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## Leadership Through Learning Part 4A: Strategic Practice as a Discipline

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“Corporate culture refers to a specific form of culture that defines the essence of an organization. Within a corporate culture, people tell stories about how they interact, how they learn, how meaning is made, and how things are done. These *stories told* provide *meaning* to daily events, acting as a form of psychological safety, making life predictable and meaningful, and reducing anxiety, even if the way in which work is done is ineffective, and the meaning that it gives is an illusion.”

— Tom Boydell, Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko, **Corporate Culture and Organizational Change: Strategic Practice Guide**, (2005)

In the last three decades of increasing change and uncertainty, leaders in organizations have been chasing the manifesto “We must manage change or die!” This manifesto has resulted in a myriad of change efforts, some of which have only marginally succeeded, and most of which have failed outright. The unfortunate result of these change efforts is a wasteland of demoralized, exhausted, and jaded employees and leaders.

The reason that most change efforts fail has less to do with what the organization and its people are doing, or are not doing, and more to do with the dynamic of its *corporate culture*. Like countries, organizations are cultures — *corporate cultures* — consisting of visible artifacts such as language, structures, history, and ways of working and getting things done. When you travel through countries of the world, you experience a variety of cultures through language, art, architecture, history, cuisine, and the way in which people live and work. *Culture* is the *essence* of what you experience; it feeds your senses, creating a way of being that permeates all aspects of life in that country. In an organization, this essence is a *dynamic* created by the interrelationships of all aspects of the organization — how meaning is made, how people organize themselves in relation to the meaning that is made, and the ways

in which people maintain, reinforce, develop, and change things within and among themselves.

But an important aspect of a corporate culture is not visible — its ability and capacity to learn. Like an ocean, a corporate culture has strong flows and dynamics that shift and move people, decisions, learning, and actions in certain ways. Many people simply go with the flow, learning by following what others are doing. Others try to initiate change efforts, often going against the flow, challenging and questioning *the way things are done around here*.

Many change efforts meet a tidal wave of resistance, marking out the boundaries of learning capacity. This is often blamed on something called *resistance to change*, which can occur at any level of an organization. But resistance to change is a complex concept. More often than not, it is a lack of understanding and an unconscious reaction to uncertainty — an attempt to stabilize in a hurricane of change. *Strategic practice* helps us to understand and work with the dynamics of corporate culture, so that we can create the conditions in which people and their organizations thrive.

Strategic practice is both a *skill* in the development of critical consciousness, and a *language* for understanding, and working within, the complexity of organizations (see **InfoMine**, Vol. 13, No. 1).

Strategic practice helps us to understand how organizational learning dynamics permeate the thoughts, decisions, and actions of people, and their subsequent individual and collective *reactions* to change. Strategic practice is based on a philosophical stance that any corporate culture is a *mystery to be explored*, rather than a *problem to be solved*. This also means that people, the stories they tell, and the patterns they live within *cultural systems*, are also mysteries to be explored. As a result, strategic practice is about seeking to understand, rather than judging whether or not one way of being is better than another.

A *cultural system* implies a focus on patterns of connection between people and the organization (corporate culture) in which they work. A cultural system is created and sustained by patterns of meaning and action. A cultural system can be as small as an individual and as large as the entire planet. Although a corporate culture can be considered a cultural system in its own right, it also refers to the organization as a whole, comprised of many smaller and interconnected cultural systems, including departments, teams, and individuals.

Underlying each cultural system is a *learning dynamic* that envelops the people, feeding back into their experiences. A learning dynamic refers to how and what people learn within the context of a specific cultural system. A learning dynamic is created by patterns of meaning and action, and is learned from existing members within the specific

cultural system. One can define the learning dynamic underlying a corporate culture as what people are allowed to learn and how they are allowed to learn it (see **InfoMine**, Vol. 9, No. 1).

As we move forward in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we struggle to deal with the reality that the amount of change and complexity will continue to accelerate, at a faster and faster rate. If we are to match the speed of change, or, perhaps, to slow it down and to change its direction, we need a different way of thinking and acting that will produce the results we desire, instead of more of the same. Thomas Homer-Dixon describes his perspective of our dilemma in his book **The Ingenuity Gap**. *Ingenuity* is the thinking process that gives us novel and sustainable solutions to problems and situations created by increasing complexity. An *ingenuity gap* occurs when we cannot seem to solve complex problems in ways that work, and are sustainable over the long term.

Strategic practice is a unique and novel approach to closing the ingenuity gap. By using a strategic practice approach, you will be able to better understand the complexity of the situation in which you may want to create change. As well, strategic practice gives you many pathways to discover interventions that will work with, rather than against, the forces of the cultural system operating in the situation. Most corporate cultures are not created to be resilient and robust in times of high degrees of uncertainty and complexity; thus, it becomes easy for people to not challenge the stories and patterns underlying cultural

system. Strategic practice helps us to understand the learning dynamics of corporate cultures, so that we can challenge the stories told and the patterns lived, and make conscious choices about what we wish to do as a result of our understanding.

“When we *practice strategically*, we become more aware of the patterns of thinking and action that we, and others, are experiencing in a cultural system. We are also aware that our actions, and those of others, are contributing to the patterns that everyone is experiencing. We make *conscious choices* about how we will think and act. We become aware that our choices and resulting actions may create effects that ripple throughout a cultural system. As a result, we become *responsible* and *accountable* for our choices, our actions, and our contributions to a cultural system.”

— Tom Boydell, Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko, **Corporate Culture and Organizational Change: Strategic Practice Guide**, (2005)



**Corporate Culture and Organizational Change: Strategic Practice Guide**, see [www.mhainstitute.ca](http://www.mhainstitute.ca) for more information

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