



# talking about...

November 2010

... designing better relationships for better outcomes

## Some Beliefs about 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 & editor

As an ontological coach, I am always looking for the underlying beliefs that are the starting point for a person's ongoing breakdowns. These beliefs are often so basic the individual never thinks about or questions them. They assume their beliefs to be true. The end result is they create limitations for themselves by holding these assumptions. What we term a "language trap".

Language traps are not just restricted to individuals. They are often shared by communities. One such trap that I have been pondering recently relates to people's assumptions about organisational culture. The generally-held belief seems to be culture is all about people's beliefs, attitudes and behaviour. Based on this definition, creating a more appropriate culture simply involves shifting those beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of the people involved. This appears to be a reasonable approach to shifting culture, and lends itself to a belief that to change culture all you have to do is to change the people. The upshot is culture change programs almost invariably focus on changing people's attitudes and behaviours.

What is missing from this interpretation of changing culture is the life conditions of the organisation. By this I mean the goals, systems, structures, and processes etc that define the environment in which people who work in organisations exist. If those life conditions are not supportive of the desired culture then people will be less aligned to that culture.

For example, it makes little sense for organisational leaders who want to create a success-based culture to set unachievable goals in the mistaken belief they need to set aggressive stretch targets to motivate people. Similarly, to seek a flexible culture whilst hamstringing people with more and more detailed procedures or a collaborative culture whilst frequently getting people to compete with each other in ranking systems. In all these cases, the environment created by the leaders works against the desired culture.

The key to understanding the generation of a desired culture is alignment. It is not enough to just focus on people's attitudes and behaviors. Organisational leaders must also look at how they align the structure, the systems, the processes etc to the culture they want to create. It is imperative they realise culture is not something that is measured every couple of years, but is ever present. As such, culture is always playing a part in an organisation's performance. Without an aligned environment, the investment in culture change programs will undoubtedly be undermined.

**"The dents in life are there to help you feel the contours of your soul."**

... Paulo Coelho b. 1947, Brazilian lyricist and novelist.

## It's All About Monkeys...

*If you have difficulty understanding what caused the current world financial situation, the following may help...*

Once upon a time in a village in India, a man announced to the villagers that he would buy monkeys for \$10.

The villagers seeing there were many monkeys around, went out to the forest and started catching them. The man bought thousands at \$10, but, as the supply started to diminish, the villagers stopped their efforts. The man further announced that he would now buy at \$20. This renewed the efforts of the villagers and they started catching monkeys again.

Soon the supply diminished even further and people started going back to their farms. The offer rate increased to \$25 and the supply of monkeys became so little that it was an effort to even see a monkey, let alone catch it!

The man now announced that he would buy monkeys at \$50! However, since he had to go to the city on some business, his assistant would

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now act as buyer, on his behalf.

In the absence of the man, the assistant told the villagers: 'Look at all these monkeys in the big cage that the man has collected. I will sell them to you at \$35 and when he returns from the city, you can sell them back to him for \$50.'

The villagers squeezed together their savings and bought all the monkeys.

Then they never saw the man or his assistant again, only monkeys everywhere! Welcome to the GFC!

***"Anything that we are aware of at a given moment forms part of our consciousness, making conscious experience at once the most familiar and most mysterious aspect of our lives."***

... Schneider and Velmans, 2007

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