Corporate Culture: Questions at the Edge of Knowing

an e-mail dialogue | Eric Lynn & Robert Pierer

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Introduction

The culture as the soul of the organization influences everything. But what exactly is organizational culture? Is there a definition and is it even important? Why do we need a holistic view of systems and why is it essential to understanding the dynamic of culture? How can we find answers to questions in the context of the development of organizational culture? What is our greatest challenge? These are just a few of the many questions that are asked and answered (or not) in this dialogue. Join us on our way to the edge of knowledge of culture, change, collective intelligence, space, trust and sense.

Robert Pierer: Can the corporate culture of start-ups be an example for established corporations to learn from?

Eric Lynn: For a number of reasons, my immediate response would be "No". However, before substantiating this, I would need to understand what you mean by " the corporate culture of start-ups" as well as what you consider to be "corporate culture"?

Robert Pierer: First, I don't see any reasons why there should be different descriptions of the corporate culture for start-ups or established companies. Before I go into more detail on your question, I just want to briefly explain why I chose this question to start our dialogue. In various social media channels, you can often read that the corporate culture of start-ups is inspiring more and more established companies. Especially regarding their endeavours to assert themselves in increasingly dynamic and innovative markets. Following these two statements, one would think that flexibility and dynamism define the corporate culture of start-ups and that is definitely nonsense.

I have of course read through various definitions of "culture" and I also know your webpage, your blogs and your concept of corporate culture. Therefore, I will be careful not to give a definition of corporate culture here.

Let me also ask a question instead: Can the corporate cultures of successful companies be seen as role models at all or must they always be developed intrinsically (so to speak, depending on the interacting individuals)?

Eric Lynn: I suggest we begin by clarifying this nebulous yet very real notion we refer to as "culture". As it is a dynamic phenomenon, culture is beyond definition. It is frequently reduced to icons that symbolise what a group purports to stand for, for example, flags, emblems, mottos, standards authorities, and more. Icons are merely icons. They are not culture. More frequently still, culture is reduced to the constructed notions of nationality, belief systems, ethnicity, and more, from which are drawn behavioural ideas leading to simplistic "definitions" of culture such as, "the way things are done around here". Behaviour is not culture. Behaviour reflects culture; simultaneously, it influences the culture in any social group.

Culture is relational – a highly complex dynamic of interactions whose roots lie in the multiple learned and embedded patterns of all actors including those of the organization itself. Everything influences everything else. Everyone influences everyone and everything else. Culture is felt, sensed. It is the soul of the organization. As a

dynamic notion, the culture of an organization changes continuously. To intentionally change an organisation culture, we need to dive deep, discover its patterns while cultivating new ones.

Each organization has a unique culture. For this reason, we cannot realistically speak of "the corporate culture of start-ups". There are no blueprints, no role-models. We can always learn from the experiences of others; indeed, we should. However, the fundamental Question for each organization remains … *"What do we want our organization to … BE?"* The uniqueness of each actor is essential to its BEing. Here lies the work.

Robert Pierer: When I read your post above, the question (or the book of the same name, respectively) by Richard David Precht came into my mind quite unconsciously: *Who am I? And if so, how many?* So, I picked up the book and read through one specific chapter (*How do I know who I am?*). In this chapter Precht writes that human consciousness is the product of the body's interaction with its environment. And further: In order to understand our mind, we not only need to place it in the brain, but also find a way to understand it as part of the whole organism. If we want to define who we want to be, we must first find out who we are. And we are many because we are constantly and dynamically interacting with our environment. This also applies to the organization. So, we must first create a clear picture of the current situation in our organization. I think you call this "Organization Culture Diagnostics". From my experience (although in a different area) this is usually the easier way. The biggest challenge is definitely the question you asked above: "What should our organization ... BE?" This leads me to another question: How can I see the path to the desired future when the organizational culture per se cannot be defined?

Eric Lynn: I am an admirer of Precht's thinking and his clarity, especially the clarity he brings to the fact that little in our dynamic world is actually as clear as it may appear. So … when we are defining … what precisely are we defining? And what is the true value/validity of the definition? And why does the definition matter?

What if we leave definitions aside? What if we permit ourselves to be guided by our dreams of possibility? Now … while we may perceive dreams as unrealistic and/or impractical, without them, I cannot imagine how significant changes in societies occur. Indeed, when I reflect on history, it is the dreams that governed the significant changes that occurred, positive and negative changes.

I would humbly suggest that the power of imagination is unlimited. And this is only the power of an individual's imagination. What could be the power of the combined imagination of a community … neither the sum of the individuals … nor a collection of paths … perhaps fields of space, oceans of water to cultivate …

How can we release the shackles that bind us to the tyranny of the known?

Robert Pierer: I am currently trying to see your above remarks about dreams, visions, and possibilities in the context of the development of organizational culture (or to put it in your words: Cultivating Healthy Organizations). You describe or define in your webpage that a healthy organization consists of 13 core characteristics. Obviously, it is not so easy to get along without definitions (at least in the context of determining the essence of a thing to be explained) or to leave definitions aside. But regardless of whether you define it or how it is described, I agree with you: *All of them are intricately intertwined and therefore inter-related with one another.* I also understand that we need a holistic view of systems and that understanding the dynamic of culture is essential for the ability to cultivate a healthy organization. However, for me, your above-mentioned question ("What should our organization ... BE?") still remains and has not yet been answered. And most importantly, how can I answer this question and how is this related to the power of the combined imagination of a community or organization?

Eric Lynn: First, let's return to the development of organizational culture. I suggest reframing this notion to the development of the organization, because this is what it is. The culture is in the organization and the work entails developing/cultivating a healthy organization, so, this ought to be the focus. Words are important.

Now, the Question (for some years now, I have been consciously writing this word with a capital 'Q', because it is so important), *"What should our organization ... BE?"* …

The temptation to seek direct and fast answers is understandable. For complex Questions, meaningful direct answers are rare. They are likely to be too limiting. A well-known quote by an early 20th Century American journalist, H. L. Mencken, highlights this trap. *"For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple and wrong."*

Who needs to answer this Question? - It is important that for your company, as CEO, you answer it for yourself. This answer however is limited. It is your perspective alone. Each member of the leadership team needs to answer it for themselves. This however is also limited. Each member of the organization needs to answer it for themselves. This too however is limited. Individual responses of all members of the organization are essential because all need to be integrated. However, if they remain individual, there is neither integration nor collective intelligence. So … when responses emerge in the group context rather than from one's own enquiries, they will be completely different: the dynamic of the energy in the group that is the community of the organization changes the meaning of the context and therefore responses.

And now the Question … How do the answers emerge? - Permit me to very briefly outline how I work with groups with this Question. Initially, the senior leadership team (first level or first two levels of nominal hierarchy) engage with it. As nominal leaders, all eyes are upon them. They incorporate the message for everyone, therefore, they, together, need to paint the picture of their desired future which is actually also the present, as the present is changing as they are cultivating it. Using dialogue conversation principles, in small groups, they engage with indirect Questions whose answers form a complete picture. As the small groups share with one another, the bigger picture emerges, changing as it does so. In this picture, all the values and nuances of these values are incorporated, beyond the mere words to the meaning behind the words. The process is not necessarily neat and does not lend itself to representation in clear diagrams. The diagram will always be missing something. It may well be very messy. Every context is unique. Conveying this meaning then becomes the challenge. It is conveyed during everyday life.

I refer to dynamic interaction in groups as relationing. This is what we human beings do when we are together, regardless of context, in all our interactions. *How do we want to be with one another in the specific context of our organization?* … would be another, less elegant way of phrasing the fundamental Question.

What about the rest of the organization? We use a similar process, building upon what the leadership team has discovered during their initial engagement with the challenge. Details will be different and designing the initiative to reflect the meaning in the message becomes part of the challenge.

This is all occurring as life in the community that is the organization is continuing. Work, after all, needs to be done. Perhaps already, the work environment and quality are more generative. And so, we can benefit from the power of community imagination as it is intentionally changing the organization.

As I'm writing, I find I could add so much more of what is happening in parallel, but we'll save this.

Robert Pierer: There is a multitude of extremely valuable information in your contribution above. The understanding of the interactions between humans and humans with the environment is of central importance in my opinion: cognitions are only reflexes of the environment and we can only understand a person if we also understand their living environment. Yes, words are important and that's why the term living environment (the world as it is lived and experienced, in which people perceive and act and in which they are constructive parts) is more precise in my opinion. I will of course be careful not to drift in the direction of cognitive or environmental psychology, since I would actually be on black ice ...

Just recently I read a LinkedIn post by Rene Schäfer, who metaphorically sums it up using the example of wine: *Often local vines have been replaced by noble vines without considering the soil and climate of a particular place, as well as their effects. In France, however, a change has started in this regard, the relationship with wine is counting again*.

To the same extent that we cannot copy ecosystems (such as Silicon Valley with its methods, structures and mindset), we cannot recreate corporate cultures either. And I go one step further: Anyone who starts to copy someone else's corporate culture will fail grandly.

Another important term for me, which you brought up above, is the *collective intelligence* and the correct understanding of this: The collective intelligence is not the sum of the individual intelligences. It is an emergent phenomenon that follows the principle of holism: the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

Actually, very easy to understand or not?

Eric Lynn: The phenomenon of collective intelligence … I wonder how easy this is to understand, and then comes the Question … *What do I mean when I say "understand"?* I can understand the words without necessarily understanding what they mean. I can understand the logic without necessarily understanding how the phenomenon works. Personally, while I cannot describe it scientifically, I intuitively understand how the phenomenon works.

Throughout history and in the present day we can see so many examples of collective intelligence, including, the rise of Nazism, collective hysteria in crowds of religious followers, the atmosphere in a full football stadium, the rise of Trump … all of which could lend themselves to an alternative meaning of the word "intelligence". Examples with a more positive taint include, Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future, a good concert.

When working with groups, we are working in a field of collective intelligence, a field which may be positive or negative for the purpose of the group's work.

And so, we come to the meaning of emergent … which I see not as something that appears out of a situation, but rather a description for what is continuously appearing in a flow of movement. Nothing stays the same.

How can we channel the inherent collective intelligence in the organism that is the organization? When I ask this Question, I am acutely aware of the danger of manipulating this channelling according to wishes or ideas that I personally may have … which paradoxically, is likely to cultivate an environment opposite to that which I desire.

My experience has taught me that the secret lies in letting go, not wanting, yet maintaining intention. Positive collective intelligence needs space. Trust in the good intentions of the people.

We don't need to analyse everything that is occurring. The more we analyse, the more we are imposing our historical interpretations on the present, the more we are closing down the space needed … and perhaps … the less we are actually understanding.

Cultivating an environment involves letting nature do its work.

We can never truly understand the world only through our mind.

How can we learn to hear and understand through our senses, not only with our mind? Not understanding is also okay.

Robert Pierer: I would not want to call your negative examples collective intelligence. This is a collective behaviour, far from any intelligence (regardless of how it is defined). However, I understand your point of view

and can also follow the approach of distinguishing between negative and positive intelligence. At this point I would like to bring a statement from book by Gerald Hüther (*Etwas mehr Hirn, bitte*) into play: "*Instead of making each other objects of our evaluations, intentions and measures, we could also invite, encourage and inspire each other to rediscover our pleasure in our own thinking and our joy in creating together. Only in this way will it be possible to develop the inherent potential in each individual and in each human community.*"

I also agree with you that we need to create a framework (you mentioned space and trust) for the development of positive collective intelligence within a team or the entire organization. Both space and trust cannot be viewed independently of one another. Without trust it will be difficult to leave space and without leaving space there will be no trust. Trust is a topic that I have been dealing with for a long time and we could probably talk about it for hours (days). Maybe it is not necessary to understand it, but Stephen R. Covey's approach is a kind of north star for me: "*Both competence and character are necessary to inspire trust and both are completely within our sphere of influence.*"

In order to answer your last question, I have to ask you, what exactly do you mean by senses? With my senses I can hear, see and so on, but how can you understand something with your senses? Do you mean intuition in a figurative sense?

Eric Lynn: Before we concern ourselves with senses, I'd like for a moment to stay with the Question of ideas that are generally seen in a positive light, yet portray phenomena that easily and equally can take a negative direction. The idea of collective intelligence is one such example. Here, you refer to the negative as collective behaviour which is fine. The phenomenon is the same. Another such idea is Organization Change, which is inevitably portrayed as positive. Yesterday, while writing a module entitled *Organization Culture: How your Organization comes Alive* for an Executive Briefing Program, I thought of 3 negative examples of Organization Culture Change from clients. The first one: a global corporation acquired a small specialist software developer, incorporated it into its bureaucracy, leading to the best people leaving the company as they no longer enjoyed the environment and were unable to work freely and effectively. The bureaucracy destroyed the value, therefore the investment. The second one: Following the retirement of the previous CEO, his successor wanted to present himself as a hero, closed down the freedom to operate of his executive team and took credit for the work of specialists, who then began leaving. He was fired after 8 months. The company is still picking up the pieces. The third example: The CEO, who had just successfully started an initiative to shift the company towards an open responsible and cooperative working environment, was headhunted. His replacement was a military-style traditionalist. Within days, the majority of people in the senior leadership group resigned.

With these examples, I would merely like to caution against the widespread tendency of denying that popular notions can also display negative characteristics. I have learned the benefits of openness when working with intentional Culture Change Initiatives. People respect the truth; then they are able to find ways of working with it … a consideration that has so much to do with space, trust and senses.

When Stephen Covey speaks of trust in his idea of circles of influence and concern, he is correct to state that both competence and character are necessary. This said, they are not an adequate foundation for the evolution of trust. In the three examples above, all the people had both competence and character, yet were unable to convey an environment of trust. Why? They had little concern for the people as Human BEings. People were objectified. People require space to be themselves; they need space to recognize what is right, appropriate, how to deal with discomfort. This is sensing … becoming aware of what one's body and soul is saying in moments. I hear, not only with my ears; I see, not only with my eyes; I touch, not only with my fingers; I smell, not only with my nose; I taste, not only with my tongue. Especially in times of challenge, and challenge can be positive too, my whole body within my BEing is talking to me. In every interaction, the unique history of my whole life comes alive, regardless of whether I am aware of it. This is sensing. We may call this intuition. Perhaps the word fits … if we are able to avoid perceiving intuition as a "thing". To be honest, I'm not completely sure.

Undoubtedly, to be able to sense and embrace the diversity that constitutes life, we need to evolve a strong intuition and need to learn to trust it. I have learned that this entails "seeing" beyond what appears to be there. An old platitude states that "there's always more than meets the eye". This is certainly true. And so, I begin to ask more Questions …

When working with people …

How can we learn to set aside the idea that 'I' need to understand everything?
How can we learn to stop seeking answers for everything, recognizing that life's evolution itself provides new answers as circumstances change?
How can we learn to automatically switch our thinking as we switch contexts between the space where answers are needed (e.g., engineering, administration), and the space where answers cannot be definitive as is the space that is the life of the organization?

In our Organizations, how can we dance in the space of the polarities pulling us between the economic need for DOing and the human need for BEing, needs which are not separate?

Robert Pierer: These are all very clear examples of how well-intentioned actions can have the exact opposite effect. Yes, you can solve a problem (as you mentioned earlier: I want software development skills in my company. I need a successor for a certain person in my company ...) and cause many other problems at the same time. Problems, which in turn even cause negative effects and irreparable damage to the system. In my opinion, the reason for this lies in an apparently deeply rooted linear thinking. Living systems do not follow a linear cause-effect principle. The recognition of interactions in complex systems is of central importance and one can actually refer often enough to the statement from Russel L. Ackoff: "*The search for simple solutions to complex problems is a consequence of the inability to deal effectively with complexity.*"

The use and development of higher-level thinking skills such as creative and critical thinking, problem solving, concept development, conflict resolution, moral and ethical thinking and analysing are certainly important. Just as important (as you mentioned earlier) is definitely developing strong intuition and learning to trust it. But now we would have to deal in detail with the concept of intuition. But let's leave that aside and let us separate from the idea of having to understand everything. There is a very important aspect in your statement: We have to learn to trust our intuition. Unfortunately, or fortunately, I've read Daniel Kahneman's book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* and I've learned that intuition is very prone to errors in certain situations. On the other hand, in a state of cognitive ease one is much more creative and even happier. Just as we have to learn to balance the economic need for DOing and the human need for BEing, we have to learn when to trust intuition and when to initiate a critical thinking process. The problem with balancing begins, however, when the dimensions to be taken into account are based on one and the same need.

Eric Lynn: Ah! Daniel Kahneman, whose work is undoubtedly interesting and, in some senses, valuable, who won a Nobel Prize, whose book in my view indicates a tendency towards binary comparisons where complex thinking would be more useful. Of course, intuition is prone to error. Or is it? When I make a decision based on my intuition, and this decision turns out not to be so great, can we really speak of "error"? Who decides what constitutes an error? Here, we are in a field that extends way beyond the notions of right vs wrong.

I've never been so sure about the idea of balancing. In the complex systems (I prefer the description "living systems") that are organisations, the challenge is incorporating more than balancing. As you point out, you need problem solvers. Equally you need creativity and space and imagination and intuition and belonging. We find both DOing and BEing intertwined throughout the system.

Terminology is important. Language brings life to life or stamps it down. The use of the term "complexity" is one example that tends to stamp upon the living of life. The word is a descriptor, reducing life to a notion. Complexity

describes the nature (fundamental characteristic) of living systems. If we name the entity a living system, we can sense the life and enquire into its essence.

How can we bring the life in an organisation to life?

Which language do we need?

Robert Pierer: It looks like we come back to the importance of terminology repeatedly. Whenever there is no satisfactory and generally suitable definition, use of terms is inflationary, opportunistic, and very often simply incorrect. This applies to complex and complicated, which are mostly used as synonyms, but also for (corporate) culture, (collective) intelligence and intuition and many more as we discovered during this dialogue.

We need a common language and, above all, clear and unambiguous communication. This is the only way we can understand the others, not only the intellectual grasp of verbal statements, but also the understanding of the other in the sense of empathy. I am aware that you can never fully understand another person, but a common language (and by that I don't mean English, German, French, etc.) is a basic requirement for understanding. If we don't speak of the "same things", how are we ever supposed to understand, inspire each other or even bring the life in an organisation to life?

On the one hand, we should leave definitions aside and let our dreams of possibility guide us. But on the other hand, we also know how important terminology and language are. We need to learn to trust our intuition and we need creativity, space and imagination. But we also need skills to think critically and to solve problems. We need competition as well as synergies. We need to analyse but also synthesise …

Before I drift further into binary comparisons, no, nothing is either black or white, 0 or 1. Too often we think that if we follow one "thing", we will have to neglect all others for the rest of our lives. However, this one thing may well turn out to be the gateway to another, greater one. And in my opinion, this also applies to a healthy organization. The cultivation of diversity, continuous learning and innovation in the field of tension of economic work (making money) is probably the greatest challenge.

Eric Lynn: What is our greatest challenge? And is it only one challenge? Our greatest challenge is to live in peace with one another. Our greatest challenge is to live in peace with one another and nature. Our greatest challenge is to recognise that we are all dependent on one another. Our greatest challenge is to cultivate healthy relationships with one another. Our greatest challenge is to cultivate healthy societies.

Aren't these all the same thing? Perhaps … Our greatest challenge is to recognise that these are all the same thing?

Abusive use of language to manipulate others has been with us forever. It's not possible to forbid this happening. Indeed, doing so would itself constitute abuse. I do see, however, an essential need to develop skills among people enabling them to recognise where language is being used to manipulate them. This entails a shift from schooling to education … also a challenge.

What … *IF* … we were able to recognise that our world is one whole? … And recognise that in this world there are multiple whole entities all related and dependent upon one another? We might then stop separating the need for economic health from the need for ethical health and psychological health and environmental health and physical health and …

Cultivating the environment to enable healthy relationships is surely the key to healthy communities … or …?

IF … we are serious about wanting to walk this path, we will need to leave our conventional way of thinking and being in the world behind us.

IF … we walk this path, we might recognise that many of the problems we currently create for ourselves in organisations and in society will dissipate.

IF … we experience these changes, even on a small scale … we might then recognise that cultivating healthy societies is our greatest challenge … while recognising that we can only do this together … while recognising that cultivation is continuous work that is never finished …

Where do we start? … We start where we are … there's no other place.

When do we start? … We start now … there's no other time.

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Eric Lynn poses the poignant Questions that enable clients to pinpoint their real challenges quickly. He works internationally as a Facilitator for Organisation Culture Change Initiatives; an Executive Coach supporting leaders gain clarity and orientation in the frequently disorientating whirlwind of professional life; a Mediator for Executive, Management and Project Teams whose initiatives have lost their way and quickly need to get back on track. He is the author of Dancing with Change: Cultivating Healthy Organisations; and creator of the unique Change and Integration Accelerator, cultureQs. https://cultureqs.com

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