

# Dancing with Change

Cultivating  
Healthy Organisations

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*"Mundus vult decipi:  
The world wants to be deceived.  
The truth is too complex and frightening:  
the taste for the truth is an acquired taste that few acquire."*

*(Martin Buber, I and Thou)*

## Organisation Culture Alive

*New is never totally "new".  
There's always something there.*

*B'*

I remember the conversation well. It was back in 1970 or '71. In a small group, we were working on a school economics assignment in which we were challenged to draw up a concept to improve the condition of public and private housing in the area of North London where we all lived. One of my classmates said, in all seriousness, "Just tear it all down and start again." Clearly, making hundreds of thousands of people homeless was not a serious option. We humoured him and continued.

Whatever we are doing, there is always something there. And this "something" forms a significant part of the context for beginning any intentional organisation culture change work, even shaping new organisations.

*B'*

Culture, like change, is a widely misunderstood notion. Far too often, it is presented as the icons that symbolise what a group purports to stand for. Such icons include flags, emblems, mottos, anthems, logos, buildings, professional standards "authorities", national borders. Icons are merely icons, constructed, not natural. Icons are not culture.

Frequently, culture is reduced to the notions of nationality, belief systems, ethnicity, gender, generations. Both national and organisation culture are frequently further reduced to extremely simple behavioural ideas such as "the way things are done around here". While these notions are certainly influencers of culture in any specific environment, they do not constitute culture. Behaviour reflects culture, as well as influencing it.

Behaviour is not culture.

When we consider the complexity of the challenges we face in making sense of our world, the attraction of simple explanations is understandable.

In organic environments, they tend to be misleading.

*B'*

The public works project, like so many such projects, was in serious danger of not meeting its completion date, with the resulting threat of political embarrassment and economically painful penalty clauses. The international consortium was in conflict.

I was sent in as a mediator with the instruction, "Get the facility open!" We did.

Shortly after returning home, a colleague asked me whether the mix of nationalities in the consortium were a cause of the conflict. They weren't. The critical factors were certainly cultural, yet of a completely different nature: professional and political.

*B'*

Culture is relational.

Fixed definitions are inappropriate. The dynamic is highly-complex, evolving through the multitude of interactions whose roots lie in interactions that go way back in history; roots that play a formative role in how we think and feel, act and react.

These roots remain, as new interactions through time add to the potpourri of influencers.

Patterns form.

As we learn and evolve, patterns change.

Effective intentional positive Organisation Culture Change entails changing the DNA of the organisation.

This is deep work, discovering patterns that influence the roots; with each member of the organisation encountering and confronting their

own patterns ... together, in relationship ...; before consciously cultivating the new patterns in the Healthy Organisation, the community, they all wish to be working in.

Unsurprisingly, people who have been through such a process invariably like to talk about it.

The vast majority describe it as intensive, frequently intense, rich and enjoyable.



## **Clarifying the Nature of Culture**

Why is culture so important?

Quite simply, it is culture that determines and reflects how we come alive, how we bring our souls to this entity we call life. On the one hand, it influences life in our communities. On the other hand, life in our communities influences the culture within.

Is this a contradiction? ... Not at all. Culture's dynamic specifies that it is continuously changing. Without this natural dynamic, there would be no life, only death ... either slow or fast. Culture is aliveness.

Picture a beach ball full of numerous different particles, spinning uncontrollably in a strong wind. The manner in which the particles bump into one another (interact) affects everything else within this environment, which we can refer to as a system. The momentary nature of each of the particles is dependent upon the momentary nature of each one of the other particles, demonstrating the interdependence of everything within the system. Each collision changes the nature of the particles.

Now, let's assume that each particle represents a person. And here we see culture in organisations at work. Culture influences and is influenced by everything within the system: interactions as well as environmental factors. When we consider these bumps as interactions in a social system (a community, an organisation) we can picture the dynamic nature of culture in that social system.



*Culture influences and is influenced  
by how we feel in any specific environment.  
What is our gut telling us about this space?*

***Culture is the Soul of the Organisation.***

*B'*

We use the term culture to describe the interactions in a social system, a system that is alive. Culture is also the collective term for the creative arts of literature, painting, sculpting, poetry, acting and more ... all of which reflect aliveness not only on the part of the creators, but also within the communities in which they live, communities that stimulate them and which they simultaneously stimulate.

Is this a coincidence? I think not. There is no separation.  
The etymology of the word 'culture' is the Latin 'cultura' meaning grow, cultivate, care.

*B'*

Shaping a Healthy Organisation involves cultivation and care.  
If the members of the organisation are not doing this, who will?

*B'*

## Culture in a Nutshell

*Culture:*

*The continuously evolving dynamic interaction  
of the mindsets and gutsets  
of all the actors in the system.*

This is not a 'definition' of culture, but rather an explanation. As a dynamic entity, culture defies definition. We cannot realistically say, "Culture is ...".

*B'*

Anthropologist, Gregory Bateson, famously asked the Question:

*"What is the pattern that connects?"*

Patterns in organisations are always changing;  
and are invariably invisible.

Nevertheless, the patterns that determine and envelop the interactions of an organisation, its choice of customers and suppliers, its relationship to its members and their families, and local communities; the patterns that describe its culture ... can, if only to a degree, be laid open.

Discovering patterns will help members understand the nature of the organisation's culture, their part within it, and thereby, indicate the work they need to do to make a conscious shift to cultivate the healthy environment everyone desires.

*B'*



## **A Dance ... Culture and Change: Perspectives through Multiple Changing Lenses**

Think of the atmosphere as you walked in the park on a hot summer's day.  
That's culture.

Think of how you felt as you were invited into a stranger's home  
to share a pot of tea.  
That's culture.

Think of your thoughts as you observed the behaviour of the security  
and sanitation staff at your nearest airport.  
That's culture.

Think of the religious ceremony you observed, and your thoughts  
while observing.  
Think of the variety of possible reasons that each participant in the  
ceremony is attending.  
That's culture.

Think of how each participant in the above ceremony might react if you,  
a stranger, asked to hold a conversation with them.  
That's culture.

Think of the atmosphere in the lively market you visited during your last  
trip to Asia.  
That's culture.

Think of how you felt and what you observed as you entered your place  
of work this morning.  
That's culture.

Think of that phone conversation with a colleague who didn't like your approach to tackling a problem.

That's culture.

Think of your thoughts as you observed women doing heavy labouring on the construction site in India.

That's culture.

Think of how your children greeted you when you arrived home yesterday evening.

That's culture.

Think of that politician's speech you listened to on yesterday's evening news.

That's culture.

Think of that time you observed the police in the street apprehending somebody.

That's culture.

Think of the long walk you have to take to the gate in order to enter the beautiful park whose upkeep is financed by your tax contributions.

That's culture.

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Now ... think of the same scene on a different day, reflecting how you felt, what you observed, how you felt about what you observed on this different day.

That's culture.

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Now ... observe yourself thinking and seeing and feeling these thoughts and scenes and feelings ... and ask yourself ...

Why ... am I thinking/seeing/sensing what I do?

That's culture.

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Now ... slow down ... perhaps close your eyes ... and imagine each of these scenes again, with the other person/people observing you ...

That's culture.

...

...

**Culture** is so multi-faceted, nebulous in nature. Yet, above all, it's alive. It is what you think and feel about what you observe. It changes ... continuously. It has multiple influencers that themselves change, as does the manner in which they influence. It's messy, very messy ... The inherent richness and beauty in life's messiness ...

And of course, your perspective is only your perspective ... through your lens ... in a particular moment.

Others will observe the same event and see/feel/sense differently.

They each have their own lens.

This is culture.

Culture has no categories; no boundaries. It changes and evolves at every moment. It is so difficult to pinpoint yet it has such a strong presence. It lies at the core of our lives, how we perceive absolutely everything in the world. It is the soul of society, organisations, families, communities ... experienced differently by each member of these groups ... transcending contexts.

Now ...

Think of the difference between your home city today and 20/30/40 years ago.

That's culture change.

Think of the environment in any office or factory today and compare it with real stories of the same place from 20/30/40 years ago.

That's culture change.

...

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Think of how you see the world differently today compared with 10/20/30 years ago.

Without doubt, you've learned a lot in that time.

That's change.

As cultural patterns change, the nature of the roots around which we shape our societies and communities, change.

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Culture Changes ... continuously.

Being alive with culture as it changes, is a dance.

