

## Workplace culture

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### Reimagining work culture

I love to read. I adore it. I devour books like my hubby devours biltong during a rugby match. Truth be told, books are my sanctuary, my escape and, best of all, they allow me to journey to find answers in the nooks and crannies of other people's minds.

Over the past few years I have developed a taste for books that touch on employee–employer dynamics, organisational culture, personal development and psychology.

These books are all trying to offer answers (see sidebar for my favourite books). Some authors take you for a walk alongside them into their personal journeys – most of them into the world of frustration. A frustration that many people experience in trying not just to survive, but to make the leap to thriving at their workplaces or making their businesses happy places for employees.

I, too, have felt the frustration and I have felt powerless, but I promised myself that I would go on my own quest to find a way to make it better. However, I could never quite put my finger on what the root cause was, or the best tool to help fix it.

I had to be honest with myself: there are always problems – and there always will be – but what was fundamentally wrong? That's what I wanted to find out. Was it me? Was it the job itself, the environment, the salary, the commute to work? An endless list of questions plagued my mind.

To be fair, it's not like companies themselves are not aware of the problems – and hats off to them. They try; in fact, a lot of them try really hard. But it just seemed that no matter how many reward programmes, team-building efforts or engagement surveys there were, something just didn't feel right.

Fast forward a few years studying towards my BA degree, I stumbled across the subject of anthropology: the study of 'human beings and their ancestors through time and space and in relation to physical character, environmental and social relations, and culture'.<sup>1</sup>

Since then, culture has developed into a passion. It has given me the key to unlocking the potential of organisations and the people working for them. However, I have come to realise that many people misunderstand the meaning of culture, especially organisational culture.

Sure, culture does include a particular tribe, community or society's art and music. But it also includes things like their rituals, language use, kinship systems and rites of passage, ceremonies and religious systems. Essentially, it's what differentiates us from animals and makes us human. If anthropology 'is the study of what makes us human',<sup>2</sup> it seems that organisational culture is a little ambiguous. But is it?

Every company has a culture, whether you like it or not. The fact that organisations exist and that people work for them means they have a culture. Companies put together a multitude of reward programmes, policies, ceremonies, rituals and rites of passage. You could argue that their hierarchy and management systems are similar to those of a tribe's kinship. Company values are plastered on everything sent from the human resources (HR) office, on email signatures and the wall in the reception area.

In *Benefits Barometer 2017*<sup>3</sup>: '[Changing world of work](#)' we looked at the changing world of work and touched on the importance of seeing an employee holistically. We argued that:

*The more holistically employers can understand employees needs, the better they will be able to structure policies and benefits that make sense for their employees – and this process starts with understanding employees in context. What are their responsibilities outside work? What are their attitudes and behaviours towards money? Understanding the history, values, psychology and responsibility lens of our individual employees is the right starting point for a meaningful discussion about a viable employee benefits framework.*

More and more, there is a realisation that work–life balance is not a clear division of time and effort compartmentalised equally between work and the rest of your life. Rather, it's about putting more of real life into work. Your organisation's culture can, to a certain extent, be used to help employees to do just that.

How do we set the ball rolling on reimagining our workplaces? How do we, in other words, infuse more of our lives into our work? Let's go back to what makes us human, and touch on a few things I believe are currently misunderstood and challenge our beliefs about the power of culture.



## Mistaken belief 1:

### Culture is not important, it's just the warm and fuzzy stuff

A couple of years ago I was privileged to have been part of an amazing initiative called the Alexander Forbes Junior Board. The people who were part of the programme were from all sectors of our organisation and held a variety of different positions. The golden thread the 18 of us shared was our passion. Each of us had something we were passionate about and we wanted to get our hands dirty trying to make it cooler, better and more awesome. The other common denominator was our ability to have conversations that sometimes got a little heated. It was all good clean fun, of course. But that's besides the point.

I clearly remember the day I discovered this particular hot button. One afternoon, I found myself in a beautiful 40-seater boardroom beginning a discussion on the importance of culture and trying to elicit resources to focus on this project. I could see my efforts were stalling. Then a comment was made about culture not being important: 'It's just the warm and fuzzy stuff HR does, like putting chocolates on your desk when it's Worker's Day,' the participant said, adding: 'Why is that our problem? We have far more important things that we should focus our time and resources on.'

Which made me ask myself: Is there a mistaken assumption that culture is simply the motivation used by HR to make us work harder, faster, better?

Or even just the pretty picture an organisation paints – the shopfront – to entice people into a company? Culture as internal marketing, perhaps? A one-dimensional practice that's nice to have on commemorative days? Unfortunately, this is exactly the perception of many companies. From start-ups to Fortune 500s, culture is viewed as a set of programmes, rituals and ceremonies that are mostly devoid of purpose and passion – a lot of them unimaginative and (at worst) boring.

In many cases, HR policies are often in direct conflict with the values and culture of a company. For example, do you tell employees and your customers that your organisation values 'sustainability and makes every effort to go "green"' when all the while you have mounds of paper piling up on every floor and insist on contracts being physically signed rather than accepting digital signatures? Maybe it's because buying the software is expensive, maybe you just don't trust digital signatures. It could even be that in your industry it's not legal yet to do so. While it is the prerogative of an organisation to make decisions and create its own policies, it is important that those decisions and policies are married to the core values you plaster on the walls of your halls.

The moral of the story? Be aware and be authentic. There's no point trying to be something you are not. Your employees and customers will sense it.

## Mistaken belief 2:

## Employees and customers should be treated differently

Clients do not come first; employees come first. If you take care of them, they will take care of your clients.

The words are Sir Richard Branson's.<sup>4</sup> But how many of us put our employees first? One way to describe culture is 'the way we do things around here'.

Did you ever notice, though, that the way we do things for our employees and the way we do things for customers are different? Depending on the product or service your organisation offers, it is likely your employees are also your customers. Why, then, do we have different ways of handling customers and employees? Isn't it obvious that by treating your employees like you treat your customers, you would create massive and, might I add, free marketing and public relations? Just imagine all your employees singing your praises.

Let's take a moment to consider the impact of spending the same time and effort on creating beautiful websites, campaigns, user experiences, products and services for people you don't know intimately (your customers), as you do on your employees. Your employees are like family. They are the people you can trust. Who better to tell you the truth (if you create the environment to do so) than your employees? And the risk is far less.

### Mistaken belief 3:

#### Culture is just another tick-box exercise with an end date

I don't know how many times I've heard some version of it. 'Don't worry, all we need to do is implement this programme by X date and then it will all be fine.'

There's a cold truth here! It won't be fine. Believing that culture is something you can manage, like a project with an end date, is setting yourself up for failure. That's because culture is an ongoing movement in the following sense:

- > There's a constant ebb and flow of individuals who join and leave your organisation.
- > Hopefully, people are not stagnating but growing, developing, learning and maturing within your organisation. When this happens, their priorities, needs and wants evolve, too.
- > There are external factors out of your control, such as the economic climate, regulatory requirements, customer spending habits and, of course, the biggie: technology.

All these factors will affect both your culture and strategy. They're two sides of the same coin (see mistaken belief 4).

Think about it like this: in an organisation, culture is like a software program for the human working condition. For people to thrive (note, 'thrive', not 'survive'), culture requires the same attention and dedication and the same methodologies as, say, app development. Go ahead and reference agile methodologies and throw in some Lean Startup, but remember to replace 'customer' with 'employee' (see mistaken belief 2).

### Mistaken belief 4:

#### Culture and strategy have no impact on each other

Let's take time out for a refresher biology lesson. There are three types of symbiosis: mutualism, commensalism and parasitism. In mutualism, both organisms benefit. In commensalism, one benefits and the other is unaffected; in parasitism, one benefits and the other is harmed.

There is most definitely a symbiosis between culture and strategy. Just as you can't have light without darkness, you can't have strategy without culture, or culture without strategy for that matter. However, there's a mistaken belief that culture has a commensal relationship to strategy.

Some people will be in Peter Drucker's camp when he says culture eats strategy for breakfast;<sup>5</sup> others will simply pay lip service to the importance of culture. One study found that, despite culture being one of the top three priorities for company boards, only 20% of 450 London-based directors and board members reported spending the time required to manage and improve it. Some 62% of survey respondents felt that they were primarily responsible for setting culture from the top of an organisation. However, a similar number (63%) either did not consider culture as part of their formal risk assessment or failed to routinely consider the risk associated with their corporate culture.

I believe that culture and strategy are equally important. When culture is taken as seriously as strategy; when it is allotted the same amount of time in boardrooms; when it becomes part of board meeting agendas and daily meetings; when it's included in performance appraisals (if you still do them) and when the values you purport to have are embedded in your policies, procedures, systems and behaviours authentically, the result is mutualism. When there is discord between where you are driving the ship (strategy) and how you get there (culture), the result is a parasitic relationship. You might just reach your destination, but you might also end up with a mutiny on your hands or with a third of the crew. In other words, you'll be making a profit at the expense of your employees, and the benefits will be short-lived.

### Mistaken belief 5:

#### Your legacy is your culture

My mother is a consummate cook. When she was taught to make pot roast, her mother told her the first thing she had to do was cut off the ends of the meat. This seemed like a waste, so she asked why this step was necessary. The response she got was, 'I was taught that way by my mother.' Not satisfied with this answer, she questioned her grandmother, who explained: 'We didn't have pots that were big enough to fit the cut of meat.'

This is the problem with legacy. It's a mistake to assume that just because something has been done for generations, it must be right. Most people never question those assumptions, they never question 'authority', especially when there doesn't seem to be any overt harm in continuing the practice.

But if you want innovation, if you want creativity, if you are looking for continuous improvement, if you want to survive automation and digitisation, you need to give people the freedom to question everything and allow the culture to make the change happen.

Commit to legacide – constantly. Richard Mulholland says, ‘You need to understand that innovation is not limited to doing something new. In fact, more often than not innovation should be about stopping doing something that’s old – even if that thing is what made you succeed in the first place.’<sup>6</sup>

### Jargon buster

Legacide: a newly coined word from legacy and cide (a killer of) that means getting rid of legacy thinking – the idea that we have always done things in a certain way – which kills innovation

And the same can be said of culture.

## References

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- 4 Virgin. 2016. Look after your staff (online).
- 5 Cave, A. 2017. *Culture eats strategy for breakfast, so what’s for lunch?*, Forbes, 9 November 2017 (online).
- 6 Mulholland, R. 2017. Legacide. *Why Legacy Thinking is the Silent Killer of Innovation*, Tracey McDonald Publishers, Johannesburg (book).

[CORPORATE CULTURE](#)

[MYTHS](#)

[STRATEGY](#)

[LEGACIDE](#)