Leading Culture Change: *tricks, traps and tips to take on board for success...*

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Getting your culture 'right' may well be the most critical facet to focus on for leaders who want to forge great teams and get sustainable results. Sometimes, we even define great leaders as those who manage to turn round a caustic or dysfunctional culture, and replace it with a revivified, constructive one...

Culture change is one of today's hot business topics for leaders at any level. Knowing how to lead it is a powerful tool for both personal and organisational success. It's a game-changer in terms of getting real results. Most leaders are acutely aware of how constructive cultures help people to perform, nurture creativity and buttress well-being. They're equally aware of how dislocated ones breed bad behaviour, toxic climates and under-performance.

Culture change is also without a doubt, one of the toughest tasks you'll probably tackle as a leader. Some good leaders have been sunk by bad cultures. No wonder many of us either baulk at the task entirely, or pretend to do something about it rhetorically, whilst leaving the underlying cultural reality untouched, to continue on its way, merry or not!

For more than 20 years, The Change Forum has helped leaders, project groups and workteams in all sorts of work settings, revitalise and renovate their cultures. So we thought we'd share a few tricks, traps and tips from our extensive (*and not always smooth*) track-experience.

Let's start with some cultural Tricks...

These are things connected with shaping a workable culture change process to begin with.

1. Getting culture on the strategic agenda

Obvious maybe, but this can be quite a trick in itself. Someone like you, in an influential leadership position, needs to make that crucial, emergent decision that culture change is a priority that matters, and then have the perseverance to get others on board. You also personally need the will to support the culture change message and mission with real action and commitment.

You'll encounter cultural resistance at senior level often disguised as rational argument, resource scarcity or competing priorities. So make sure you have good business-based reasons for renovating your culture at hand. For example: how it would help address a pressing business priority or offer a

new opportunity. Targeting a specific business improvement opportunity, key direction, or a set of troubling procedural behaviours, may be preferable to taking on the culture head-on, and still help you tackle most of the same improvement priorities.

2. Finding your culture

It's true. The first difficulty in changing culture is often actually finding it. Culture can be elusive, intangible, multi-layered and hard-to-grasp. Often what appears to be the culture can be illusory. It's not just behaviour or the way we do things around here.

Culture is deeply-rooted and highly resilient to wholesale attempts to dig it up and bring it to light. It's cultural archaeology as you dig down through the various layers of icons, customs, artefacts, actions, behaviours, stories and myths that make it up, until you finally excavate the core beliefs that are at the centre of a culture.

It's these deep layers you need to get to because change there reverberates through the entire culture. But changing these is always hotly contested, since long-held assumptions and beliefs are challenged that people tend to defend fiercely. Finding the right levers to pull or cultural buttons to press to effect change can be seriously tricky too sometimes.

3. Be clear on cultural directions

Don't be vague. Be really specific about the kind of culture you want to see and what parts of the existing one you want to renovate or keep (we call these *culture change specifications*). Make the shaping of these a collaborative process that emerges over time as you gradually gather momentum and get people on board with the new cultural directions.

Effective culture change leaders know shaping shared vision, purpose and directions is essential. Lack of a cohesive and compelling cultural vision spells trouble and multiplies misapprehensions. To revitalise culture, revisit three basic 'revival' questions: *What facets of our cultural identity do we need to reinvent or renovate? What's our purpose – what should we really stand for? And what about behaviour and strategy, what should we really be doing differently?*

Your cultural directions need to line up with strategy and reflect the cultural values, beliefs and behaviours you want to promulgate. You need to talk up and act on these every day, and enlist others to help you make it happen. Spend more time focusing on where the culture needs to be, rather than on where it's been. Find common ground that can act as a mutual purpose hook to keep people engaged (eg. *What we all care about is... What none of us want to see...* etc). Real culture change means everyone being involved on an equal footing, not imposing your ideas of what a good culture looks like on the rest.

4. Keep-up culture conversations

Continuously conducting conversations is a crucial part of culture change success. It's how you engage others, shape direction, uncover core-beliefs, talk strategies, allay fears, reduce resistance and formulate action plans. Expect to have key culture conversations like: *Where are we going? What happens if we don't turn this culture round? What gets in the way?*

Start culture conversations early. Keep them going throughout the process. Raising the conversation tempo is an essential culture change tool. Get them out of corridors and into public all-in-the-one-room forums. Use social media to stimulate them. Talk about revitalising culture wherever and whenever you can and keep dialogue going non-stop.

Seek out other people to act as conversation convenors, creators and extenders. Help people learn new ways to talk. As they do, relationships and interactions may subtly shift. Behaviour changes. Ideas flow in different ways, and the culture may begin to shift and change too. You also need to get the talk-and-action-balance right. Too much talk and not enough action isn't a good formula. But neither is too much un-talked-through action. It may go against the urge to act first, but try to sit still, talk, listen and reflect, then act second.

5. Too shallow and short-term

One prevalent reason culture change efforts peter-out is they're often shallow, short-term, quick-fixes while culture, on the other hand, is long-lived and deeply embedded. This means it can rather easily ride-out and resist your attempts to change it. Like onions (or Ogres if you're a Shrek fan), cultures have layers. You can change surface trappings, without affecting the deeper, more subterranean culture which can over time, gradually absorb, neutralise or reject your changes.

A culture can handle a change to procedures, adapt to a new piece of technology or even welcome changing a poor work process, just so long as you don't challenge cherished customs, or fiercely-held beliefs or ways of being. If your change does involve deeper changes to such cultural sub-currents, or it's seen as a threat to cultural identity, resistance can be staunch.

Let's turn to the quick-fix mentality. Many leadership cultures are addicted to short-term thinking and reactive problem-solving – mental habits that won't help your changes stick in longer-term, more enduring, and more deeply-layered culture contexts. So decide whether you're in for the long-haul.

A few cultural Traps to avoid...

"*Traps*" are predictable pitfalls many of us fall prey to as we take on culture change.

6. Casting out the culture

If you fancy a bit of cultural exorcism, by all means broadcast that your goal is total culture change. Creating an impression that everything to do with the current culture is "the devil's work" and needs casting out will raise a lot of resistance in almost every quarter. It's also generally untrue. By all means identify aspects of the culture you want to change but also appreciate other aspects that are good.

After all, most leaders walk into, and have to work with, already fully-formed cultures. They mostly don't 'create' new cultures, or transform every aspect of a whole culture, unless they totally destroy and dismantle it (even then cultural vetiges can still cling on). Often of course, rather than changing culture head-on, leaders realise they have to work with-and-through the existing culture in order to renew it. So be selective. Discern what bits of the culture you really need to do something about and which bits may be helpful or be left alone.

7. Beware cultural absorption..

As we've said, culture runs deep – and it's just as likely to control you as it is for you to control it. Absorption is where *the culture acculturates the culture-changer*, wearing down your will and energy and ultimately convincing you that *"the culture's really pretty OK or even perfect as it is*" – and you had it wrong to start with (despite feeling that you didn't).

Culture's a tough area to get clarity on, since we're deeply immersed in it. It's true that leaders create and shape the culture. But they're also shaped and created by the culture. You need to be able to step outside of the culture in order to lead changes in it.

But it's hard to look at something from the outside, when you're working on the inside of it! No-one objectively observes culture because we see it through the distorted prism of our own cultural preconceptions and prejudices. The longer we're in a culture being assimilated, acting out its patterns of thinking, feeling, behaving and reacting, the more taken-for-granted, rigid and unconscious our perspectives are likely to become. We can become complicit captives caught-up in the culture we want to change.

8. Be alert to cultural sabotage

There's almost always an old-guard who'll do just about anything to stop you tampering with the culture – falsification, fabrication, sabotage, personal attack, threats, or one we call "*passive immobility*". People simply stop working. The hope is tactics like these wear you down and you'll see the error of your ways if things get punishing enough. Keep in mind not all this behaviour is conscious or deliberate. People often seem to act unwittingly out of a very visceral need to defend their culture – no matter how dysfunctional it may be.

Be persistent. Expect flack. People will question your motives, accuse you of being ego-driven, selfish, uncaring, insensitive, arrogant, incompetent or even stupid. Stick to your purpose and don't let the cultural rear-guards dictate the terms of culture change to you. By all means consult, keep dialogue open and involve. But your change will stall if you allow the keepers-of-the-current-culture to dictate terms or have too much say in how change happens. That would be tantamount to inviting your adversary to draw up your battle plans for you. They'll go for slow, steady, cautious and small (if they go at all!) when what's needed may be faster, more incisive and bolder.

9. Going to ground

A new leader arrives and attempts to tune-up the culture or turn it on its head, only to find it goes to ground and re-emerges once they have moved on. Culture's stealthy. There may be no direct

resistance. In fact, many will say *"Yes, we support and welcome the change."* They may congratulate you on your foresight or courage, but do nothing to help you make it happen, as they cling covertly to the old culture.

Another version of this is what we refer to as *"top management turns turtle".* They say they want culture change but turns out they weren't committed to it in the first place, or back off if they see it inconveniences or threatens them. They're part of the culture too remember. Culture change can touch on control, privilege, significance or vulnerability nerves, so top managers turn turtle. They may even decide to side with the culture-resisters, distance themselves from the changes they said they wanted, or even offer you up as a sacrifice to curry favour in other quarters.

10. All players – no spectators

Everyone creates the culture and everyone needs to be part of changing it too. You can't be a lone-culture-ranger. While you'll probably have a small handful of cultural advocates to begin, focus on broadening the engagement base for cultural renovation quickly.

And make it all players, no spectators. Involve as many as you can somehow in taking actions to engage with help out on new cultural directions. Otherwise, you end up with a bunch of sidelined spectators watching you compete with the culture rear-guard or waiting for you to do things for them. Not only will this tire you (which is what some want). It allows many to remain non-committal or detach from the process. Make it clear you want everyone doing something constructive, then empower them to do it and get out of their way.

By the way, accept there will be casualties. It's tough – but it's tougher to see your good people go because they can't work with the old culture guard. Sometimes you don't have to get rid of people – just their behaviour. But if you encounter staunch resistance early, monitor it closely becasue you may have to remove them before you can make any progress or before they undermine your effort.

And a few culture-change Tips...

Finally, here's a few tips that might give your culture change a bit more needed grunt and traction…

10. Dig down to thinking and behaviour

Mental models or 'tacit assumptions' are the deep-set beliefs at the core of culture. Like DNA they subtly dictate patterns of thinking, seeing, believing and behaving. Resistance to culture change often correlates directly to 'stuckness' – the degree to which we're locked into old cultural mental models that have past their 'use by' date.

A central issue for culture-leaders is how to dig down and disturb these deeper levels. Unless you do, nothing much changes. If you do, expect strong reactions. People have powerful, sometimes puzzling, rationalisations for why they act

the way they do, which they expect you to buckle-under to. If you buck instead of buckle, this demonstrates you're not really part of the culture and should be strenously rejected.

Culture change is ultimately about replacing these ingrained habits. And if you really want to change culture long-term, long-time, you have to embed new thinking and behaviour so it sticks, and have ways to sustain it so it keeps sticking until it becomes an intrinsic, habitual part of the way we do things around here. Though it's easier to start sometimes with behaviour and work down to thinking later. If you do, make sure you focus on only a few behaviour shifts first rather than too many – and remember to consistently and publicly recognise and reward those and confront ones you don't.

11. Be the change you want to see in others

Consistent modelling of the new behaviours you expect to see in the culture potently signals things are changing. As a chief agent and exponent of culture change, you and your deputies need to lead the way through examples you set – and also publicly recognise others who are breaking out of the old cultural mould too.

If you say transparency matters – stop the cover-ups. If it's diversity you value, stop pushing for uniformity. There's often a seriously major inconsistency gap between the culture change rhetoric, the behaviour of leaders, and what the workforce experience. For example, leaders say they want to cultivate cultures characterised by innovation, initiative or candour while staff say what they really experience is uniformity, routine, deferring to authority and telling management what they want to hear.

12. Deconstruct but don't demolish everything

Sometimes, the only way to shake a culture out of complacency is to dismantle and reconstruct some of it's key parts – values, assumptions, systems or structures. Don't shake-up too many things at once though. Choose one or two sacred cows, particular rituals, or structures and change it.

This includes breaking-up bits of bureaucracy that are part of the old culture that will hold you back. Be careful you don't give cultural resisters just cause by overlooking regulations that count, but do away with worn-out-rules and rituals that are the leg-irons of the old culture. Don't demolish everything though. If you do, you may remove foundations you need to build on in terms of renovating the culture, or take away cultural struts that are important in terms of getting results . Always look closely to see what else good something may be supporting before you remove it. This is where the discipline of Systems Thinking really comes in handy.

13. Focus on strategy and structure

Strategy, structure and culture are part of the same package and need simultaneous attention. Your culture change specifications should align to support your strategic directions. You can't work inside a current culture's norms, systems and structures because they're a haven for comfortable rituals and routines, and quite probably, a container for behaviour and thinking you want to dislodge. Trying to change culture without changing structures, strategies and systems rarely works.

Conversely, changing structures or rules can 'encourage' behaviour change. It's difficult creating a new culture if you keep doing change in ways that are comfortable for the old. Take a few change actions outside the 'norm' that break with past customs. Remove old barriers and unpack, evaluate and reframe operating assumptions that underlie the organisation's activities, directions and purpose. You need dynamic new structures and ways of doing things that will direct people on to new behavioural paths and prevent them from reverting to the old ways.

14. Create a Cultural Action Plan

A culture change vision without practical strategies and actions to help make it happen is just hallucination. Leaders have to work closely with their cultural advocacy groups (and more broadly in their change community) to collaboratively steps and processes to transit from the current to a renovated culture. We call this a Cultural Action Plan (CAP).

CAPs should detail things like where to start and what priority changes you most need to implement. Focus on 2 or 3 important things – don't get sidetracked into tackling too many at once . It should also get more specific on what needs to change to reach your culture vision, and exactly what new behaviours and thinking patterns to encourage, as well as discourage too. Don't underestimate how powerful new concepts and new learning can be in changing old ways, dislodging dysfunctional core beliefs, and helping people learn new cultural habits of mind.

15. Do it NOW, be bold and maintain a persistent pace

Conventional wisdom says it takes years to change a culture. Maybe. But don't let that lull you into thinking that's the timeframe you have for taking action. If you do, your efforts will flag behind as you start too late to ever catch-up on the cultural change time-lag, and you give people the impression culture change is a liesurely stroll rather than a rigorous jog. The later you start, the later you finish – and it may just be too late.

Take a lesson from climate change. Believing serious deterioration won't envelop us for another 50 years (*we wish?)* does not mean you can leave it for another 30 before you act. *You have to start now* . And when you do, act steady and persistent. Keep up the pace. Don't let other busy-ness cut across and stagnate your timetable. Make big impressions early. Meek little adjustments slows momentum. It allows the current culture ample time to defuse and deconstruct your change. Do things that destabilise the current culture so it can't reconstitute and re-absorb your change. Take actions outside the 'norm' – ones that break with past ways of doing change. You'll have difficulty creating a new culture if you do it inside comfortable ways of the old.

Taking on Culture Change

It's now widely recognised that organisational prosperity is in large part, coupled to culture. It's also pretty clear that a big factor in creating constructive cultures that perform well is leadership at all levels: how we communicate vision or direction, what behaviours we consistently model and reinforce, how this resonates or not with the people we lead, and how our words and actions are perceived

by others. They're all crucial factors that influence culture creation *and recreation*.

Taking on culture change isn't for the faint-hearted. It calls for a lot of persistence, determination, courage, resilience and at times, a thick-skin doesn't go astray either. Some days, you'll wonder whether all this pain and effort is worth it or even whether you're doing the right thing creating so much mayhem. It's heavy-duty, agonising and emotionally taxing. But it's better than standing on the sidelines, while good people lose jobs, competitors overtake you and the whole place goes bottom-up.

➲ Download The Change Forum's ***Culture Change Services Guide*** for an overview of ways we can help with culture revitalisation in your organisation.

➲ If you'd like to purchase a copy of our full **Culture Change Guide and Toolkit** please contact us initially by email as below or through our on-line **contact** form.

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