



Changing Culture: It's an Imaginary Thing

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Recently, I was meeting with a senior executive of a major Pharmaceutical company. He was struggling to understand how to bring about in his division the cultural change desired by the company. Globally, the company was seeking to change their culture to drive business results. They had identified desired behaviors. Global had communicated the initiative, identified observables and developed a method to measure and report them. To localize the change, divisions now were expected to conduct meetings, usually as a working project, to align with the desired cultural behaviors.

But there was some push back and the desired change didn't seem to be happening quickly enough. What would it take for successful implementation?

Target Change

Changing culture and desired behaviors requires changing how people "automatically think". That is what a culture is. It is the way the individuals in a company "automatically think".And that takes some sophistication. You can make a list of goals and cascade down desires, but that is just a communications program. A well designed program and implementation will result in how the people in the organization "automatically think".

However, changing culture means not only changing how people think. It means changing how they form relationships and it also means changing their emotional responses, i.e. changing how they think and feel.

If you want to change a culture, which means you also want to change a pattern of relationship habits, you have to give folks an emotional experience. And you need to make it an emotional experience they welcome.

The internal task for the company then is to change the habits of imagination for every person in the company. The iconography has to change. If you are trying to effect people's imaginations, you have use more than words. One way to do this is through pictures and moving pictures with sound and music are even better. Another way is through acting out and recording the behaviors.

These tools have been around for centuries, of course. You see them in ancient churches, and in civic buildings. Where you see them most now is on television and in the movies. If you want to change corporate culture, words are rarely enough...and you have to do more than state "how" you want it to change. What you have to do is flood the culture with a new set of images. Look at the word, "imagination." At the heart of the word is the word, "Image." You have to change people's imaginative habits.

So to summarize, a successful cultural change initiative requires an internal communications program the scope of which targets changing:

- How the people in the organization think automatically
- How they form relationships
- Emotional experience to change peoples emotional responses
- Iconography, to change peoples habits of imagination

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Tell stories

A central goal of any program should include ways to get people to think in terms of stories that touch hearts. This is because humans form and think about relationships, through stories, which is to say through experiences which are then spoken of and thought about. Deliberated shaped stories and experiences are, of course, the time tested tools of advertising and public relations.

A successful program provides experiences and stories. For example, if you want people to habitually think about the customer, an interesting and emotionally engaging video can be made, featuring close up interviews with several patients and doctors (or convincing actors acting as such). Viewing this shifts the sense of “what we do,” from an internal operation” to “helping patients live better” Patients expressions of genuine gratitude become part of the thinking and feeling of the organization. They become part of the lore.

Another way to encourage the cultural shift would be to have reps collect stories and bring them back. This also builds a body of lore. Creating a newsletter of stories from reps will also help do the same. All of this shifts the conversations

So in summary you are changing how people imagine, what stories they tell, the rituals they use, how they tell the stories and you rewarding this change.

You have changed, not so much what they know but how they know. More than that, you have to changed how they relate to one another. You have changed what they notice. You have changed perceptual habits.

Therefore in addition to stating clear goals, in addition to naming specific behaviors, you have created an atmosphere in which people become creative and invent new ways of fulfilling the culture.

A Little Bit of Soul

Along with this, it is essential to find ways to reshape the culture from the ground up. If you only try to change a culture from the top down, by decrees, (key word is “only”) you fail to tap into the soul of the culture. What you want in the long-term is to reshape the “soul” of the culture.

Why?

Because if you don't get to the soul, then you produce a culture which is sort of like the old communist cultures, or the more oppressive dictatorships. When information only flows downward, participants work under threat, which is a very primitive way of organizing a culture. In those cultures people parrot the party line and manage to keep their heart and soul out of the mix.

How do you change the soul of the culture.

It's a good idea to start looking at a culture as a mental process. More than that, it's a participatory mental process.

You have to start in several places at once. You change the laws, the rituals and observances and the expectations people hold toward each other.

You do this by

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1. Instituting policies, i.e., you create rituals that permeate daily life.
 - a. Specific forms of behavior demonstrating the leadership strengths being nurtured. What regular behaviors could become a practice which builds customer focus, courage and candor, rapid decision making?
2. Creating times of observance.
 - a. What could happen on a regular basis that involves the whole group that could also build the objectives.
3. Creating a local mythology
 - a. What images and language needs to be consistently present to support the specific cultural dynamics.
 - b. How can people be inspired, motivated and fulfilled by the culture. How can they come to love it?
4. Creating a regular form of review
5. Creating specific inspirational resources who can continue to articulate and remind. It helps to have a resource that is somewhat outside the culture being changed. In many cultures this catalyst and instruction function is served by a priesthood of sorts. In a cultural environment it's served by coaching.

Often on a divisional level, the policies, observances, mythology, review and inspiration functions are undefined. Part of the start up phase needs to be developing these culture shaping tools.

Always ask Why

When an individual or group decides it wants to achieve some fundamental changes in its basic pattern of operations, when it wants to change the grid on which it maps its information, then the first question a change agent has to ask is a "why" question: Why these changes/ why here/ why now? In other words, the designers of the intervention have to know what was going on before. What caused this determination to make a change in culture. Minds only change when they are forced to.

Specifically to the division, the question needs to be fully answered: "What would be different in this division with this desired cultural change and change in behaviors?"

Some initial steps

The division needs to gather information locally and then develop culture changing tasks and policies. These policies have to be tied to a meaningful action. Give people things to do something to actually do that would have an effect.

Ask for specific ways to manifest the desired behaviors. Name ten ways to do it. Share that lore. Create a body of lore about how to do it.

Be clear about why the change in the culture is desired. Certainly if you want the culture changed, you want to also be very clear what you do not want to happen any more and why. Answer the question "Why are we doing this?". Create an observance about that, too.

These are just some initial steps.

Always remember, you want to change the habits of imagination for every person in the company and thus change the way they automatically think. It's an imaginary thing!

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