



Corporate Culture and Complexity Part 1: It's Bananas in Here!

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“What really drives culture — its essence — is the learned, shared, tacit assumptions on which people base their daily behavior. It results in what is popularly thought of as ‘the way we do things around here,’ but even employees in the organization cannot without help reconstruct the assumptions on which daily behavior rests. They know only that this is the way, and they count on it. Life becomes predictable and meaningful.”

— Edgar H. Schein, **The Corporate Culture Survival Guide** (1999)

In the last series of newsletters, we explored the new sciences to discover what they might tell us about the human condition. We ended the series by talking about complexity, and the implications complexity has on human systems. All living systems, including human

systems, are *complex adaptive systems* (see **InfoMine** Vol. 8, No. 3). In this next series of newsletters, we will explore a complex adaptive system called *culture*, and a specific form of culture called *corporate culture*.

Think of culture as an ocean, and the humans that inhabit this ocean of culture as the fish. As a fish, you do not know that you live in an ocean — you simply live, and seldom question what it is that you live in — unless you are philosopher. Since few humans are philosophers, most of us simply live in this ocean. In organizations, this ocean is called *corporate culture*, and each organization has its own unique corporate culture. In families, this ocean is called *family culture*, and each family has its own unique family culture. The humans who live within these cultures seldom question them. They simply do things the way they have always done them, and when things don't work, most people feel powerless to change anything.

To demonstrate how powerful culture is, here's a story about a research study that was done with monkeys. Four monkeys were put into an observation room with one banana on the floor. The monkeys were wired so that the researchers could give each monkey a mild shock. When the first monkey approached the banana and tried to pick it up, he received a mild shock. When the second monkey approached the banana, the first monkey became very agitated and attempted to stop the second monkey from touching the banana. Any monkey who touched the banana received a mild shock. Suffice it to say that the monkeys learned very quickly that touching the banana was an unpleasant experience.

Now for the most interesting part of the story. One of the four original monkeys was then replaced with a new monkey. As this new monkey approached the banana, the other three became extremely agitated, and succeeded in stopping the new monkey from touching the banana. A short while later, one of the remaining three original monkeys was replaced with a new monkey. As this new monkey approached the banana, the other three monkeys, including the one who had just replaced the first monkey, became extremely agitated and stopped the new monkey from touching the banana. This replacement process continued until all of the original four monkeys had been replaced with new monkeys. None of these new monkeys would touch the banana, and whenever a new monkey came

into the observation room, he was quickly taught not to touch the banana. In effect, none of the remaining monkeys understood what would happen if they touched the banana — they just knew that they should never touch it. These monkeys were living in a culture that forbade touching the banana. These monkeys were immersed in this culture, like fish in an ocean, and were completely unaware of the reasons for their behaviour. They simply did what the culture dictated.

Humans are not so different from monkeys when it comes to culture. There are a number of things that people do in organizations that are seldom questioned. One indicator that culture is operating appears when someone does question why something is done in a certain way. If the person has questioned a cultural norm or standard, the response will be protective and defensive, with little or no evidence or logic to support the response. For example, if someone asks “Why do we do it this way?”, a response indicating that a cultural norm or standard is operating might be “Because we have to.” or “Because this is the way we’ve always done it.” or “We should follow the procedure.” The irony of this is that the person giving these responses believes that these responses are factual and logical, when, in fact, they are simply assumptions. Even more powerful than fact or logic, these opinions are shared among the members of the culture. Like fish in an ocean, or monkeys afraid to touch a banana, these people are convinced that what they believe is right.

Edgar Schein, author of **The Corporate Culture Survival**

Guide, describes culture as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions that is learned by the members of a group in solving problems. Their problems are of two kinds:

- External problems of survival in the environment
- Internal problems of integration”

According to Schein, these assumptions work well enough to be taught to new group members as the correct way to perceive, think about, and feel about all aspects of the daily work life. Once shared assumptions exist, they function to provide meaning to daily events, make life predictable, and therefore reduce anxiety. Corporate culture, in its most meaningful form for people in organizations, is about “the way we do things around here”. In other words, culture acts as a powerful form of psychological safety (see **InfoMine** Vol. 8, No. 5). Culture makes life predictable and meaningful, even if the way in which work is done is ineffective, and the meaning that it gives is an illusion.

Unlike monkeys and fish, many people in organizations are, at a subconscious level, somewhat aware that something is not quite right. However, most people are not consciously aware of the illusion. Rather, they first feel it, then express it in a number of ways. For example, you hear the awareness of the illusion of culture operating when people complain about the lack of change and the lack of power to make things better. You can feel it in people’s daily frustrations with their inability to do a good job. You can see it in people’s faces, haggard and drawn as they try to manage a frantic pace with some level of dignity. At some level, most people know that the system isn’t working well, but they

don’t know what the system is, let alone how to change it. Even more ironic is that although people complain about and feel the illusion of culture, when faced with the chance to confront the illusion, most people will defend the “way things we do things around here”. It’s almost as if people believe that if they confront the illusion, they will lose something stable — something they understand. The illusion seems to be that the devil they know is somehow safe; it is a form of psychological safety or certainty. In most cases, people’s need for psychological safety and certainty is greater than their need *to change the system*. This is what causes most change efforts to succeed only marginally, or to fail altogether.

In this next series of newsletters, we will explore corporate culture — the form of culture that occurs in organizations. We will discover what creates culture, what makes it work, how to change it, and how to sustain the change.

“The multilevel concept of culture makes it clear that culture is a complex concept that must be analyzed at every level before it can be understood. The biggest risk in working with culture is to oversimplify it and miss several basic facets that matter.”
— Edgar H. Schein, **The Corporate Culture Survival Guide** (1999)

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