Creating CLEVER Cultures

6 Dimensions that matter

**the Change forum**

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Creating CLEVER Cultures:
6 dimensions that matter...

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Based on extracts from our Leading Culture Change Guide

A much-repeated management mantra...

"We need to change the culture..." It's a much-repeated management mantra that's easy to say, but much harder to do. Culture can be notoriously difficult to change. Sometimes, immeasurably so. It isn't like changing your socks – you can't just slip a fresh pair on when the old ones get smelly.
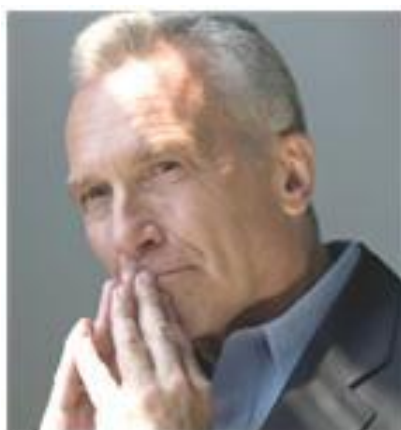
Culture wins outs time and again over attempts to change it. In frustration, some toss in the towel, dismissing culture as one of those soft-issues that's too fluffy and ephemeral to manage. Other times, it gets discounted as a trivial side-show or distraction not deserving serious attention. Both of these views are patently wrong, as you well know.

Why bother with culture? The answer, in a nutshell, is because culture impacts strategy, performance and behaviour, all significantly key factors for organisation survival, thrival and success.

"Culture eats strategy for breakfast" Peter Drucker, celebrated management thinker, once famously said. What he meant was that many leaders make the mistake of focusing on strategy while ignoring or downplaying culture: dismissing or discounting it's role in the real game of performance or business improvement.   But culture ultimately limits or enlarges what's possible in any organisation – moving strategy forward or holding it back. It's often the hidden factor in change success. Change strategies that work in one organisation can fall flat in another – and the variable is often culture.

Most leaders are acutely aware of how constructive cultures help people perform well. They're equally aware of how dislocated ones seem to breed bad behaviour, toxic work climates and chronic under-performance. Outbreaks of *'staff behaving badly'* seem to be on the rise in many organisations, and culture is often the culprit when you look below the surface. Research, and everyday experience, repeatedly show how culture impacts every facet of an organisation.

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Many factors that dislocate a culture have a detrimental flow-on effect on performance that can spell disaster. We even define great leaders as those who turn around an impoverished

culture and create a constructive one. Whether you helped create the culture you're dealing with now, or you inherited it from past leaders and the aggregated actions, achievements or accidents of organisation history, leaders certainly have a job monitoring, managing and trying to re-shape or revitalise it from time to time.

But before you can do that, you need to get a grip on what culture is. Then you need to find out what shape your own is in , what it looks like, what it does and where it resides in your organisation. *This is where culture scans come in.*

Shadow-boxing in a mirror maze...

However you define culture, we think you'd agree it's complex, multi-faceted, multi-layered and very deeply embedded. Organisations often try to change culture by replacing what really just amounts to some of the superficial window-dressing in it, without getting at the deeper patterns. It's a common mistake.

We try to reduce the culture to one of its characteristics or manifestations, attempt to change that element only, and overlook the interplay with other components.

This single-factor approach is often in play when you hear organisational leaders proclaim they want to create a *'coaching'* culture, a *'customer-centric'* culture, a *'safety'* or a *'learning'* culture. Worthy aims, but most often too simplistic.

Similarly, many managers change superficial things like a specific piece of behaviour and overlook deeper values and tacit assumptions that influence people's attitudes and behaviour. Usually disappointment follows when hoped-for deep culture change fails to eventuate or withers away.

In this sense, changing culture is a bit like shadow-boxing in a mirror maze. Just when you think you know what to hit in the culture to knock it into shape, it turns out to be merely a reflection of a deeper trait that's much harder to hammer – because culture is deeply rooted and resilient. It goes beyond the surface things you can see, and definitely beyond what people tell you about the culture.

We believe that culture consists of deeply ingrained, often unconscious, taken-for-granted patterns of thinking, feeling, talking and responding. Along with this goes resident rites and rituals that dictate how individuals, teams and even entire organisations operate and navigate their way through their environment, make sense of it and survive in it.

> **Culture consists of deeply ingrained and often taken-for-granted patterns of thinking, feeling, talking and responding, along with the resident rites and rituals that dictate how individuals, teams and entire organisations operate and navigate their way through their environment, make sense of it and survive in it.**

Defining culture though, can be a bit of a philosophical phantom – suitable for Zen masters who can hear the sound of one-thong-slapping. *So let's see if we can distil some simple sense from all this...*

Cultural archaeology – unearthing layers...

Like an archaeological dig-site, culture comes in layers. The deeper you dig, the closer you may get to unearthing the real core beliefs that lie hidden at the bottom of your culture.
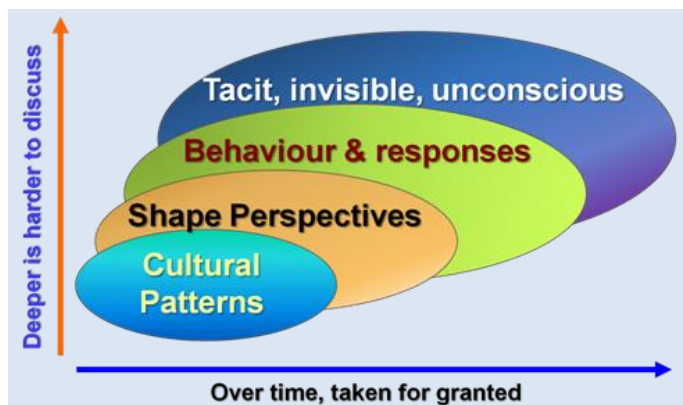
As this diagram shows, we think culture operates on 4 levels, going from the most visible and superficial, all the way down to the deepest, most unconscious and invisible.

You can't talk simply about organisational culture without specifying what level you're dealing with.

Let's unpack this a little bit more...

At Level 1: Culture consists of patterns of thinking, feeling, talking and responding. These are the most visible level – the ways of acting that persist because the culture widely sees them as successful. So, they're reinforced, rewarded, and even celebrated.

If I can make an analogy with *super-hero movie-land culture* here, Iron-Man always acts unflappably, clever and cool no matter what the odds; Batman seems darkly determined and Wolverine, well, excuse the pun, claws his way to victory over a lot of seething emotional angst. If we're fans of these fabulous folk, we see these qualities as admirable and even 'emulatable' – *if that's really a word?*

This level of observable patterns is what most culture surveys seem to measure and where most cultural change or renewal work is likely to start. But if you want to embed your changes, and make them sustainable over time, you can't just stop here. You have to do something about renovating those parts of the culture that are dysfunctional or obstructional in terms of where the organisation wants to go. *This can mean re-shaping perspectives – the second layer in our diagram.*

Level 2: Patterns shape perspectives over time – the way we see situations, the meaning we put on things, the approaches we take, even what we take notice of, or learn. Perspectives is the layer of ideas, information and beliefs. The things people in a culture know and think. The longer we're in a culture acting out its patterns, the more taken-for-granted, rigid and unconscious our perspectives are likely to become.

> The longer we're in a culture acting out its patterns, the more taken-for-granted, rigid and unconscious our perspectives are likely to become. If you want people to change the way they do things, act differently, or be open to learn new approaches, you have to get to the level of their thinking, because their way of thinking is behind their way of acting.

This is where your cultural change or renewal work needs to go next. If you want people to change the way they do things, act differently, or be open to learn new approaches, you have to get to the level of their thinking, because their way of thinking is behind their way of acting. *This takes us down deeper, to the third layer in the diagram.*

Level 3. Patterns and perspectives then drive our behaviour and responses. They govern to a large extent how people think, feel and behave. We're now moving well into the realm of the unconscious, where people act out patterns of behaving, thinking and feeling without much thought. We've been culturally absorbed.

Like Jonah, the cultural leviathon has swallowed us up. We're in the belly of the beast. But many drifting around the cultural currents may not even notice it. Changing behaviour is where your cultural revitalisation work may focus most. You need people to rewire their heads, change their approach and act differently.

The current culture can often resist any attempts to change behaviour, because it kind of likes the way people behave right now. As far as the culture's concerned, this way of behaving has worked so far, so why change it?

People will often give powerful, persuasive, 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 after all and should be ejected. Even if you prevail and push people into behaviour change through threat, fear, displays of power or sheer persistence, they can change their outer behaviour but retain their inner-beliefs. To really embed a new behaviour and get change to stick, you have to get to the core beliefs – to unearth tacit assumptions. This is the last layer in our diagram.

Level 4 is about core beliefs. They're tacit, invisible and unconscious. The deeper you dig into a culture, the more resistance you're likely to encounter because now, you're treading on real cultural toes, exposing the sacred cows of the culture. This is the level Ed Schein calls *'tacit assumptions'*. Peter Senge calls them *'mental models'*. We call them *'core beliefs'*.

Unless you dig around and disturb them, the majority of people immersed in a workplace culture will most probably not be all that mindful of the mental models, tacit **assumptions or core beliefs that drive their behaviour. It's invisible to them – below the level of their conscious awareness.**
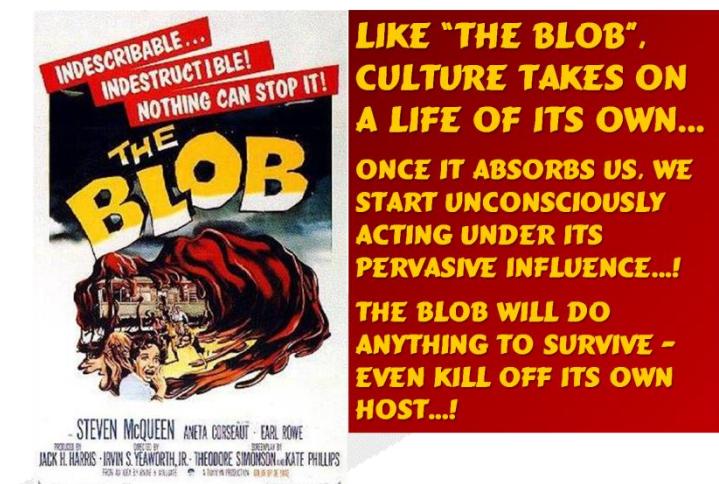
Core beliefs is the level all culture change and revitalisation work needs to reach, but whether you can access this level and work on it effectively is problematic. This involves replacing or supplementing old assumptions with new ones that people can accept and live with.

> **"Tacit assumptions drop out of your awareness. It is this unconscious quality of culture that makes it so powerful. You are not aware of your cultural biases until someone challenges them or until you have offended someone with a different cultural background."** Ed Schein *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide* p.19

Culture and The Blob

Often it's not just tacit assumptions or core beliefs that are invisible. People don't see how they behave all that clearly either. This is how poor behaviour like bullying or disregard for safety, can proliferate and become part of the norm, no matter how abnoxious or harmful it may be.

Because the culture encourages it, accommodates it, and turns a blind eye to it. Everyone helps build and reinforce the culture – both its good and the not-so-good aspects – through the ways we habitually behave: our patterns of interacting, thinking, talking, feeling and responding.

LIKE "THE BLOB", CULTURE TAKES ON A LIFE OF ITS OWN...

ONCE IT ABSORBS US, WE START UNCONSCIOUSLY ACTING UNDER ITS PERVASIVE INFLUENCE...!

THE BLOB WILL DO ANYTHING TO SURVIVE – EVEN KILL OFF ITS OWN HOST...!

Over time, we believe culture virtually takes on a life of its own. In our *Leading Culture Change* clinics, we laughingly refer to this cultural organism as being like The Blob – that famously corny, 1960's so-bad-it's-good horror movie starring Steve McQueen. The original movie poster on the left reads alarmingly: *"The Blob – indescribable… Indestructible! Nothing can Stop it!"* It pretty much sums up how some feel about the horrifying, toxic, all-devouring work cultures some of us happen to work in!

Once the Blob absorbs us, we start acting unconsciously under its influence. It begins to shape our behaviour more and more, without us ever realising it. No one solely controls or shapes it but it 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 dominate and define our culture. Like The Blob, culture'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 survival of the organisation.

Of course, when it comes to culture there are bad blobs and good blobs. But the point of this movie metaphor 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. If you want to get people to unlearn old habits and learn new ways of thinking and doing, you need to get them to see the tacit assumptions they've been operating out of and help them develop new mental models.

Scanning the Cultural Horizon...

Scanning the current culture is the second, in an 8-phase model we use in our Culture Change clinics, to help leaders design, plan and carry out their cultural renovation work.
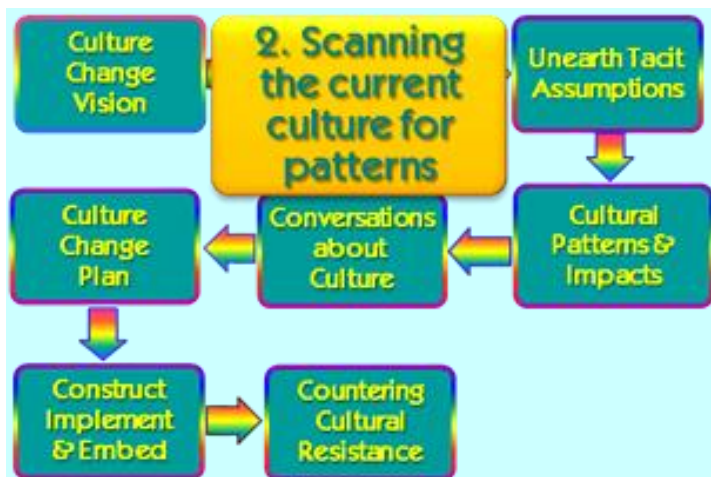
As this diagram illustrates, the first phase is to reflect on what parts of your culture need renovating, and then develop a shared vision of the kind of culture you'd like to encourage.

Soon after that, most people realise they need to to find out what what's going on with their current culture and what sort of shape it's in. That's when you might do some sort of culture scan.

A culture scan takes an imprint of the culture now. It gives you a measurable handle on your culture and a way to understand the patterns in it. It's also a way to involve everyone in seeing both good aspects of the culture you want to keep, and the not-so-good parts of the culture you most need to work on.

Scans provide a foundation, not-so-much-of facts (since what you're really dealing with is peoples' impressions) but of shared perspectives. They can help people to see the need to do something about culture – to answer the question *'Why do we need to change?"*

Culture scan is a broad term we use. It doesn't always mean big, formal culture surveys. A scan can be as simple as running a series of dialogues or ideas sessions with people to brainstorm major features, patterns or impressions of the culture.

Doing some kind of scan of course, won't change anything unless you're willing to act on it. Over-surveyed staff often say cynically that management's running *"another one of those culture surveys",* muttering in the same breath, that nothing ever seems to come out of them. Often, they complain, they don't even get feedback on the results, get told how results are going to used or the reasons for running the survey in the first place!

Conducting a culture scan of any sort means you're committing yourself to action of some kind. As soon as you do, the message you send to staff is that something's afoot.

Surveys raise various degrees of anxiety, cynicism, hope or expectation. Not following-through on them can dash such expectations, increase resistance and play into the hands of the cynics that you're not serious about culture change. So only do culture scans or surveys if you plan to act on them. *If you're not committed to action – better not to start.*

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Most organisations are 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? That's certainly not the cased with culture.

A culture survey serves 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. That's requires the personal touch.

6 CLEVER Culture Dimensions...

OK. You say you're serious about scanning the culture. You're committed to taking action, you have a vision of how you'd like things to be and now you want to find out what shape this culture's really in before you move to make any changes to it.

A few questions now come up such as: What do I want to find out about this culture? What are the measures or dimensions I might use? What kind of data do I want to collect? What questions do I want to get answers to?

In culture scans The Change Forum conducts, we use 6 key dimensions depicted in this diagram, to describe the characteristics of constructive, as opposed to, dislocated cultures. They are summed up in the acronym CLEVER. We collect people's impressions about:

Collaborative conversations: the calibre of conversations that occur, and how much collaboration, teamwork and collective effort there is.

Leadership behaviour, style and fit: how people respond and relate to leaders, and how well their leadership styles and behaviour fits with the culture's idea what it believes good leadership looks like.

Emotional Patterns and Climate: the frequency and kind of emotional patterns most commonly generated, experienced, and displayed in the workplace, and the affect they have on climate.

Visions, values and directions: how clear and shared visions, directions, values, goals and priorities are, and more importantly, how aligned people feel with them.

Environmental responsiveness: the way we engage with, and respond to, changes and challenges in our environment. This includes how reactive or pro-active we are to unfolding trends, threats, pressures and opportunities, and how change adept, flexible and adaptive the culture is.

Relationships and Rapport: the quality of relationships the culture allows us to have, including how distant or close relations are, the degree to which we identify and have a sense of 'belongingness', and whether we feel acknowledged and included. or rejected and excluded.

Although some culture-commentators say cultural traits can't be seen as good or bad, tell that to people who work in toxic workplaces, those that live in fear of despotic bosses, patients treated by careless clinicians lacking in empathy abd compassion, or kids in classrooms who cringe in fear at their cranky teachers.

Since culture determines behaviour, it must take some heat for generating, or turning a blind-eye to, these sorts of patterns. We know all organisations develop cultures and that some are more positive than others. In terms of cultural evolution, some are helpful adaptations. Others are not.

We think cultures can be characterised into what we'd call dislocated or constructive. Our scan takes each of the CLEVER Cultural Dimensions above and describes what dislocated or constructive looks like for each one.

A **Constructive Culture,** in general, is one that's well-adapted, and continues to be adaptable to its environment. It's morally or ethically sound (ie it does the right things). It supports behaviour patterns that are healthy and emotionally positive. It creates work climates that are uplifting and inspiring, where there is a good fit between the aspirations of staff, leaders and the visions, values and operating principles of the organisation, and where innovation, creativity, learning and latitude is given to people that enables them to develop strategies that are successful.

A **dislocated culture** is one that is poorly-adapted and struggles to adapt to its environment. It's morally or ethically questionable (ie. *does wrong things*). It encourages behaviour patterns that are unhealthy, emotionally disruptive, oppressive and demotivating – where there is a lack of alignment between the needs and aspirations of staff, leaders and visions, values and operating principles of the organisation; and where conformity, stagnation, lack of learning and coercive leadership practices, disempower people and stunt strategy in a way that often threatens the survival of the organisation.

Let's decant the CLEVER Dimensions of Culture and give you a tasting of each...

Conversations create Culture

The *calibre of conversations* that occur in a culture, and *how collaborative they are*, is the first of our six CLEVER dimensions.

Conversation is an area that largely gets ignored when we talk about how cultures form and what makes them tick. It's almost as if they become so much a part of the furniture that we don't notice them – so we underestimate the impact they have both in, and on, a culture. How people talk to each other is one of the most visible aspects in any culture, if you stop to notice and take-stock. It's also a good predictor of how constructive or dislocated a culture's likely to be.

In constructive cultures, conversations tend to be open, frank, inclusive. People think together, integrate individual efforts and there's a sense of unselfish cooperation, of pulling together. Many *dislocated cultures* spawn conversational styles that are combative, competitive, adversarial, argumentative and critical.

You can't really talk about culture without talking about the crucial role conversations play in it. They both subtly shape a culture, and are also influenced by it. For example, while cultures are forming, conversations are the vehicle through which people share ideas about what the organisation is here for, and shape identity and strategy.

Cultural transmission also happens through conversations. When the culture finally takes shape, they act as the main way we transmit our cultural identity to new people. Once a culture's in full swing, conversations become a major way it continues to reinforce itself as various conversational norms of behaviour become embedded.

Ultimately, you might even see conversations as a determiner of culture. Because your culture has allowed certain kinds of conversational norms to form, they now influence the kind and quality of conversations you have in this culture. If the quality of conversational interactions is good, you're lilkely to have a lively, dynamic culture that's strategy-smart and responsive. If conversations are closed, guarded, combative and conservative, you create a culture like that too. Conversations are also culture-carriers. The dominant assumptions and core beliefs that distinguish a culture are carried through conversations. When we open our mouths to speak, we think we speak for ourselves, but unconsciously, we often mouth the prevailing beliefs and values in our culture.

> **Dominant assumptions and core beliefs that distinguish a culture are carried through conversation. When we open our mouths to speak, we think we speak for ourselves, but unconsciously we're mouthing often, the prevailing beliefs and values in our culture.**

And finally, conversations can act as a culture revitaliser. Since debate's the default mode for most cultures, we often have to learn how to have more connective conversations and dialogue. Raising the level of conversations and paying more attention to changing the nature of the conversations we have is an essential culture change tool. As people learn new ways to talk with each other, their relationships and interactions subtly shift, behaviour changes, ideas flow in different ways and the culture may begin to shift and change again too. Working on having better conversations can have a positive culture-building effect.
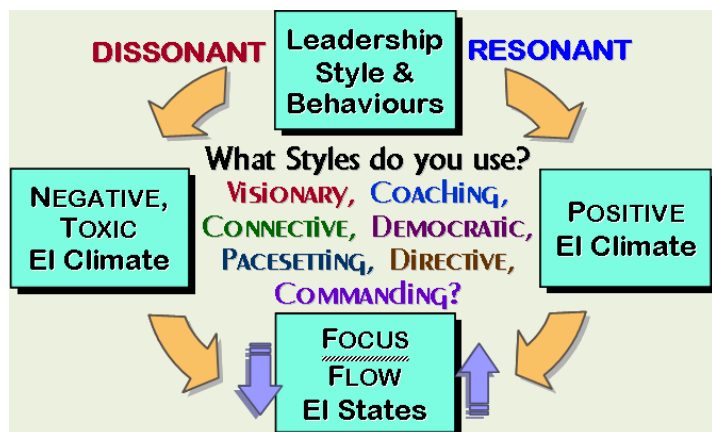
The Culture of Leadership

Dimension 2 in our CLEVER model is *leadership style, behaviour and fit*.

It measures how people respond to the style and behaviour of their leaders and how well it fits with what the culture sees as a model for a good, successful leader.

It's often said leaders create the culture. That's true – especially so if you're a founding leader moving in on the bottom floor of a culture. All cultures begin with the emergence of leaders who impress with their patterns of leadership, ideals, ideas and directions. If the leader's recipe proves to successful and a culture thrives, the operating principles of that leader, and their behaviours and approaches, are enshrined in the cultural memory. They'll be embraced and become the dominant leadership model for that culture.

So the way leaders act and style of leadership they adopt can be a major influence on the kind of culture that gets created. But once a culture gets used to a certain style of leadership (and it works) that becomes the benchmark other leaders coming may be measured against. So if you move into an already well-established culture, your performance and impact will be influenced and judged by what kind of leadership style has been celebrated, accepted or rejected in the past. If we follow this to its logical conlusion, it seems as if leaders are also created and shaped by a culture.

In constructive cultures, a leader's style and actions facilitates good performance. They connect and resonate with others. They're perceived to be trusted, supportive, engaging and responsive. In dislocated cultures, leader-styles clash. Their viewed with suspicion and mistrust. They're seen as blocks to performance, their efforts to engage people fall flat and their behaviours are seen as ill-informed, harsh, over-bearing or misguided.

Emotional intelligence research of the past decade or so, into leadership style and behaviour has revealed a number of major findings that help explain how leaders are a major influence on culture creation and how this in turn, influences performance.

Since emotions are contagious, and because leaders tend to be in the organisational spot-light, staff take a lot of their emotional and behavioural cues from them.

We also know that patterns of behaviour are generated by certain feelings – and research is revealing there are certain sets of leader behaviours more likely to generate positive emotions and performance, that reverberates in an organisational culture. As this diagram shows, leadership behaviour and style is now being characterised as resonant or dissonant, in terms of its impact on people in a culture and the emotions it generates.

> **"Culture and leadership are two sides of the same coin and one cannot understand one without the other...it is one of the unique functions of leadership not only to create cultures in new groups, but also to manage cultural issues in mature organisations. If we want leadership to be more effective, we have to make leaders aware of their unique role as culture creators, evolvers, and managers."**
> **Ed Schein i Corporate Culture Survival Guide pp.1, 3 & 19**

Culture and leadership intrinsically link together. Leaders create the culture. They also operate inside it and often need to change or re-shape it in some way.

The style and approach of leaders, how they communicate messages about vision or direction, what behaviours they consistently model and reinforce, how this resonates or not with the people they lead, and how their words and actions are perceived by others, are all crucial factors that influence culture creation – and recreation.

Culture's Emotional Footprint

One defining footprint of a culture is emotional: the prevailing patterns and frequency of different kinds of emotions that take up residence in your culture and are most commonly generated, experienced and displayed. This picks up Dimension 3 in our CLEVER model: *Emotional Patterns and Climate*.

Different cultures tend to display different footprints depending on what emotional patterns each culture encourages or proscribes, expresses or conceals.

Over time, the recurrence of positive or negative emotional patterns get embedded in a culture and come to characterise it. Positive emotions energise. Negative emotions drain. Some cultures seem to breed negative feelings that can spread to create chronically toxic work cultures, dragging down performance. Other cultures seem to consistently generate positive feelings.

Again, this harks back to Emotional Intelligence (EI) It seems to be a key differential between effective or dysfunctional teams, good or poor leaders and also between supportive, safe and constructive cultures or cold, indifferent, toxic ones.

In constructive cultures, people feel connected, friendly, joyful, happy, optimistic, enthused, interested and focused. They're likely to be more creative, less tense and usually far more productive. In dislocated cultures, feelings like apathy, anger, aggression, anxiety, cynicism, contempt, disrespect or sullen silence set off negative emotional chain-reactions that turn team climates toxic.

Emotions mostly get left out of the cultural equation. Many culture practitioners, including Ed Schein and Peter Senge, tend to downplay the part emotional patterns play in culture creation. While feelings get a grudging side-mention in the literature on culture – mostly the focus is on the thinking side: the notion is that it's our beliefs or tacit assumptions that are the most fundamental level and that it's these that create most of the behaviour and feelings we see displayed in a culture. Not so, says the latest nueroscientific research. We're physically wired to feel first and think second. This puts emotions back in a primal position as primal influencer and creator of culture.

What does this mean for understanding and changing culture? Since emotions drive and affect how we think and how we behave, they should be seen as another deep layer, and become a major player in culture change, not just a manifestation of thought, tacit assumptions or mental models.

One Direction – not just a boy band?

Cultural Dimension 4 in the CLEVER model is how clear and *shared, visions, values, directions, goals and priorities* are – and how aligned people feel with them.

Visions picture where an organisation wants to go and how to get there. They're not just about reason and logic. They also have a deep emotional element to them. Collectively creating a shared vision (with guiding principles, goals and strategies to get there), builds momentum, creates common focus, and forges a sense of commitment and purpose, that inspires, guides and energises.

Values support vision. They're what an organisation stands for. As we've seen, when it comes to layers in a culture, there's often a big difference between the espoused or stated values an organisation likes to think it stands for, and the real, under-the-surface values and beliefs that the people in it hold. Values alignment is a major challenge for teams, leaders and whole organisations. On a cultural and personal level, it's also a challenge to make sure values we hold – our espoused values – match up with our actions and behaviours – our values in use.

In constructive cultures, everyone knows what they stand for, what the direction is and they're basically going the same way. Visions, values and goals are commonly understood and shared by everyone. In *dislocated* cultures, differences in visions and values divide people and there's a feeling the organisation has lost its way and lacks direction, drive and the energy to excel.

Many organisations impose visions, values and goals, often with little, no, or token consultation and involvement from those who actually have to make them happen. We call this the *'illusion of inclusion'.* They're rarely extensively agreed or genuinely shared. They pay lip service to involving people in shaping a shared vision; and push it through with perhaps a couple of set presentations or question/answer sessions to pacify the mob.

They overlook the 'shared' bit: "it's too hard", "it takes too long", "we'd never get agreement" or "they don't need to be involved in this" are regular responses we get from senior management.

> **Many organisations pay lip service to involving people in shaping a shared vision and there are often strong tacit assumptions under the surface that militate against doing so.**

There are often strong tacit assumptions that really act against a culutre where shared visioning is valued. For example: "Vision and direction-setting is a management job – you can't get staff involved"; "Staff are only interested in their own particular tasks not the big picture stuff" or, "Our employees don't have the strategic intelligence to contribute at such a complex level."

Environmental Responsiveness
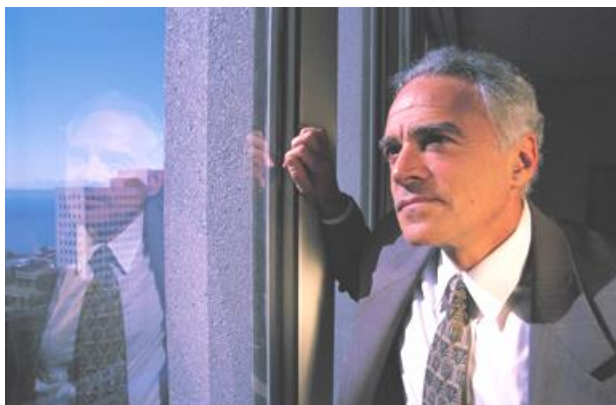
CLEVER Dimension 5 looks at how cultures engage with, and respond to, changes and challenges in their environment.

This is about how well cultures adapt yo change: a financial challenge, an emerging market trend or social fashion, innovation, new technology, or a sudden turn-around in organisational destiny.

This crucial dimension for all cultures affects strategy, viability and survivability.

Constructive cultures adapt rapidly. They're flexible, outward-looking, future-focused and open to change and new opportunities. Acceptable risk-taking is encouraged, innovation is valued and political pressures, threats and other emergent trends in the environment are managed pro-actively.

Dislocated cultures tend to be rigid, conservative, insular, inward, even backward-looking. They miss opportunities, resist change and respond reactively to threats. External relationships are not cultivated with care and imagination, and the culture tends to persist in handling new situations by applying the same old strategies and approaches.

Culture influences what's possible or not for an organisation to achieve. It's the hidden 'X' factor in organisation success or failure. Many organisations don't have the foresight to change their culture before the external environment and changing circumstances forces it on them. Cultural markers here include: how rigid, conservative, regulated or risk-averse the culture is; whether the culture enables or blocks rapid learning and change; how quick the culture is to recognise and correct dysfunctions within itself; how much real innovation and continuous improvement are nurtured and...the degree to which the culture tends to be inward or outward-focused.

New leaders coming into an organisation are often constricted from moving the organisation forward or changing strategic direction because the established culture has set assumptions about what directions and strategies work, and what is successful.

Often, people are restricted to managing what's already there, and are discouraged from deviating because conservative elements of the culture emphasise delivering what's worked rather than pushing for more innovation, change, or anything other than incremental improvements.

> **"Continued success creates strongly shared assumptions... if internal and external environments remain stable this continues to be an advantage. However, if there is a change in the environment, some shared core assumptions can become liabilities, precisely because of their strength." Ed Schein in The Corporate Culture Survival Guide p. 170**

Relationships – rocky or rock-solid?

Groups, not individuals, are the basic unit that make up all cultures – and the quality of relationships that happen in them are at the heart of healthy ones. This is the last dimension in our CLEVER model.

It takes in elements like how distant or close relations are; to what degree we identify ourselves as 'belonging' in the team, or identifying with the organisation; and whether we generally feel acknowledged, respected and included or unappreciated and excluded.

Good work relationships are based on positive emotional connections, engaging each other in respectful, approving ways and building rapport. *'Having a feeling of harmony with a group'* is the dictionary definition. At the bottom of rapport is 'mutual positive regard' or what we simply call 'liking-ness'. It means connecting well with others. It's an essential foundation for the health of your working relationships and a telling sign of constructive cultures. Think of it as the background atmosphere – the *emotional ambience* – to your interactions.

In *constructive* cultures, there's trust, connection and a resident degree of harmony underneath, no matter what difficult moments float to the surface. In *dislocated* cultures, there is tension, mistrust, distance, disconnection, dissonance, disrespect and toxicity

Different cultures work off different basic, shared assumptions about what good work relationships should look like. They'll have different operating principles around appropriate degree of closeness or distance, openness and sociability, about what constitutes good group interactions, and what behaviour is acceptable or inappropriate.

All teams and cultures learn lessons about how to deal with issues of climate, cohesiveness, communication and controversy. Being more aware of your own and others' behaviour in the team – 'group dynamics' – is an effective way to maintain it. *And emotional connections are central to this.* Good work relations depend on making positive connections with others. Connecting comes first. If you can't connect, you can't do much else with teammates.

Teams work better together if they like each other. The reverse is true too. If I dislike others, act surly or sad, this takes its toll on me and the team too. Some say you can work with someone even if you don't like them. New brain science says 'no' to that. In teams that like each other, people connect with each other's thoughts and feelings, and trust follows. There's mutual understanding, support and harmony. This creates a positive and supportive work-culture.

> **In organizations, real power and energy is generated through relationships. The patterns of relationships and the capacities to form them are more important than tasks, functions, roles, and positions."** Margaret Wheatley, Leadership and the New Science

Culture with a Bang

Let's wind up this short discussion of CLEVER Cultures with a bang – and this one shows just how fundamentally important culture can be.

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 weapons 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 – albeit the legacy of that achievement is definitely dubious...

➡ Information on The Change Forum's *Culture Change Services* and *Leading Culture Change* program on-line at **www.thechangeforum.com**.

- Our *Culture Change Services Profile* gives an overview of ways we can help with culture revitalisation in your organisation

- *Leading Culture Change* clinic **course outline**

- Free **FactFiles,** **Articles** & **Newsletter** back-issues to read and share

- On-line **Course Calendar** for up-coming scheduled events

- The Change Forum **Directory of Programs** for outlines of the full range of programs we offer

- **Contact us** anytime to **enquire** about in-house programs, individual **coaching** or general consulting services

➡ To find out about purchasing 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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The Change Forum tailors culture change services to suit client contexts and needs and delivers a 2-day public program on *Leading Culture Change* to help individual managers and change leaders get started with thieir own culture change projects

Creating Constructive Cultures

Leading Change
Culture Change
Leadership
Personal Mastery
Building Better Teams
Strategic Consulting
Facilitation
Coaching

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