

Tools, Tips, Tidbits and a Forum for continuing conversation...

Research repeatedly shows how culture profoundly effects every facet of an organisation. It ultimately, determines what's possible or not in an organisation and it's arguably the hidden 'X' factor in success or failure...

## A Word from the Editor...

Culture change is on almost every organisation's agenda these days. The theme of this issue is conversations about *culture* – a topic that tends to get talked about constantly in workplaces. We look at what makes up culture, why it's important, and why it's so hard to change. We also review Ed Schein's *Corporate Culture Survival Guide* and preview our must-do, new program *Leading Culture Change*, for leaders at any level who are serious about creating constructive work cultures.

Bill Cropper, Director – The Change Forum

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## Culture – the hidden 'X' factor at work...

Culture may not be an obvious factor impacting organisational performance, but one thing is clear – many factors that dislocate a culture have a detrimental flow-on effect that can add up to disaster. Some great leaders have been sunk by bad cultures and others... well we might even define a great leader as one who turns around a bad culture and creates a constructive one.



Research repeatedly shows how culture profoundly affects every facet of an organisation. It ultimately determines what's possible or not and it's arguably the hidden 'X' factor in success or failure. Companies from Google to Virgin are quick to attribute their firm's success to dynamic cultures that foster high levels of commitment, innovation, employee

satisfaction and identification with what the organisation is all about. It is for these basic reasons that organisational culture matters. It is the right thing for an organisation to do – to think about the work environment, working relationships and 'how we do things here'.

Focusing on building and sustaining an organizational culture is one way of showing that people are the organization's most valuable asset. And there are many other bottom line business reasons to focus on and build organizational culture. For example:

- ◆ *Exceptional cultures are talent-attractors.* Everyone wants to come and work there, because it offers an environment they enjoy, that supports them and they succeed in.
- ◆ *Exceptional cultures are talent-retainers.* Culture is a key determiner in who stays and goes. How often have you heard people say I left because I didn't fit in the culture?
- ◆ *Exceptional cultures liberate employees at all levels to do great things.* They give people a reason to challenge the status, kill sacred cows and constantly think about how to improve performance – even when they are not at work. In short, exceptional cultures spark higher levels of commitment, ideas and performance.
- ◆ *Exceptional cultures engage people.* While most of us want to feel engaged at work, disengagement is epidemic, with huge indirect losses in productivity.
- ◆ *Exceptional cultures create energy.* Vibrant cultures that value people and encourage creativity and self-expression create positive energy that's constructively contagious.
- ◆ *A strong culture changes the view of 'work'.* Most people have a negative connotation of that word: work equals drudgery, 9-5, 'the salt mine'. When you create a culture that is attractive, people's view of 'going to work' shifts to positivity and enthusiasm.
- ◆ *Exceptional cultures engender commitment and cohesion.* They bring people together, help them get along well, collaborate with each other, and stick together.

Creating better cultures is not only a good thing to do from a human relations viewpoint, it ends up making lots of good business sense too.

Culture, like the Blob, takes on a life of its own. Once the Blob absorbs us, we start acting unconsciously under its influence...

## Culture – the “Blob” in the background!



In our change clinics, we sometimes satirise culture as being a bit like “The Blob” – that so-bad-it’s-good, pop-corn spilling 1950’s horror movie starring Steve McQueen. The poster for the movie reads “*The Blob – Indescribable; Indestructible; Nothing can stop it!*”, which pretty much sums up how a lot of us feel about some of the horrifying, toxic and all-devouring work cultures we encounter!

Of course, when it comes to culture there are *bad blobs* and *good blobs*. The point of this movie metaphor though, is that culture, like The Blob, tends to take on a life of its own. No one person embodies all of it, but the culture embodies all of us.

It’s the collective, often unconscious, personality of a team or organisation no one solely controls or shapes, that takes us over and absorbs us into it. It ‘*squelches*’ around in the background, feeding off those well-embedded habits of behaving, thinking, talking and feeling that predominate in our culture, and that we continuously replicate.

This raises an interesting question: do you *absorb the culture*, or has *The Blob absorbed you*? Anyway, once the Blob absorbs us (it’s called ‘*acculturation*’ but who wants to get technical) we start acting unconsciously under its malign and insidious influence – or if it’s a good Blob, we should say *benign* and *beneficial*. It begins to shape you and your behaviour more and more without you realising it. (Oops – this is beginning to sound more like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* now).

Changing culture is notoriously difficult, because like The Blob, it’s ingrained, automatic, intangible and hard to see – and again, like The Blob, it will do anything to protect itself and survive – even if it means killing off its own host! We’ll resist changing those familiar, well-worn and comfortable habits, even if they’re not all that good for us – or for the ultimate survival of the organisation.

In *Before the Fallout*, an account of physics history leading up to the Atom bombing of Hiroshima, Diana Preston makes the point that German scientists convinced themselves nuclear fission was not possible in the time-frame, while the American Team at Los Alamos entertained a ‘*can-be-done*’ attitude....

## Collaborative Physics Culture – a winner in WW2?



In her very enthralling account of physics history leading up to the unleashing of the Atom bomb on Hiroshima, Diana Preston traces how the Nazis, though they had a head start, luckily never managed to produce a nuclear weapon, and how the fear they would drove the US to pull out all stops to try.

She recounts wire-tapped conversations of German physicists like Heisenberg, captured after Germany’s capitulation and interned back in the US, who were astounded at the success of America’s nuclear weapon program compared to their own failure.

*What’s the connection with ‘culture’?* Well, she makes the point that German scientists convinced themselves nuclear fission was not possible in the time-frame, while the American Team at Los Alamos entertained a ‘*can-be-done*’ attitude. One German physicist was overheard to praise the collaborative culture of the Los Alamos team, comparing it to the disharmony within their own program, where ‘*Each one said the other was unimportant*’, and tended to take an individualistic, ego-driven, competitive approach.

So it looks like a collaborative ‘*can-do*’ culture helped win WW2 – though the legacy of that achievement is definitely dubious. (Diana Preston *Before the Fallout*).

A culture of status acceptance and utmost respect...

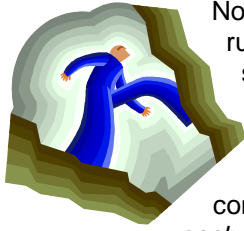
## ‘Bow to the Boss’ Culture – it’s about time!



Browsing on the web, I came across advice about corporate culture for anyone coming to work in Singapore. It includes things like: ‘*people at lower levels accept their subordinate status, and respect formal hierarchical authority. They seldom violate chains of command or openly question or disagree decisions made by their superiors. They treat employers and superiors with utmost respect, refrain from calling their boss by first names*’ – and my favourite, ‘*if you want to get ahead – practise “arrive before the boss, leave after the boss” work hours*’. At this point, I imagine several of our senior management readers are seriously considering a career move to Singapore... Bon Voyage!

Fault lines that run through workplaces are often created by the culture - then those same fault lines also continue to shape it. Blame, acrimony, territorial disputes and feuds between the factions follow... Do you know the fault-lines in your culture?

## Cultural Fault Lines – *they fracture workplaces*



Not as earth-shattering as the San Andreas sure, but the fault lines that run through workplaces are often created by the culture – then those same fault lines also continue to shape it...

A while back, I was facilitating a senior management retreat in The Blue Mountains west of Sydney for a construction company. The CEO got up during dinner on the first night, and seemed at first to congratulate everyone, as he started saying “*What an outstanding job each individual manager had done.....*”, pausing mid-sentence at this point, as sighs of self-congratulation murmured through the group, then completing his hanging sentence with: “*...at the expense of everyone else in the room.*” There was an audible ‘suck-in’ of breath, followed by silence and surreptitious glances as everyone in the room thought of when they’d been guilty of looking after their own patch, not sharing critical information or putting their own project first, to get ahead of others.

We all know the systemic cause. Organisations parcel up work and siphon it off to people in different functional silos. This sounds logical, rational and efficient. To a degree it is, if people acted like robots on a car assembly line, that is. As soon as you introduce a boundary or border between functions and give a group responsibility for it, they begin to identify strongly with that piece of territory you’ve bestowed on them. It’s their turf, their tribe. They begin to differentiate from other tribes who inhabit different turf. Fault lines and factions develop between policy and field, sales and marketing, doctors and nurses, admin support and operations and on and on...

This can be good for performance but bad for inter-group co-operation across boundaries. Us-and-them-syndromes spawn, along with often absurd levels of adversarialism and competition between groups, where the actions of one inhibit, disadvantage, cut across or even damn-right sabotage the efforts of the other. Blame, acrimony, territorial disputes and feuds between the factions follow – and those fault-lines fracture more.

And so you get a culture of conflict, blame, secrecy and competition instead of one of collaboration, openness and co-operation across boundaries. Of course, innovative, energetic cultures bridge these gaps and great collaborations occur regularly enough to keep us all hopeful.

Organisational tectonics may not be to your taste, but we’re often shaken up and put off balance by the behaviour that happens around us in factionalised cultures and it’s often those cultural fault lines at work. *Do you know the fault-lines your culture is likely to fracture along, because they’re certainly one of the shifting dynamics of any culture?*

Overworking is not uncommon, but you’ve got to give to Japan when it comes to overworking cultures. As with many other things, they “Zen” in it. Death from overwork is so commonplace in Japanese work culture, they have a word for it - ‘*karoshi*’.

## “*Karoshi*” - *the culture of death by overworking*



*Overworking.* It’s a common cause of stress, hypertension and toxicity in many work-cultures. *Work-life balance*, or should that be *life-work(?)*, is something organisations pay a lot of lip service to, then turn around and demand more of the fewer people they employ to do the increasing amount of work they have. Fine for profit. Not so good for people.

We work longer hours on average than ever before. Many managers get caught up in the ‘*sacrifice syndrome*’, where they put work before themselves, neglect to self-care, fall victim to the inevitable stress and sickness that follow, and then breakdown – or die. In the West, this pattern is pretty evident but, you’ve got to give it to Japan when it comes to overworking cultures. Like many other things, they ‘Zen’ in it.

Death from overwork is so commonplace in Japanese work culture, they have a word for it – ‘*karoshi*’. There’s even a legacy scheme for the dependents of those who commit early ‘*karoshi*’ for the good of the company. A 2007 *Economist* article relates the story of a Toyota engineer who worked himself to death by doing incredible amounts of unpaid overtime for the last six months before he died, working on the worldwide manufacture of a hybrid version of the Camry. The case went to arbitration (not the first time for Toyota) with the company denying culpability, claiming the hours were ‘voluntary’.

A ruling by the Labor Bureau of Aichi (where Toyota is headquartered), returned in favour of the widow and children with cause of death attributed to over-work, the implication being Toyota encouraged a culture that demanded such sacrifice. So next time you step into your Toyota, think of the human cost it took to make it. *Oh what a F...!*



Understanding what make up a culture at least gives you some chance of being able to see it, interact with it, and maybe even change it a bit...

## What makes up Culture? *The patterns that count...*

Culture sometimes seems so intangible, elusive and hard to grasp. Understanding what things make it up at least gives you some chance of being able to see it, interact with it, and maybe even change it a bit.

Culture is commonly described as “*the way we do things around here*” but it’s much more than that. It’s been called the glue that holds everything else in an organisation together (Goffee and Jones 1996). *Well, most people certainly get stuck in it!*



Here’s another one we like: “*Culture is the sum total of everything that has been going on and continues to be ongoing in an organisation.*” At least this gets at the all-encompassing nature of culture. There’s also the anthropological, tribal angle – *a group’s culture comprises the things an individual has to know, do, think and say in order to be accepted as part of that group.* And that’s true – you’re most often either in, or out, of a culture.

Of course none of these general definitions really get at the components that make up a culture. We often describe culture as a ‘cloth’ composed of many threads – myriad and complex interplays between numerous, often unnoticeable strands, including patterns of...

- ◆ **Thinking:** the prevailing values, beliefs, assumptions and mental models a team or an entire workplace hold collectively. These often operate unconsciously and define in a basic ‘*taken for granted*’ way, how we see the organisation, how we see ourselves and how we see each other.
- ◆ **Behaving:** the prevailing behavioural ‘rules’ resident in a team or workplace, that govern the way people interact with each other inside and outside the organisation. These rules aren’t usually explicitly stated but they’re implicitly, and again, unconsciously followed anyway.
- ◆ **Tradition:** the web of stories, histories, myths, legends, slogans, creeds, customs, rituals, rites, ceremonies, celebrations, heroes, villains and remembered actions that continually reinforce the prevailing culture and deflect efforts to change it.
- ◆ **Feelings:** the stream of underlying emotions people most commonly experience, display, act out or hide that flow through a culture, effecting how we treat each other, how we behave, how we think, how we cope with change, challenges and stress and how satisfied, productive and happy we are at work.
- ◆ **Conversation:** The nature, quality, frequency and direction of conversations people in a team or organisation have. This includes who speaks to who, how open we are in conversations, how we handle disagreements, what topics can be discussed and which are ‘undiscussable’.
- ◆ **Leadership:** The style and approach of leaders to how they lead others in a team or workplace, what behaviours they model and reinforce, how this resonates or not with the people they lead, and how their words and actions are perceived by others.
- ◆ **Responsiveness:** The way people engage with and respond to change in their external environment; how reactive or pro-active and how rigid or adaptive the organisation is, in navigating political, environment, social, and ‘futures’ contexts.

Though they serve a purpose, most definitions of culture (including the patterns we’ve outlined above) are mechanistic and over-simplistic. We delude ourselves into thinking all the elements of culture sit side-by-side in a simple cause-effect relationship and can be broken down into components or characteristics that are able to be taken out, adjusted and replaced at whim, like parts in a car engine.

The ‘components’ approach to culture has led to the fantasy it can be easily adjusted, manipulated and controlled, if only we are clever and adept enough at ‘parts replacement’.

Cultures aren’t manufactured like a car is and you can’t just re-engineer them. They’re more *organic* than *mechanic*. A better metaphor is to think of our planet’s continually shifting and erupting tectonic plates or the way organisms go through inevitable stages of growth, maturity and decline. When it comes to culture, a *systems-thinking* approach works better – remembering every thread we try to change is connected to many others – and that changing one can alter others in ways you simply did not expect or even want.

*"There is now abundant evidence that culture makes a difference to performance; we know that leaders increasingly need concepts and tools for working with culture in varied and subtle ways"* Ed Schein *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide*

#### ➤ New program...

The Change Forum has added a new 1-day culture change clinic to its series of public learning forums.

**Leading Culture Change** can also be run in-house as a more in-depth 2-day clinic...

The Corporate Culture Survival Guide is the latest in a long line of books and articles from the pen of this venerable professor at MIT's Sloan School of Management.

Schein's book is a classic in terms of concepts, applications and useful advice. It may give leaders insights into what been missing in terms of understanding and 'managing' culture

Add it to your reading list. We give it 4 stars

*The Corporate Culture Survival Guide* New and revised edition Edgar Schein 1999 & 2009 Jossey Bass

## The Culture Change Clinic – a new addition!



Culture change is on every leader's lips nowadays. Most leaders are acutely aware how constructive cultures help people perform, collaborate, connect and thrive. They're equally aware how dislocated cultures breed bad behaviour, stress, toxicity and sub-performance.

"We need to change the culture" is a much-repeated mantra in many management meetings, yet culture is notoriously difficult to change. While there are no magic bullets or quick-fixes, if you can understand a culture, and learn some lessons about what seems to work and what doesn't, then you have a chance of changing it for the better. And that's what our new program – *The Culture Change Clinic* – is all about.

Our *Emotional Intelligence*, *Conversational Coaching* and *Working Better Together* team-building clinics, centre on helping leaders build the emotional, conversational, relational and team-working capabilities they need to create constructive work cultures. The *Culture Change Clinic* looks *behind-the-scenes* at the deeper patterns that underpin culture and what leaders can do to systemically change and revitalise their culture.

Coming along to this clinic can equip you to handle a culture change effort better – whether you're leading a team, a division or a whole organisation. Like all our clinics, this one has lots of take-away tools and ideas to help people get started in earnest on culture change – and we explore areas instrumental in doing it like understanding the dimensions of constructive culture, conducting culture scans, recognising danger signals and working out the best place to launch a culture change effort.

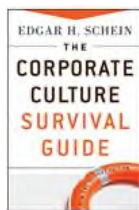
Check our [website](#) for scheduled events coming up in your region or to [enquire](#) about an in-house clinic for your leadership team or by all means give us a [call](#) to discuss ways we can help you get started on culture change at your place...

## Schein shines a light on Culture for Leaders

Culture and leadership, as Ed Schein says straight up in *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide*, "are two sides of the same coin and one cannot understand one without the other."

How leaders interact with the culture and how we judge their effectiveness, has a lot to do with the fit between their style and actions and where the culture is in terms of the stages of its organisational life. When new leaders come into an existing culture, they're faced with excruciating choices:

1. Destroy the existing culture by getting rid of the key culture carriers
2. Fight it by attempting to impose their own beliefs, values and assumptions
3. Give in to the existing culture by abandoning their own beliefs and values
4. Evolve it by adapting enough to figure what's going on, then gradually re-shape it



This book gives leaders insights into what they've been missing in terms of understanding and 'managing' culture. It's part of a long and venerable line Schein's penned on this topic. He reiterates a message he's made many times: that leaders need to "learn to see the world through culturally more sophisticated lenses"; that it's dangerous to "over-simplify" culture, mistaking its outward signs like espoused values, climate, rites and rituals for the culture itself that exists at much more complex, subterranean levels.

In this sense, changing culture is like shadow-boxing in a mirror maze. Just when you think you know what to hit in the culture to effect a real change, it turns out to be merely a reflection of a deeper trait that's much harder to hammer. The first part of the book helps leaders get a grip on how deeply rooted and resilient culture is – how it goes beyond what you can see, and even what people tell you. Schein digs down to unearth how culture exists at several "levels", the most important being:

1. "Artefacts" – visible aspects, structures and processes you should not take at face-value
2. "Espoused Values" – what people say they're about, that often turns out not to be true
3. "Shared Tacit Assumptions": unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts and feelings that are the ultimate well-spring of real cultural values and actions

Schein doesn't just dwell in the conceptual realms of cultural complexity. This book is filled with *practical applications* for leaders on how to deal with and change culture when it gets in the way of effective functioning. For example, he shows how:

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Schein shines a light on Culture for Leaders...

- ◇ Many corporate problems trace back systemically to the way the culture is – and how it's a tough area to get clarity on, since we're all deeply immersed in it, and it's hard to look at something from the outside, when you're working on the inside.
- ◇ Changing culture just for the sake of it is a huge mistake. The only reason is when there's a performance need. Even then, he argues, you can't 'create' a new culture. You graft on behaviours that if they take, become part of a new cultural off-shoot.
- ◇ Approaches to change have to vary depending on where the culture is in the life cycle of an organisation – from the relatively recent, where the culture hasn't not put down deep roots, to the more mature, where the culture is much more deeply entrenched
- ◇ Cultures form and why it's so hard to change an embedded culture – and he also lays out practical plans for assessing culture, which while not simple or easy, promise great rewards if diligently followed.

Schein's book is undeniably deep and perplexing. If you're looking for simple formulas don't go here. As Schein himself says in the preface to the first edition: *"If you want to take a serious rather than superficial look at culture in organizations, struggle through this book with me-and let the complexity inform you rather than turn you off."*

In an article from *The Conference Board Review* (tcbreview.com), Fall, 2009, Hope Greenfield, a former Lehman Brothers manager, gives her spin on why the firm's best traits turned out to be its worst - and it all comes down to culture....

### Cultures that Crash – going from tonic to toxic...



Lehman Brothers was a global financial-services firm which declared bankruptcy in 2008. Hope Greenfield, a former managing director at the centre of the action asks: *"Could it have been different?"* Her answer, featured in an article for *The Conference Board Review* is, 'no' in the short term but 'yes' in the longer term – and *"It all comes down to culture,"* she concludes.

Greenfield's article is at once personal, poignant, sad and insightful, as she recounts her story of Lehman's demise, which she astutely observes: *"illustrates the truth of a little-remarked phenomenon of organizational development: The very attributes of a strong corporate culture that underlie a company's success often carry the seeds of its destruction."* She outlines vividly the four *"admirable cultural characteristics"* that had been *"the bedrock of the culture (and) had served the business well for generations... their notion of family, their resilience, their underdog pride, and their competitiveness."*

As Greenfield observes, the Lehman demise offers salutary lessons for organisations about the nature of culture itself and the necessity to change it. What are those lessons?

Here are some of the major ones Greenfield extracts from her experience...

- ◇ *"Clinging to cultural habits that become outmoded as a company grows and as markets change is a recipe for disaster. It can lead to misuse of talent, reward leadership styles that have become dysfunctional, and undermine the company itself."*
- ◇ *"Putting too much faith in an outmoded culture" can blind you to seeing "how its very strength can undermine (a) business... A culture that is too strong can also end up too rigid and can shut out diversity" that may be needed to revitalise it.*
- ◇ *"A strong culture attracts people (but) it also repels them, and the more passionate and proud you are of the culture, the more likely in the end you are to blind yourself to other potentially valuable points of view."*

The crash of Lehman's was tragic for a company that really looked after its people. *"Whether viewed as a strength to cultivate, or as a weakness to fix, culture can ultimately exact a steep price,"* Greenfield concludes. *"It can be much stronger, more deeply embedded, and far less malleable than glib promoters of 'transformation' might suggest."*

Cultures that Crash - going from tonic to toxic...

Culture is a topic we tend to talk about at work constantly. We think we own what we say, but often, it's the culture that owns what we say - we merely act as mouthpieces for it...

### Culture Conversations – do you own what you say?



No – not those pretentious conversations you overhear in art galleries, while you squirm with aesthetic inadequacy or sit in confusion wondering what this painting is doing here or trying to work out whether they've hung it the right way up!

We mean one of those topics we tend to talk about at work constantly, in corridors, cafes, behind closed doors (if you've got a secretive culture), even at home, if anyone is listening. >>>



Culture Conversations - do you own what you say?

Of course, we may not use the word 'culture'. We say things like: *"There's too much blaming around here"*, *"We have too many rules and regulations"* or *"We're not very trusting"*, but we're still talking culture. Conversations with workmates are littered with allusions and evaluations (usually bad) about the state the current work culture is in.

There's another level to culture conversations too. The culture we're in informs the climate and kind of conversations we have. It infiltrates what we think, feel and how we respond. When we open our mouths to speak, we think we speak for ourselves, but unconsciously, we're often mouthing the prevailing mental models, beliefs and values in our culture.

When I say *"We do too much talking – we should stop, and just get on with it"*, I think I'm expressing my own unique, individual opinion. I rarely stop to think how *a culture that values action over reflection* might be influencing the sentiments behind what I'm saying.

In many ways, while we think we *own* what we say, most of us are just talking from the dominant perspectives of our culture. Often, it's the culture that owns what we say and we act as mere mouthpieces.

The words people use can be telling indicators of the character of a culture...

## Characterising Culture – what words do you use?

All kinds of organisations have a culture. So do different groups, sporting teams, communities, countries. Some are more positive than others, and every culture has its idiosyncrasies. Some are helpful adaptations – others are not.



To revitalise a culture, people first need to have conversations about their experience of it – how they find it and how they'd characterise its good and not-so-good aspects. The words people use can be telling indicators of the character of a culture.

One activity we use for culture scanning is to simply ask people what words they'd use to describe their current culture. The patterns of words that emerge are often revealing – and can lead into very constructive and confronting conversations about what the culture's really like.

*Try it.* It may be a great start to your culture change work. You might be surprised by some of the words that crop up... and it always sparks a lively conversation.

Characterising Culture - what words do you use?

Toxic work cultures, seem to be on the rise world-wide. Over time they dispirit, distract, disrupt and can lead to real physical and mental deterioration. How do you know if your workplace culture is turning toxic?

## Toxic Cultures – caustic, cutting, out of control



In Issue 11 of our E-News, we looked at caustic conversations and how they contribute to toxic work cultures, which seem to be on the rise world-wide. We also said that in terms of stress, tension and other insidious side-effects, toxic work cultures can be as literally poisonous as if you were handling real bio-hazards.

Over time, toxic work cultures dispirit, distract, disrupt and can lead to real physical and mental deterioration. *How do you know if your workplace culture is turning toxic?* Here's a few warning signals....

- ◆ People drag themselves to work – they're more despondent and de-motivated
- ◆ People are more defensive, scratchy, irritable, cutting, reactive or cynical
- ◆ There's more flare-ups, crises, caustic remarks and out-of-control behaviour
- ◆ Leaders are feeling more cornered and becoming more directive and demanding
- ◆ Aggression is used to get results and leaders are less tolerant and more impatient
- ◆ People act more stressed, frustrated and relationships are more strained
- ◆ We're more cynical, distrusting, suspicious and unsure of people around us
- ◆ Personal egos, selfishness and look after yourself becomes more common
- ◆ Blaming, back-biting, sniping and snitching behaviour is more out in the open
- ◆ Competition and self-protection become the norm and collaboration evaporates
- ◆ People feel less safe, conversations are more guarded and many are withdrawn

A rule of thumb? If you notice more than 3 of these signals consistently and widely appearing within the same time-span, you probably have toxic leaks in your culture.

Some cultures “*have got so many bad habits*” it’s a wonder they work at all. A culture change effort won’t get very far unless you can either persuade people to replace bad habits - or leave...

## Bad Cultural Habits – *and spot-replacing behaviour*



There was a one-hit wonder by Billy Field back in 1981 called “*Bad Habits*” – and some cultures “*have got so many bad habits*” it’s a wonder they work at all. They range from back-biting to blaming to sheer belligerence. *But what can you do?*

Some say “*leopards can’t change their spots*” and leave it at that - meaning you either put up with bad habits or get rid of the people who have them. Zoologically speaking, that’s right – leopards can’t change their spots any more than a tiger can trade-in its stripes (although new research in the January 2010 issue of *Genetics* at least tells us how cats end up with spots or stripes)...

But we’re not talking spots, stripes and genetic markings here. We’re talking people and behaviour. And you can, by the way, train tigers to jump through hoops (though I’m not sure about leopards)! One thing’s for sure, a culture change effort won’t get very far unless you can either persuade some people to replace bad habits – or leave.

- ◆ **The first step** to break a bad habit is to get people to see the behaviour as harmful, damaging or negative. Some can’t seem to even get through this hoop. This is where feedback helps – and raising awareness of the pain I cause for myself or others
- ◆ **The second** is to see why we find this bad habit so compelling. In other words, what’s the payoff for continuing to do this negative thing? Many are tempted to say there isn’t one. If you look closely, there’s always a payoff – though not always one you want to admit to. Let’s say you talk over the top of others. The payoff maybe you get heard.
- ◆ **The third step** is see the trade-off. What are you losing by doing this habit? For example, think why you get angry or overbearing with those who disagree with you. You know it leads to arguments. You’re trading a temporary release of tension for high blood-pressure and poor work relationships. Not very clever?
- ◆ **The fourth step** is to see you have a choice. To do this, you have to give up dumb excuses like “*They made me yell at them*” or “*That’s just the way I am*” and start to see how you choose to act. It’s not an involuntary behaviour now - you choose it.
- ◆ **The fifth** is to get at the thinking that goes with the bad habit. Every action we take is accompanied by thoughts and feelings that are often unconscious to us. Bringing those to the surface and changing them is essential. For example, “*They never listen to me*” is a thought that ‘*makes*’ you butt in and not listen to others.
- ◆ **The final step** is substitute a better behaviour. You can’t just stop the old behaviour unless you have a replacement behaviour that is better. Instead of blaming everyone else, for instance, see how you contributed first or think of fixing things, not blaming.

Of course to relinquish bad habits, it also helps to change the environment they’ve flourished in. Get rid of the systems or structures that have accommodated the behaviour. Move people into different teams. Give them new tasks or new purpose. And one final thing – you have to make the old habit painful to continue and constantly confront it!

Developing a team behaviour charter is easy - and it won’t change anything by itself. Organisations are stacked with codes people blithely ignore...

## Changing Culture – *why behaviour codes can’t cut it*



One of the first, most predictable responses to changing cultural behaviour is to develop a charter or code of behaviour. There’s a flurry of activity. Teams meet to identify good and not-so-good behaviours, good intentions waft around loftily, then slowly everything reverts back to the way it was.

Developing a team behaviour charter is easy – and it won’t change anything by itself. Organisations are stacked with codes of conduct people blithely ignore. Why? Well, how many New Year’s resolutions do you manage to keep – or have you given up making them? Behaviour codes are a bit the same aren’t they? There’s lots of reasons codes and charters fail to have the effect we hope for, but some of the main ones are:

- ◆ Many are full of injunctions (eg *don’t blame or gossip; respect others*) - *thou-shalt-not notes to nobody*, that have little impact on behaviour because they’re just too vague. Individuals and teams don’t change just by making a random list of *Do’s* and *Don’ts*. They assume we know how to act respectfully, for example, and don’t give specific enough examples of behaviour to follow.

...Continued over >>>



## Changing Culture - why behaviour codes can't cut it...

- ◇ We assume people can simply stop doing long-ingrained habits of behaviour. But these are hard to change. People revert back to them despite codes, warnings or punishments, because their emotional brain makes them act this way and overrides better judgement. Lacking the emotional self-management skills to curb dysfunctional behaviour, their emotional reactions get the better of them,
- ◇ While we tell people DO or DON'T, what's really needed is for them to learn new, replacement patterns of behaving that can become the new habit. And these have to be practised a lot. This means more training, coaching and more time – and many organisations aren't prepared to put up with that.
- ◇ Self-awareness is a perennial problem. People just can't see they behave badly – it's invisible to them (*"I don't yell at people – I just raise my voice so they'll listen"*). Or they make excuses (*"I normally don't act like that but.....?"*). There are some who'll even help you assemble a code, naming all sorts of bad behaviour they see in others. But when it comes to the crunch, they actually believe this code applies to other people – *it couldn't possibly apply to them.*
- ◇ In other cases, people have gotten away with this behaviour for a long time, no-one's pulled them up for it, so they just assume that's how everybody acts and there's nothing wrong with it. A major support skill often missing here is teaching people how to confront bad behaviour, give feedback and work through difficult issues with others.
- ◇ And finally, let's face it, there are some people who just don't give-a-stuff about the adverse impact they have on others or how they treat people (eg. *"If they get upset because I'm a bit abrupt, that's their problem"*) – they're too self-focused to care.

All this may seem like we're saying don't bother with charters or codes. Not so. Agreeing on ways we want to be treated and how we'll treat others, can act as a 'first line of defence' against dysfunctionality, to ensure certain things happen, or don't, in your team.

What we are saying is behaviour charters need to be carefully thought through, framed in positive ways, be specific and clear, not vague and general, and be supported by giving people the self-awareness skills to learn new ways of behaving and get at the underlying thinking and emotional patterns.

And a final thing, to be effective, developing a Team Behaviour Charter needs to be everybody's business, not just the opinions of a few.

We often hear that if you want to change things, you have to 'leverage the culture'. Do you know what cultural levers to pull in your organisation?

Finding the right levers - scheduling culture change

## Finding the right levers - Scheduling culture change

It's often said if you want to change things, you have to 'leverage the culture'. I sometimes feel unsure about what this really means – though I imagine it suggests: use some of the existing strong icons or tendencies of the culture to your advantage – a bit like baiting the right hook if you're fishing.



A few years ago though, I experienced a graphic example, while working with a school principal keen to introduce 'social and emotional learning' (aka *emotional intelligence*) into classrooms. We were convinced clearly caring teachers would wholeheartedly embrace the value of such obvious life-and-learning skills. We were dead wrong...

Taking the advice of education experts who warned *"Don't introduce EI into the curriculum formally, integrate it into lessons teachers already teach"* sounded nifty. We did – and it didn't work. It wasn't as though there was a teacher rebellion. Quite the reverse. They agreed how important it was, and then ignored it. Six months later, I was back in the principal's office, discussing how nothing much had happened.

So, at the beginning of next year, we changed tack. The timetable was re-jigged with formal EI lessons planned in that every teacher had to run. The turn around was noticeable. Now teachers showed a renewed interest in EI and how to teach it and the effort finally gained traction. What cultural lever did we pull? You guessed it – it was the timetable.

As far as teachers were concerned, the timetable was an indicator of what was important. If something wasn't timetabled, it was simply not seen as important. If you put it on the timetable, it was. Simple. This was the collective meaning the timetable had in this culture and leveraging it worked wonders. Do you know what cultural levers to pull in your organisation?

Taking on culture change isn't for the faint-hearted. You don't do it because it sounds like a good thing to do or it's the in-thing. The old culture-carriers will do pretty much anything to prevent you succeeding. What does it take? Here's a few tips that might give your culture change more grunt...

## Tackling Culture Change – *not for the faint-hearted*



Taking on culture change isn't for the faint-hearted. You don't do it because it sounds like a good thing to do. It takes persistence, commitment, determination, courage, resilience and at times, a really thick-skin doesn't go astray either.

The old culture-carriers will do almost anything to stop you succeeding – sabotage, sedition, personal attack, innuendo, threats, or one we call 'passive immobility' – people simply stop working. The hope is tactics like these will wear you down – you'll see the error of your ways if things get punishing enough.

*What does it take?* Here's a few tips that might give your culture change more grunt...

- ◆ **Don't waste too much time analysing current culture.** You've decided to change it, so why bother. Focus on where the culture needs to be, not where it has been. Too much analysis stalls action and plays into the hands of the 'no-change' mob (or is that *The Blob?*).
- ◆ **Keep up the pace.** Conventional wisdom says it takes years to change a culture. Don't let that lull you into believing that's the timeframe for action. If you do, the change effort will lag as the task expands to fill the time. Act fast, keep up the pace..
- ◆ **Make big impressions early.** Making meek little adjustments slows momentum and allows the current culture time to defuse the change. Do things that destabilise the current culture so it can't reconstitute itself, and like the Blob, re-absorb your change.
- ◆ **Don't let the current culture dictate the terms.** Your change will stall if you allow the current culture to say how it should be carried out. It's a bit like inviting your enemy to draw up your battle plans. They'll go for slow, steady, cautious and small (if they go at all!) when what's needed is fast, dramatic, bold and audacious.
- ◆ **Take change actions dramatically outside the 'norm'.** Choose strategies that break with past ways of doing change. You'll have difficulty creating a new culture if you keep doing change in ways that are comfortable for the old.
- ◆ **Be persistent and expect flack.** People will question your motives, accuse you of being ego-driven, selfish, uncaring, insensitive or even stupid. Stick to your purpose.
- ◆ **Keep focused on the outcome.** Change releases energy. You need to harness it, not let it turn into negative resistance that cancels out your change. Give people clear targets. Empower those who are positively charged, sideline the negative.
- ◆ **Reward new behaviours.** Supporting the new culture needs rewarding. Sticking with the old needs to get painful. Change reward systems to recognise the behaviour you want. Give new culture advocates support, budgets and big projects. Don't waste time on squeaky wheels. Confront their behaviour – don't reward them with choice tasks.
- ◆ **Break up bureaucracy.** It's part of the old cultural system and it will hold you back. Resisters will keep trying to entangle you in it. Be careful you don't give them cause by overlooking rules that really count, but do away with the worse worn-out-rules and rituals that are the leg-irons of the old culture.
- ◆ **Communicate around.** Communicate in all sorts of ways and don't rely on standard communication channels. They won't cut it and some are expert at fouling these up. Get conversations out of the corridors and into public all-in-the-one-room forums. Talk up the new culture whenever you can and keep dialogue going non-stop
- ◆ **All players – no passengers.** People will wait around for you to keep doing things. Not only will this tire you – you simply can't do it alone. Involve everyone in some way in taking actions that will help with the new cultural direction.
- ◆ **Accept there will be casualties.** It's tough – but it's tougher to see your good people go because they can't work with old cultural guard. Sometimes of course, you don't have to get rid of the people – just their behaviour.
- ◆ **Be the change you want in others.** Consistent modelling of new behaviours potently signals things are changing. As the agent of change, you lead the way through example – and publicly recognise others who are breaking the old cultural mould too.
- ◆ **Leverage learning.** To change old habits you need to change the old thinking that perpetuates them. Don't underestimate how powerful new concepts and new learning can be in changing old ways and helping people learn new ones. ...Continued over >>>

Tackling Culture Change - not for the faint-hearted...

Lots of companies will measure your culture for you. But will it really tell you much about the state of your culture? We think the answer is cautiously... yes - but with some conditions you should best be 'eyes-open' about...

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 mess and mayhem. It's heavy-duty. It's emotionally taxing – and it's agonizing. But it's better than standing on the sidelines watching, while good people lose jobs, competitors overtake you and the whole place goes bottom-up.

## Culture Surveys – why they mostly miss the mark...

An obvious place to start a culture change effort is to find out what shape your current culture is in. Most organisations are over-obsessed with measuring things (after all, it's part of the *culture of management*). The assumption always seems to be that measuring stuff is a good thing in itself – that it's objective, precise and appropriate. But is it?



There's a plethora of enthusiastic, and sometimes very self-serious, statisticians out there ready to take your money to survey just about anything you want them to in your organisation – from emotional intelligence to equity, from leadership to office leg-room, from change readiness to resourcefulness – and, of course, lots of companies will measure your culture for you.

There's an array of matrices and multi-dimensional cultural typologies, not to mention lots of impressively sexy, scientific-looking cultural reporting mechanisms to choose from – but will it really tell you much about the state of your culture? We think the answer is cautiously... yes – but with some conditions you should best be 'eyes-open' about.

- ◆ **Imposed reality:** For a start, most surveys tend to impose an external set of cultural measurements on your culture which may or may not fit that well. You may be edified to know how your culture measures on 'mercenariness', 'adhocracy' or even 'change-acrobatics' – but why? What has it got to do with getting at the real undercurrents in your culture? Whose construct of reality is it anyway? Certainly not yours – it's *externally imposed*. And that's the main problem with many surveys.
- ◆ **One-size-fits-all:** The dimensions they measure against may simply not be a relevant mirror to hold up to *your* culture. They cut your cultural survey cloth from the same pattern they've used on others for years. Oh, by the way, because they have, they can 'benchmark' your culture against lots of others. But what does this tell you? You're not concerned with changing those other cultures. You're concerned with changing yours.
- ◆ **Survey construction** is always a factor. As the old adage goes, you only find what you look for. Many surveys employ standard-rater mechanisms – you know 'Most – Least – Sometimes – Often – Never - Not Sure'. People say it's for statistical accuracy (*and nothing to do with saving time in collation and report generation*) – but different individuals have different ideas of what these terms mean (what is 'very frequent' to one may be 'seldom' to another). Statistically-based response surveys also tend to downplay the often-revealing information yielded by anecdotes, stories and narratives.
- ◆ **Right Questioning:** As Ed Schein says in *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide* (reviewed in this issue): "You don't know what to ask, what questions to put in the survey, because you don't know at the outset what issues or dimensions are the important ones." You could ask 300 questions and still miss out really essential ones >
- ◆ **Question Overload:** Speaking of questions, some surveys ask a never-ending number of them – on average between 100 to 150 is not uncommon. People are likely to die of survey-sickness before they finish. Still, '*impacts of survey-fatigue*' – now that would make another good survey!
- ◆ **Sausage-Machine Reports:** Finally, there's the inevitable report that follows. Like star-signs, astrology charts and sausage machines, we seldom seem to stop and think how the bulk of these are *not* tailored to your unique circumstances. They're largely computer generated phrase-formulas cleverly re-combined (or not in some cases) that could describe your firm, or a thousand others around the place too. *And you thought you were special?*

It's enough to talk you out of doing a culture survey. But that is not the point. The point is be discerning. Shop around. Test whether the company you have in mind will willingly integrate questions or dimensions you want (rather than what they tell you need).

A culture survey can serve the purpose of getting people focussed on the culture, act as a spur to action or an initiator to the conversations that are needed – but not as the final word on diagnosing what's going on in your culture or what to do about it.



## Culture Scans Tool Feature...

Highlighting a tool from our Culture Change Clinic for revitalising your workplace culture...

➔ If you'd like to find out about conducting a Culture Scan for your team or organisation - [contact](#) Bill Cropper at The Change Forum to talk over how we can help...

The blame game is a classic icon of many toxic cultures. It's also an absorbing pastime for many at work - players and spectators alike. The trouble with playing the blame-game is four-fold...

## Culture Scans – working out what needs work...



In any culture, there's always some things that are good and some not-so-good. 'Cultural revitalisation' is about working with your people to identify what parts of a culture are dislocated or dysfunctional – that we need to rethink, reinvent or replace. It's also about reminding ourselves what parts are constructive that we want to preserve and also finding new elements to introduce to re-energise and renew a culture.

There's never one-right place to start with cultural revitalisation. But one approach is to collect everyone's impressions of what the current culture is like first. That's what the *Culture Scan* we've developed at *The Change Forum* tries to do.

- ◆ Our Culture Scan contrasts your current culture against a set of key dimensions and characteristics most commonly connected with *constructive* or *dislocated* cultures. We vary these to your context, but some core ones often include: *leadership behaviour; emotional patterns and climate; conversations and collaboration; alignment with visions, values and directions* and *environmental responsiveness*.
- ◆ We're aware of shortcomings all culture surveys suffer from (see article in this issue). You know your culture better than us, so we partner with you to tailor the scan dimensions and questions, not impose ones that may not be relevant to your situation. And to avoid survey-sickness, our scan is economical, intriguing, incisive and simple.

Our Culture Scan isn't just a survey. It's a *learning-for-change* process with 4 main steps:

- 1. Individual/group interviews** with everyone, commences conversations about cultural impressions and undercurrents, that provide valuable input into constructing the scan.
- 2. The Culture Scan.** Everyone gets an e-file of the culture scan we've tailored to your culture to complete on-line. The scan is also very much a learning document and has a positive bias towards collecting anecdotal information and stories, not just 'numbers'. Unlike many surveys, we use the scan to also collect ideas for improving the culture.
- 3. Cultural Imprints.** Scan results are published in a *Cultural Imprints Brief* that reports back on the difference between actual and desired characteristics ('culture-gaps'); gives direction-markers for culture-building strategies and gets people thinking about what they want/wish for their culture to be like moving into the future
- 4. Cultural Dialogues.** Dialogue session(s) follow to talk over findings/patterns in a safe, controlled conversational setting. Conversations like these are crucial to spur people into wanting to do something about improving culture and involving everyone in deciding what parts of the culture need the most work.

Culture scans won't work miracles in changing your culture but they do provide a handy guide to help you work out what needs work to revitalise it. Once you've decided that, *The Change Forum* can also provide targeted clinics in key self-awareness areas that can help with developing new patterns of behaviour or assist you in putting together a Behaviour Charter that can serve as the blueprint for your new cultural directions.

## The Culture of Blame – it's an absorbing past-time



The blame game is a classic icon of many toxic cultures. It's also an absorbing pastime for many at work – players and spectators alike. The trouble with playing the blame-game is four-fold.

- ◆ First, it's spectacularly self-perpetuating. Blame breeds blame. People feel indignant when others they've blamed, blame back. This raises resentment which eats away trust and respect.
- ◆ Second, blaming is simple-minded and non-systemic. Systems Thinking shows that no-one person, event or situation is ever to solely blame as the single cause or contributor to anything. There are multiple factors and contributions.
- ◆ Third, blaming conceals low levels of self-awareness about how *I contribute to my own situations*. As I focus on what everyone else has done and blame them for it, I remain blind to how I have contributed – and never have to take responsibility for fixing anything – since it's always someone else's fault. It's always about what everyone else is doing wrong.
- ◆ Lastly, blame never actually fixes anything. It rarely evokes an apology or confession and definitely stokes ire, disappointment and pay-back. Really to do blame, you have to be spotlessly blameless yourself – *so hand-up anyone in this category?*

Our *Working Better Together* clinics are a great support for your culture change efforts...

To make it easier to design a clinic that's right for you, we've developed a self-contained menu of team-building topics people commonly gravitate toward. There are 10 main themes to choose from, adapt or extend:

- Designing Teams
- Visions & Values
- Talking in Teams
- Respect-building
- Team Cohesion
- EI for Teams
- Difficult Discussions
- Deciding in Teams
- Teamwork Lessons
- Thinking in Teams

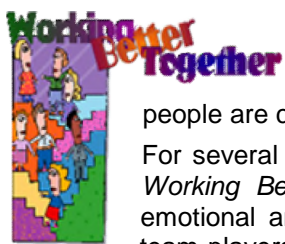
➡ For an outline of our approach with lots of useful pointers to help plan your next team-building session download our [Team-Building Prospectus](#) from the [Working Better Together](#) page at [www.thechangeforum.com](http://www.thechangeforum.com)

Extend your team's conversational competency with an in-house clinic or individual and small group coaching in the workplace... Powerful learning support that's also cost-effective!

### More Information?

➡ To find out more about our services, download [Brochures](#), [Register](#) or make an [Enquiry](#) contact:

## Feedback from the Field...*Working Better Together*



Deep down, we all yearn to work in places that are warm, welcoming, inspiring and supportive – ones where we relate well with each other, where there's a real sense of team and where people are committed to building positive, safe and uplifting work cultures.

For several years now, The Change Forum has run a range of what we call *Working Better Together* Clinics to equip people with the conversational, emotional and positive interaction skills they need to be better leaders and team-players – to build vibrant, healthy, connective work cultures and tune-up their team to put in a superior performance. Here we share some impressions our WBT participants have left behind for us over recent years...

*"Well worth attending. I enjoyed it immensely."* said Carol Collins, admin-coordinator. *"It gave us all a better understanding of ourselves and one another, taught us respect for each other and this was conducive to better cooperation."* Denise Woodford was of the same opinion: *"Working Better Together was great. It provided many useful insights into behaviours and interactions and many 'tools' which I will implement into my daily practice."*

Janet Knowles from Queensland Health thought the clinic she attended was *"very relevant to leaders who want to engage better with their team"*, while Ron Zahner, training manager added: *"Life would be so much better if more people adopted some of these concepts to understand the people we deal with. The more people who are aware of these concepts, the better."* Joanne Collins, manager with Wide Bay Water, concurs: *"My folks have been telling everyone else how good Working Better Together was – now they all want to go!"*

All teams need to take time-out now and then to renew relationships, find ways to discuss difficult issues that get in the way and clarify how to work more constructively together. Lots of people like the interactive team-building aspects of our clinics, designed to help people tackle their specific team-relationship issues with renewed vigour.

*"I enjoyed the structure and activities. As issues arose, Bill was able to quickly identify methods that could help us as a team to explore them,"* said Sally Murray from Disability Services. *"Well worth the time off work"* adds Olivia Falvey of Queensland Health. *"Great facilitation – you got the group engaged and could relate easily. Activities were great too, with a great toolkit that's good to go back on to refresh and develop skills further. I'm going to share these concepts with the team!"*

Teambuilding can take a multitude of different paths and we tailor our *Working Better Together* clinics to your team context. We'll let Kerry Stumer, also with Disability Services, have the final word on *Working Better Together*: *"To me, this was not a workshop but an event to change the way this team interacts with each other. We needed to face the real issues without beating around the bush – and this we did. Thank you..."*

## Constructive Conversations & EI Clinics In-house

Our **Constructive Conversations**, **Difficult Discussions** and **Emotional Intelligence** clinics offer excellent culture changing and teambuilding advantages when run **in-house** for leaders, mixed learning groups or intact work teams – enhancing shared understanding of tools and techniques, strengthened relationships and increasing 'real-time', back-at-work application of learning. And we tailor programs to focus on your priority improvement areas or key learning needs – whether stand-alone events or part of a broader workplace change or team development effort.

We also provide **personalised, by-the-hour coaching services** – face-to-face, on-line and by phone – for individual managers or small teams keen to fast-track their leadership and conversational capabilities. Contact **Bill Cropper** to find out more about the learning programs, coaching and **change support** services we provide.

### The Change Forum

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