



GASP! Culture Change: Unravelling the mystery and creating the shift

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Part of the reason why leaders and managers don't want to go near culture change is because they don't even really know what it's about; what it looks like, what it feels like, literally what it is. And quite frankly, I don't blame them. When have we ever embarked on a big change when we aren't even really sure what it's about? It's time to unpack, unravel, and unearth what exactly 'culture change' means.

Apparently, 'the way things are done around here' is supposed to define 'culture' more clearly. Right...What 'things'?? Haven't we already learned that using the word 'thing' to describe anything is pretty useless? Part of the reason why making culture change stick is so hard is because people often assume that others know what it means, when really, they don't. So we end up having a sea of people going along a culture change agenda when they aren't even sure what the purpose is for, and why they should bother; essentially setting up for failure.

Culture Change is basically Behaviour Change

Why we don't actually call it that, I couldn't tell you. Maybe it's because we don't want to be reduced to Pavlov and his dogs... who knows. Your organisation's culture is essentially the behavioural norms that are seen, as well as less obvious factors such as people's underlying assumptions and beliefs. And while we cannot disregard the role that structures, policies and procedures, and business models play in either facilitating or hindering an optimal company culture, the bottom line is that a massive proportion of culture change comes down to changes in human behaviour.

3 Simple Ways of Understanding Culture:

1. The stuff that's not written down. If there was a rule book on what it's like to work at your company, it would probably say that the work day is generally 9-5:30 but it wouldn't say that what's tolerated is people regularly walking in 15-20 minutes late for morning meetings. The rule book of procedures is the ideal, whereas the culture depicts the reality and what people tend to get away with.

2. What is really valued and placed as highest importance: what is most noticed & measured. For example, a logistics company aims for a balanced score card at the end of each day. While this is the ideal, the reality is that the greatest emphasis is placed on a) did you meet your throughput targets? And b) how are the finances doing? The other trackers, while of value, don't come up on top when the pressure is on.

3. The behavioural norms. This can include behaviours that are tolerated, accepted, and what people can 'get by' with. Positive behaviours that represent either an actual or ideal company culture may or may not get praised or drawn attention to. Negative or unhelpful behaviours that people turn a blind eye too, like 'banter' that can go too far, humor that is offensive or demeaning, or intimacy that crosses the professionalism line, all make up company culture.

If you break it down then, a company's culture is essentially the **collective behavior of a company's people**. Since behaviours are grounded in underlying attitudes and beliefs, a company's culture, by nature, includes these attitudes & beliefs as well. **Behaviours are the outward manifestation of company culture; attitudes & beliefs are the undercurrents that fall below the waterline.** This is why it is essential, when trying to understand company culture, to objectively shine a light on this undercurrent to uncover what's driving people's behavior (and therefore the current culture). Trying to change people's behaviours without tuning into what drives their current modus operandi is like pulling someone towards you without recognizing that their feet are super-glued to the ground.

This is why culture change is difficult; because you are essentially asking your company to change the collective behavior of its people. And of course, behavior change is not the easiest of them all. Culture is nothing outside of them, it is inherently in them.

5 Simple Ways to Initiate a Culture, I mean Behaviour, Change:

1. Focus on a few critical behaviours that have the most impact. Think less is more. When the going gets tough, it's easy to revert back to what we know best; we've been doing it for so long that it just feels natural! No effort or thinking required. Start by introducing one minor change- something that is low in complexity but high in impact.

For example, meeting behaviours. If a meeting is scheduled for 9am, the meeting starts at 9am and whoever comes in afterwards has the responsibility to do what he or she needs to do to catch up. After a few late strolls in, Fred will learn that time waits for no one and that it's probably more effort to play catch up then it is to get out of bed 5 or 10 minutes earlier.



2. Role modeling. Inspiration is powerful and behaviour breeds behaviour. While senior leadership can have a very strong impact, it need not be the only way. Senior managers lead teams of their own and we all have ability to influence. It's about leveraging that and being a positive deviation of the norm.

3. Ingroup vs. Outgroup. Humans have a fundamental need to belong. We create any reason, consciously or subconsciously, to make us feel that we belong to a group. This is our 'ingroup' and everyone else is in the 'outgroup'. Create an ingroup of people who are committed to changing the company's culture. Live by the principle of '... do good anyway', that is, apply consistency with new positive behaviours even if they are not initially met with the desired response. Resistance, at first, is very likely. Once people start to see the new ingroup as positive, inspiring, admirable and future-orientated people will want to be part of it and identify with it, and guess what, the easiest way for them to do this is to start mirroring those behaviours.

4. Be disciplined to stick to the rules. When we learn to drive, we start by understanding the road rules: when to give way on a roundabout; when we can bypass someone; what to do at a 4-way stop. It's mechanical, it takes cognitive work, and it's functional. After some time driving, and years thereafter, road rules live in our unconscious competence: our driving behaviours become automatic and reflexive. This is how behaviours stick. What rules do you need to revisit in order to get your ideal behavioural, and therefore cultural, outcome? Don't assume that 'rules' are school-like. Rules are a system of behaving in a way that is most conducive to achieving a desired outcome. Have rules but maintain sound judgment for deviances.

5. Reward & praise good behaviours. Simple behavioural psychology. If you see something that demonstrates culture and behavioural change, acknowledge, champion, and reinforce what that person is doing or who they're being. As human beings we like, rather we *need*, to be seen and heard. Take notice and reinforce the behaviours that create the kind of culture you strive towards.

Well, I feel better now. I can sleep at night knowing that, hopefully, I have demystified culture change to busy leaders & managers who avoid culture change like the plague. It's not so scary or complex after all, I promise! Though admittedly, in practice it is not necessarily easy either. But really, what is easy these days? Commitment, buy-in to the benefits, and a willingness to adapt are essential ingredients to any behaviour, and therefore culture, change. Recognising your role in perpetuating your current company culture, and what you need to do to help create the shift, is the first step. Be bold and take it!