



talking about...

June 2009

... *designing better relationships for better outcomes*

Thinking About Culture

"No man ever looks at the world with pristine eyes. He sees it edited by a definite set of customs and institutions and ways of thinking."

... Ruth Benedict (1887 - 1948) US anthropologist

There are many definitions of organisation culture that have been put forward by theorists over time and these generally speak to the psychology, attitudes, experiences, beliefs and values (personal and cultural values) of an organisation. When these are distilled down they can be seen to refer to an observation of patterns of feeling and thinking within an organisation that manifests themselves in certain values and behaviours and predisposes people to act in certain ways. Given that people generally don't spend a great deal of time, if any, reflecting on how they feel and think, these patterns can be seen as habitual.

If we start from this idea that culture speaks to largely habitual patterns of feeling and thinking within a community, then it follows that culture change involves changing those habitual patterns. This begs the question about how we can change those patterns. In our work, we see this as process of creating conscious choice points at the times when the habitual pattern is likely to occur and then making choices that are aligned with our desired outcome. The effectiveness with which we consistently do this will dictate the extent of the shifts in our habitual patterns.

How does this apply to organisations who state their desire to shift their culture? It is clear that organisational leaders have the largest impact on an organisation's culture so when we look at how effective an organisation is being at creating a designed culture we can begin by asking ourselves a simple question. When they are making everyday decisions, do the leaders give no thought, after-thought or fore-thought to culture?

Anecdotally, it would seem that the overwhelming answer is that they give culture no thought in their everyday decision making processes, leaving them in their habitual thinking patterns and hence the culture stays the same. Sure they may think about culture at times when it is brought to their attention such as when culture or engagement surveys are conducted or when they engage in periodic culture events but they do not think about it as part of their everyday practice.

There are those leaders who tend to be more cognitive of culture

and who respond with after-thought. These after-thoughts are likely to occur after something has gone wrong in a cultural sense which then prompts reactive reflection about what has occurred. Although this can be helpful in terms of learning, it is not likely generate new habitual patterns in the short or medium term. It also tends to require a circumstance to generate the response, which is not conducive to creating a designed culture.

Fore-thought is the key in shifting habitual patterns. It requires strategies to create awareness in the moment in order to create a choice to think about culture as it is needed. You might like to go back to one of our earlier articles on creating awareness to explore how to do this more systematically. This article can be found on our web site at <http://www.talkingabout.com.au/articles/Learning/CreatingAwareness.htm> or in our newsletter from January 2007.

If you are seeking culture change in your organisation and are struggling to see how this is being achieved or can be achieved, we invite you to go back to basics and simply ask yourself, "Am I daily dealing with culture with fore-thought, after-thought or no thought?" The answer may be very revealing.

Talking About Pty Ltd

PO Box 6652,
St Kilda Rd Central,
Victoria, 8008.

Ph: +613 9504 3558

info@talkingabout.com.au
www.talkingabout.com.au

"Genius means little more than the faculty of perceiving in an un-habitual way."

... William James (1842 - 1910) US philosopher & psychologist

Financial Woes in Japan ...

Thanks to Julie for some clever humour:

Following the problems in the financial sector in the US, uncertainty has now hit Japan.

In the last 7 days the Origami Bank has folded, the Sumo Bank has gone belly up and the Bonsai Bank announced plans to cut some of its branches. Yesterday, it was announced that the Karaoke Bank is up for sale and will likely go for a song, while today's shares in the Kamikaze Bank were suspended after they nose-dived.

While Samurai Bank is soldiering on following sharp cuts, the Ninja Bank is reported to have taken a hit, but they remain in the black. Furthermore, 500 staff at Karate Bank got the chop and analysts report that there is something fishy going on at the Sushi Bank where it is feared that staff may get a raw deal.

"Cultivate the habit of attention and try to gain opportunities to hear wise men and women talk. Indifference and inattention are the two most dangerous monsters that your ever meet. Interest and attention will insure to you an education."

... Robert Millikan (1868 - 1953) US physicist

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ACN 112 307 892
info@talkingabout.com.au
Telephone: +61 3 9504 3558