

Culture modification: talk is cheap

Culture is a hotchpotch of things like behaviours, beliefs and values – summed up by the phrase ‘the way we do things around here’. It isn’t a tangible entity in itself, so if we want to change it we need to delve into its underlying structure so that we can intervene with its components to get the change we want.

The first component is behaviour, the element of culture that exists on the surface. Beliefs and values are hidden inside the brain, and we only obtain evidence about them when they are manifested in behaviours. Behaviours are the physical, observable, expression of what is going on under the surface, whether we describe them as ‘good’ (praise, positive teamwork, supportive relationships) or ‘bad’ (sexism, racism, greed, lust for power). When we describe a culture, the only thing we can describe is a set of behaviours even though we know they tell a story about underlying beliefs and values.

Because behaviours provide evidence about what is going on under the surface, actions communicate more powerfully than words alone about real beliefs and values. When Nelson Mandela donned the South African rugby shirt at the world cup final in 1995, the act sent an implicit but powerful message about his own beliefs and values far more effectively than words could.

Unfortunately, this mechanism has been prostituted by virtue-signallers and marketers. For some time the football Premier League has required professional footballers to wear a ‘Respect’ campaign label on their shirts, yet imposing no penalties when disrespect occurs. The marketing industry has also sought to exploit the mechanism by packing hidden (and invalid) implied values-based messages about power, sexiness, individuality and scientific credibility into their communications. In business, we are all familiar with senior management ‘taking action’ in an empty way by putting up feel-good posters or delegating a major issue to a sub-committee. Over time, we can become immune to these actions and treat all behaviours (especially talk) as empty.

Because of these vacuous actions, it’s tempting to dismiss behaviours as an irrelevant surface component when we know that deeper values and beliefs are the drivers of culture. The problem is that, lobotomy aside, we can’t modify beliefs and values directly: ironically the primary tools available are also behaviours – but behaviours that have genuine leverage. To understand how these work, let’s dig a little deeper.

We need beliefs and values to navigate our way through life’s decisions. When we have a decision to make, rather than consider the infinity of possible reasons for and against we rely, usually unconsciously, on our beliefs and values to provide a shortcut to the answer. So if one of my values is about health, I might choose a salad from the menu over pie and chips without having to think too much about it. If I believe that I am not very competent, I might not bother applying for a better job. When we find ourselves agonising over a decision, it’s usually because we have values that conflict – again, often at an unconscious level. Everyday examples are the classic ‘work/life balance’ problem and arguments arising from gender

stereotypes in family roles. More insidiously, the pressure to comply with unhealthy organisational norms and a desire for job security can collide with personal values of fairness and respect.

Beliefs are personal 'truths': we act as if they were true - whether or not they are proven facts. Some people believe that all dogs are lovable, and others act as if they all bite. Some people believe that workers are lazy, while others act on the assumption that they work hard. Whether or not a belief is factually true is irrelevant: it drives decisions and actions without the need for conscious intervention. The cause/effect link between beliefs and behaviours is so strong that when we observe a distinct behaviour, we can use it as evidence to deduce the beliefs that underpin it: "what must be true for this person to act in that way?".

Values, the things that are important to us, drive many of our beliefs as well as our decisions and behaviours. The trap with values is that when we talk about them, we only mention those that are socially acceptable: values like achieving, collaborating, caring and respect. But whether we like it or not the values that we are not proud of, and the values that are invisible to us, are just as important in driving our behaviour: values like greed, lust, power and dominance.

The same dynamic applies to corporate culture: lists of corporate values only ever contain virtuous elements despite evidence of behaviours that scream values like greed, control, power and sexism. If we want to change culture, we need to cope with *all* the values that are operating including those hidden – especially since the latter will usually be at the root of any culture 'problem'.

Everything that we do is driven by our beliefs, and particularly by our values. If we do something that doesn't seem to 'fit' with our known values, that is evidence that we have a value that we haven't recognised yet: it's the one that drives that unexpected behaviour. When we start to feel uncomfortable about something without knowing exactly why, that's often a sign that an unacknowledged value is operating.

Similarly, corporate culture is defined by the shared values that are operating within the organisational system: all the values, not just the publicly declared ones. Attempts to change culture with intellectual appeals to rationality consistently fail because they don't address the emotional values (usually implicit) that maintain the current culture. Similarly, corporate statements of purpose and identity only have positive impact if they tap into an emotional vein that engages with human values. Culture is fundamentally an emotional issue, not an intellectual one.

As managers we have been trained to operate rationally, so a management problem that doesn't obey rational rules is a challenge. Given the power of beliefs and values to establish a culture, how can we intervene to change them? Let's start by understanding how they change naturally.

From experience with loud and scary dogs, a child can easily develop a belief that all dogs are dangerous. Giving the same child a puppy to care for can dramatically reverse that belief. Neither belief is true in scientific terms, because in truth some dogs are benign and some are dangerous.

Premier League footballers carry a belief that they can disrespect referees because, despite their Respect badges, there are no consequences for doing so. By contrast, Rugby Union referees are treated courteously because heavy discipline is applied otherwise. It's clear that if the same level of discipline were applied to the footballers, their beliefs would change overnight.

A paradox is that we tend to treat beliefs as immovable and sacrosanct, even when there is plenty of evidence that they can change. That may be because our psyche treats them as absolute truths ("all dogs are dangerous") when they are simply practical coping mechanisms.

Even religious beliefs, which we think of as immovable, change. A personal crisis can shift a person's beliefs either towards or away from religious beliefs: such a belief shift is explicitly embedded in the 12-step addiction recovery programme.

A shift in values can also change beliefs. When Nelson Mandela invited his former jailers to sit in the front row for his Presidential inauguration speech that gesture, together with donning the national rugby shirt, communicated that he considered national unity to be more important than his previous belief that whites were the enemy.

How can values change? They evolve naturally and slowly during our lifetimes as our personality develops and matures. The major values of a crying baby are about survival – and this later develops into seeking bonds with other toddlers, through the teenage rebellion phase, and into the responsibilities of adulthood (and, ultimately, the classic values conflict: mid-life crisis). Adults in the Western world tend to gravitate towards valuing achievement and relationships. But even these values can be manifested "positively" as philanthropy and "negatively" as tribal hooliganism. It's a complex subject (which is explored in greater detail at the Mechanics of "Why?" website [here](#)).

Values change as our experiences evolve. The CoVid pandemic has been a trigger for many to develop stronger values around relationships and the greater good. A crisis can change values instantly: a person who has just had a heart attack regress rapidly from valuing ambition and comfort to valuing survival above all. The values of a large proportion of the world were suddenly challenged by the gut-wrenching evidence of the death of George Floyd at the hands of the police.

The values of others can also be changed by personal leadership actions. Mandela's relegation of his grievances against whites in pursuit of national unity enabled a constructive dialogue with FW de Klerk that led to apartheid being dismantled. Colin Kaepernick 'took a knee' at NFL games and inspired many other black athletes - but never played again as he

was shunned by team owners and the US President. Martin Luther King led the civil rights movement in the full knowledge that he was laying his life on the line.

The common thread of these powerful acts of leadership is the willingness of the leader to expose themselves to criticism and loss in the pursuit of a higher cause. The subliminal, but authentic, message is “this issue is more important to me than my selfish needs”. These acts carried a massive emotional charge that changed the world.

Unfortunately when we turn to business, its literature is full of stories of leadership that tap into and change personal values, but real-life examples are thin on the ground. Showing personal vulnerability is not acceptable in most business cultures, despite evidence that humility is a key to great leadership (*“Good to Great”, Jim Collins, 2001*). Fred Trump is reputed to have trained his son never to apologise, ever – because it was supposed to be a sign of weakness.

In business, talk seems to be the prevalent substitute for authentic action: talk is cheap. It’s cheaper to say virtuous things in mission and value statements than deal with the existence of unacceptable values. It’s cheaper to print “Respect” and “Black Lives Matter” on football shirts than implement real change. It was ‘cheaper’ for Volkswagen to cheat emission testing systems than deal properly with environmental concerns. It’s cheaper for CEOs to deal with sexual harassment by inviting victims to initiate action rather than initiating action themselves to criminalise unacceptable behaviour. The list is endless.

Most attempts to change culture fail because they don’t take account of the complex emotional interplay between behaviours, beliefs and values. There is no one-size-fits-all management methodology that will work in every situation. But, drawn from the observations above, some approaches are more likely to make a difference than others.

First, be consistent in applying punishments to unacceptable behaviours and rewards to those that we want. If we don’t do this, no amount of executive speechifying or other corporate communication will work: our audience isn’t that gullible, and empty messages reduce our credibility even more. Firing the corporate star because they have broken the new rules may look expensive in the short term, but not as expensive as the ultimate costs of maintaining a culture that society finds unacceptable. Inefficient external regulation (see financial services) and expensive public opprobrium (see VW) can cripple a business.

Second, make a personal emotional commitment to the change you want. Your organisation is a system over which senior leadership has the greatest influence: expecting the whole system to change without changing yourself (while you unconsciously maintain the existing system) cannot possibly work. The delegation of culture change is an oxymoron: it has never worked and it never will. You don’t have to become Nelson Mandela or Martin Luther King, but if you are a business leader you do have the power – and responsibility - to influence the business you run emotionally as well as rationally. If your actions are not congruent with the words that come out of your mouth your influence will be restricted to your capacity to punish rather than your capacity to inspire.

Third, it helps to adopt the belief that people will consistently behave in a way that is right for them – determined by their values. It doesn't matter whether these values are sensible or rational, or even whether they are known to the person. Unless someone believes at a visceral level that they'll benefit from a change, they will maintain their behaviour - even if this appears to be irrational. If what you are doing isn't working, that means you have overlooked a hidden value: one that is maintaining the behaviours that you don't want. Treat the information as feedback that you can use to refine your approach. (This requires adoption of another value: one that considers feedback as potentially useful information, not positive or negative, good or bad.)

This isn't an emotional crusade, it's about good business. In truth there are no 'good' values and no 'bad' values because these are subjective judgements – there are only values and cultures that work or don't work in the wider business context. The wise leader knows that although culture is an emotional subject, it needs to be handled pragmatically so that the organisation and the people within it are better suited to fit the needs and demands of society. The pandemic has led us all to be aware of, and question, some of our values so the climate is ripe for businesses to become more congruent with wider expectations. Culture change is difficult, but it can be done – and it needs to be done if a business is to survive in a constantly changing world.