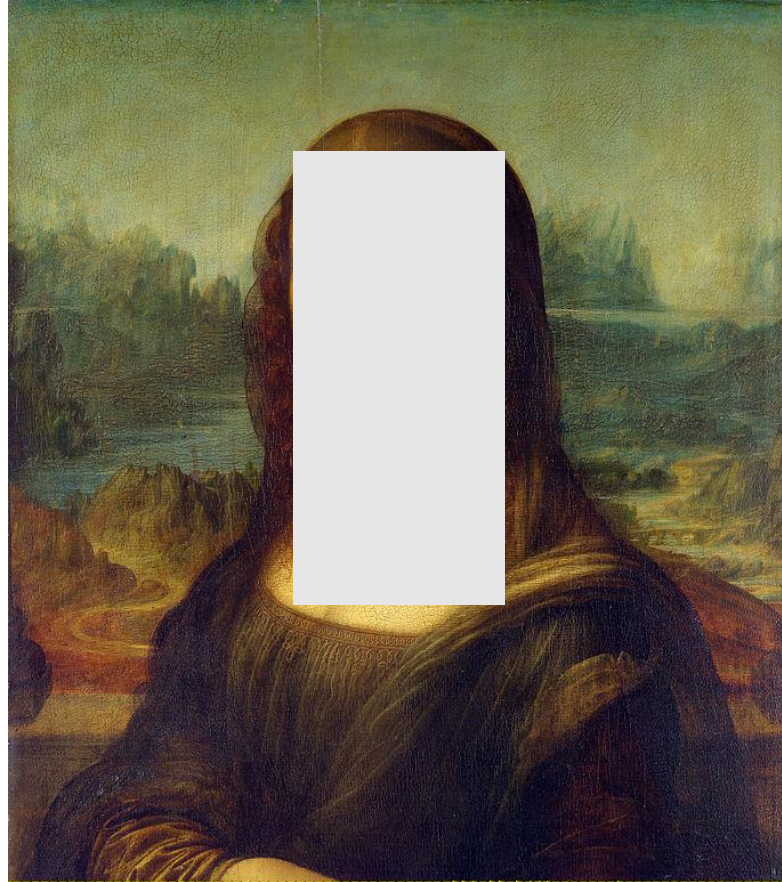
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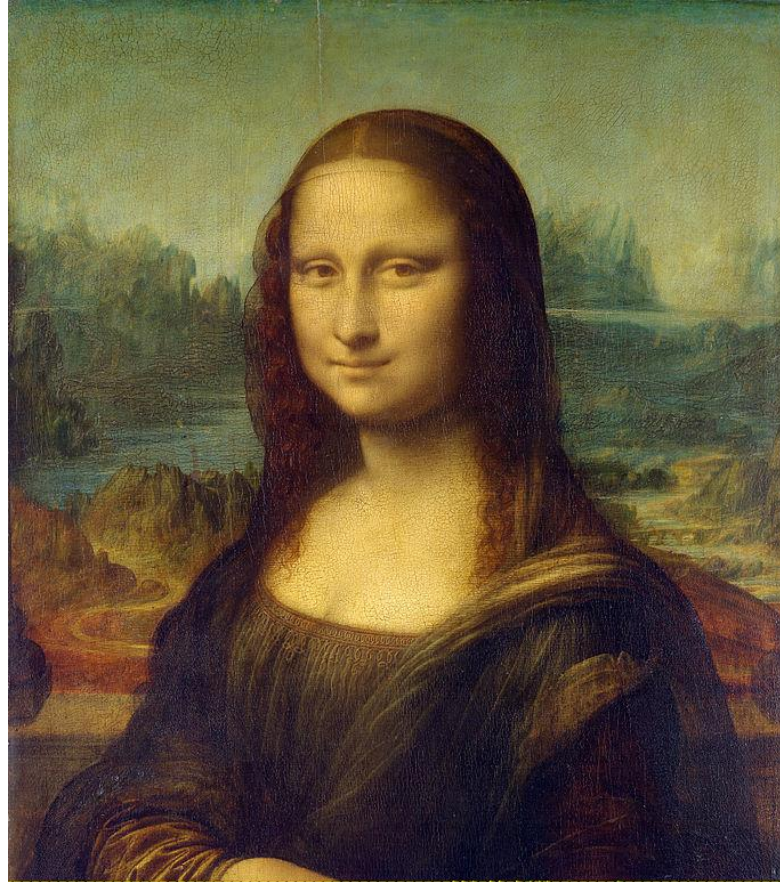
What do you look at then?

But information is not all. The question remains:
What is the *meaning* of that smile?

What to look for: Cultural expressions

Behaviour

Physical expressions

Verbal expressions

Cultural expressions

Actions

How is someone
seen as less
competent handled
at a meeting?
Neglect? Silencing?
Appreciation?

Behaviour

Emotions

Is it OK to get
really angry at a
meeting and slam
the table?

Rites and ceremonies

Common as well as special occasions:

- Do meetings follow special procedures?

- The annual company celebration?
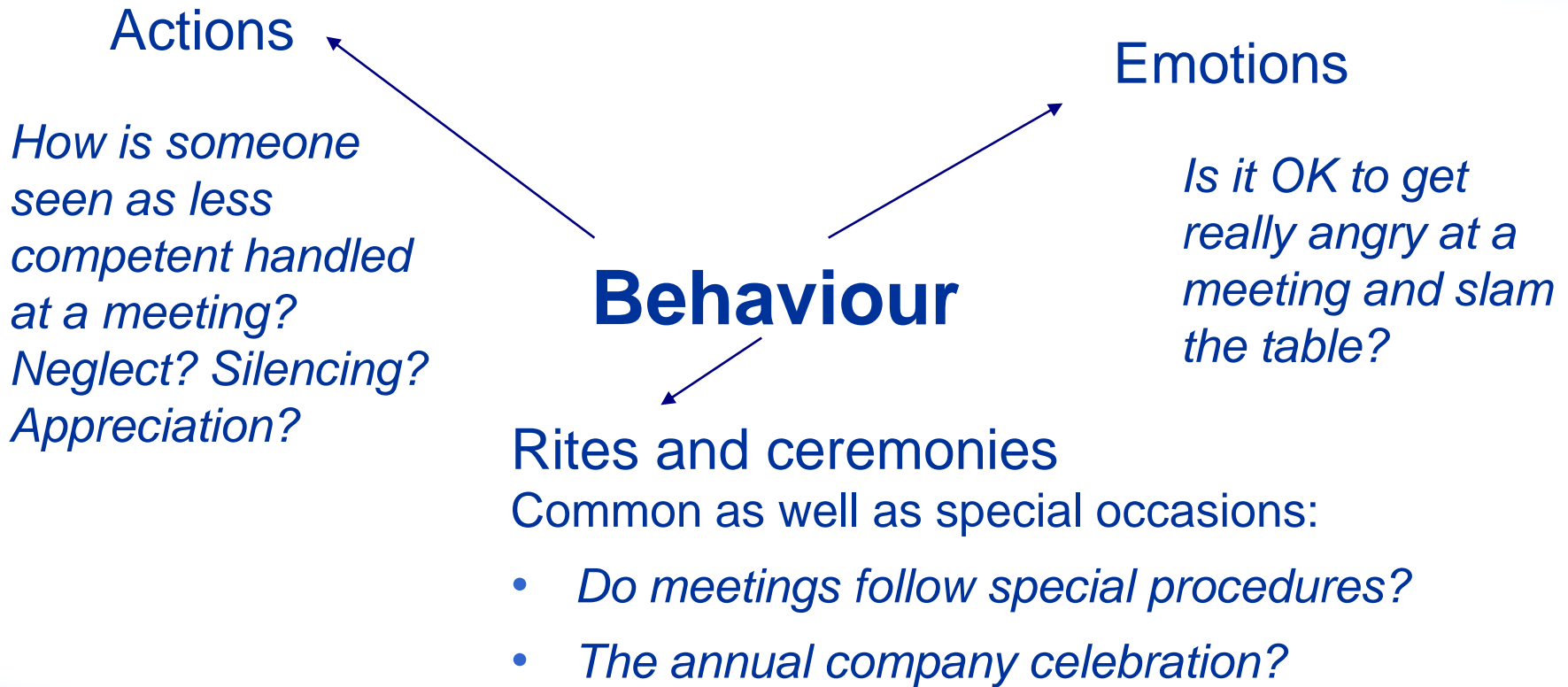
Cultural expressions

Stories

Working in security at IBM

Verbal expressions

Cultural expressions

•At IBM the story about a security worker named Lucille is told. She was confronted with the company's Chairman, Thomas Watson Jr. The young woman had as her task to check the security clearance of everyone entering a special zone.

•As usual surrounded by a squadron of costumes Watson headed towards the entry point Lucille was responsible for. Watson was wearing an orange card, giving access to the whole factory – except this part. To enter here, a green card was required.

•Lucille was shaking in her slightly too large uniform. 'I'm sorry' she said. 'You can't enter, you don't have the right security clearance.'

•The men following Watson froze. The situation could end in any way. 'Do you know who he is?' someone whispered. Watson held up his hand to make silence, while one of the men went away to get a green card.

Cultural expressions

IAEA

Stories

Working in security at IBM

Language and humour

Ironic cartoons mocking management?

Verbal expressions

Espoused values

'Here we have a questioning attitude'

Espoused values are not always the same as those expressed in stories, language and humour;

which ones do you think we live by?

Cultural expressions

Objects

Do you wear your protective equipment when the manager is not around?

Physical expressions

Physical design, architecture

How difficult is it to see which office it is that belongs to the senior manager?
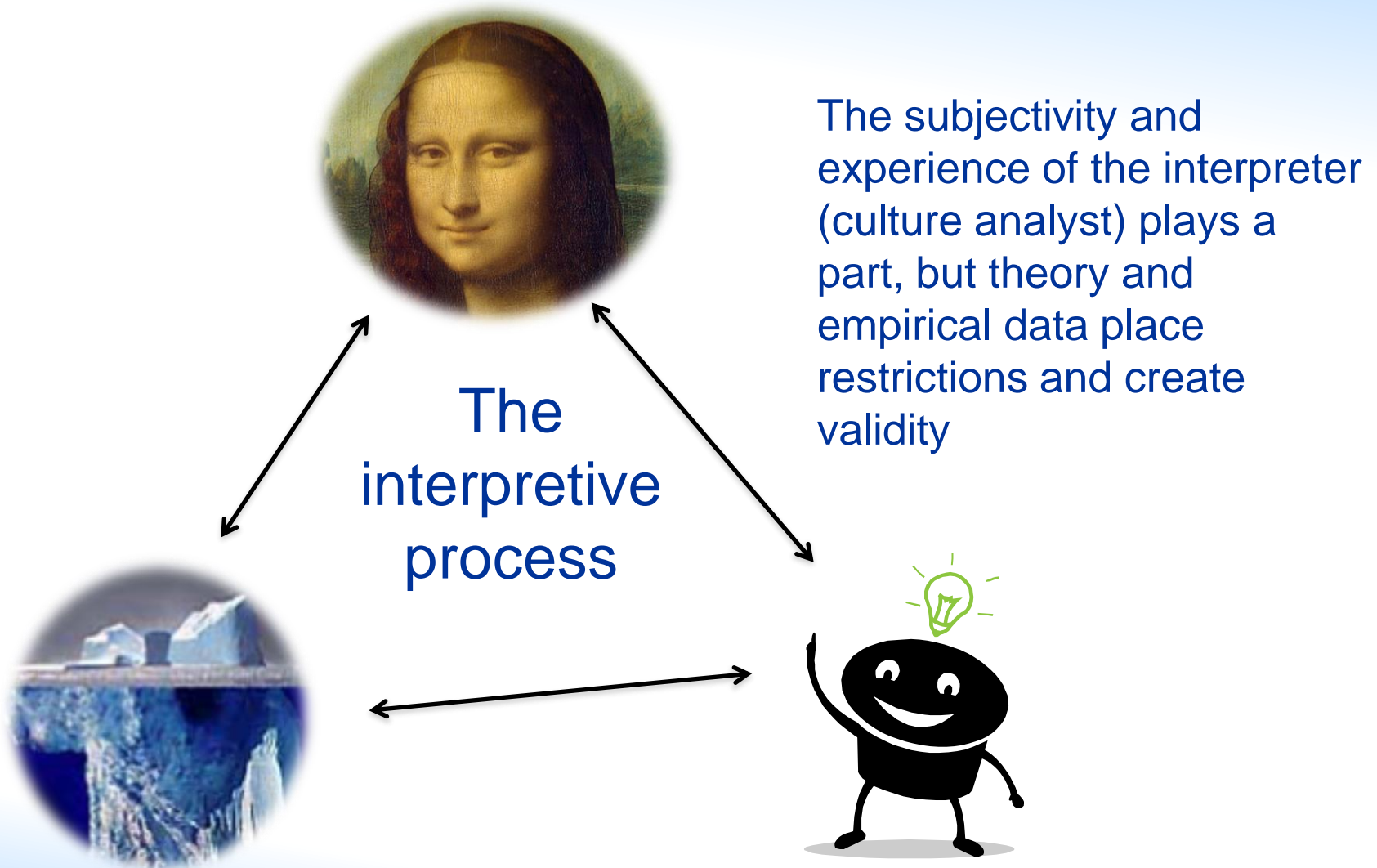
IAEA Building, Vienna

(Photo ©: Johan Alvehus)

From expressions to interpretations

- What we can see and hear (stories, language use) is one thing

- The *meaning* of this is quite another thing

- What meaning we attach to something is an effect of what we assume

- Interpreting culture thus means that we must know which assumptions we make;

- it requires a 'theory' of culture!

From expressions to interpretations

The subjectivity and experience of the interpreter (culture analyst) plays a part, but theory and empirical data place restrictions and create validity

The interpretive process

Warning 1: The false assumption of homogeneity!

- Larger groups can seldom be seen as one culture
- Subcultures are common, any group with common interest or background may develop a subculture
- Subcultures can lead to conflict as well as development
  - Conflicts can be good, e.g. minimize myopia
  - Conflicts may be bad, e.g. costing time and effort and lead to paralysis in the organization
- It is important to sensitive to different subcultures in the organization, as change efforts may mean different things to different groups!

# Warning 2: The belief that we can control culture!

- What the concept of culture teaches us is that how people respond to actions partly depend on their culture

- Our view on people's cultural assumptions is an effect of our interpretations – and this is no exact science!

- This means that the way people react, e.g. their relation to change efforts, will be to some degree impossible to predict

- Thus, we cannot control culture, only influence it,

- and this only at the discretion of those influenced

The art of interpreting culture

- There is no easy 'to do'-list to follow if we want to understand culture

- Culture will not turn out as figures (means and standard deviations)

- Interpreting culture is more like interpreting a book then measuring temperature
  - It is less easy
  - It is more subjective
  - It is a whole lot more rewarding!

Perception and meaning making
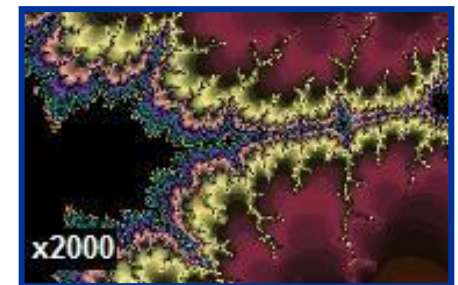
The art of interpreting culture

- Interpreting culture requires an effort at distancing oneself from one's own views
  - This becomes particularly important in self-assessments
  - While a self assessment has the advantage of knowledge...
  - ...that very same knowledge can cloud vision
  - We rarely really see that which we are used to seeing, 'it just is there'
- Interpreting culture is something that takes time to learn

Summary

- The concept of organizational culture has changed significantly since it was first conceived in the 1980's

- Culture is generally understood as patterns of behaviour and systems of thought

- Culture can be thought of as an iceberg, with values, attitudes and basic assumptions submerged below the surface

- Culture is not uniform and cannot be controlled

- Working with culture is an exercise in interpretation

Keep an open mind