



talking about...

June 2010

... *designing better relationships for better outcomes*

The Importance of Culture

"Learning to take hold of one's life is very difficult in a culture that values property over life."

... Haki Madhubuti b.1942 US poet, writer and editor

Many larger organisations see culture as something they want to improve. They will speak of higher employee engagement or high performance cultures. They will look for ways to measure these things. They will often take actions designed to make a difference in these areas. They will invest time and significant money to improve their culture. Yet two out of every three attempts to improve culture lead to a marginal improvement, no change or a deterioration in the culture. Why is this?

As coaches, we look for patterns in individual and group actions. We are looking to interpret the basic stories held by the individual or the group, which traps them in a way of being that is not serving them well. One of the most common stories held by organisational leaders about organisations (and more broadly in our societies for that matter) is that an organisation is an entity to be controlled and control comes from policies, structures, rules and systems. From that perspective, when something goes wrong the tendency is to change the policies, structures etc. This "modern worldview" story also holds that an organisation can be seen as a machine, which has resources that can be utilised to achieve its goals. These resources include the organisation's finances, assets and people. It is important to note here that people are seen as only one of the resources that the organisation can utilise. Since culture is about people, therefore culture speaks to only part of what the organisation has to address to be successful. Hence a high performance culture can be seen as one of the things the organisation has to create along with financial success, productivity and so on.

So what is the alternative? Rather than seeing an organisation as a machine to be controlled, we can look at an organisation as a community of people. These people establish ways of relating and acting to achieve certain goals. They also create policies, structures, rules and systems. Indeed everything done in the organisation is a result of human action. Given that culture can be defined as the underlying stories and beliefs held by a group of people, we can then see that the policies, structures, rules and systems etc are a manifestation of the culture. We can also see that the organisation's goals and definitions of success are a manifestation of the culture. When looked at in this way, culture is not one of the things to address it is the only thing to address and everything else – the goals, policies, systems etc - flows from that culture.

How does the "machine/organisation paradigm" manifest in organisations? The most obvious way to see this lies in the conversations that happen within an organisation. Most businesses will spend a lot of time discussing financial matters for example, but comparatively little time relating that back to the culture. They divorce money from culture, rather than seeing that financial conversations are part of the culture. Ultimately

they see financial success as imperative and a high performing culture as not essential but nice to have. In this approach, actions associated with culture become highly negotiable and generally the first thing to be dropped from the action list.

The alternative view sees that the culture is everything. Get it right and the outcomes such as financial success will follow. In this view an effective culture is not one of the things to address and a nice to have; it is THE thing to address and essential.

"How old would you be if you didn't know how old you are?"

... Satchel Paige, US baseball player (1906 - 1982)

Anti-Stress Diet

This is a specially formulated diet designed to help you cope with the stress that builds up during the day.

BREAKFAST

- 1 grapefruit
- 1 slice whole-wheat toast
- 1 cup skim milk

LUNCH

- A small portion lean, steamed chicken with a cup of spinach
- 1 cup herbal tea
- 1 small chocolate

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AFTERNOON TEA

The rest of the chocolates in the bag
1 tub of ice cream with choc-chip topping

DINNER

2 bottles of wine (red or white)
2 loaves garlic bread
1 family size supreme pizza
3 chocolate bars

LATE NIGHT SNACK

Whole frozen cheesecake (eaten directly from the freezer)

Remember: **"STRESSED" spelled backwards is "DESSERTS"**

"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

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