



Although sincere in his effort to look at things through the eyes of his supervisor, Joe's first day suffered some setbacks.

Corporate Culture and Complexity Part 2A: Culture and Memetics

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“When you imitate someone else, something is passed on. This *something* can then be passed on again, and again, and so take on a life of its own. We might call this thing an idea, an instruction, a behaviour, a piece of information ... but if we are going to study it, we shall need to give it a name. Fortunately, there is a name. It is the *meme*.”

— Susan Blackmore, **The Meme Machine** (1999)

In the last newsletter, we began to explore a complex adaptive system called *culture*, and a specific form of culture called *corporate culture*. In this newsletter, we will discuss a theory that attempts to explain how

culture develops. This theory is called *memetics*, and was conceived by Richard Dawkins, author of **The Selfish Gene**. Dawkins, an Oxford zoologist, is one of the world's leaders in evolution research. In his forward to Blackmore's book, Dawkins states that “Genes are accurately copied and transmitted from body to body, but some are transmitted at greater frequency than others — by definition they are more successful.” Current evolutionary theory holds that, when genes mutate, there is a chance for these genes, if they can survive, to replicate and possibly to begin an evolutionary change in an organism. However, most researchers in evolution agree that genetic mutation alone cannot explain the rate at which humans have evolved. It appears that human evolution has created an evolutionary puzzle. In 1976, Dawkins asked the question, “Are there any other replicators on

our planet?” Dawkins believes that there are, and he proposed that there must be a second replicator acting over and above the *gene*. He calls this replicator a *meme*.

The **Oxford Dictionary** defines a *meme* as “An element of a culture that may be considered to be passed on by non-genetic means, esp. imitation”. What makes humans so different from any other organism on this planet is an inordinate ability to *imitate*. Other animals can imitate, such as birds when they sing bird songs, dolphins when they swim intricate patterns, and monkeys when they learn to wash their food. However, humans imitate at a frequency and ability that far surpasses all other living things. And this ability to imitate is what has escalated our evolution as a species.

Memetics is a complex topic for a short newsletter. To gain a better understanding of the impact of memes on evolution, we suggest that you read these references:

- Susan Blackmore: **The Meme Machine** (1999)
- Richard Dawkins: **The Selfish Gene** (1976)
- Robert Wright: **Non Zero: The Logic of Human Destiny** (2000)
- Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: **The Evolving Self: A Psychology for the Third Millennium** (1993)

In the next few newsletters, we will focus on understanding memetics as it relates to culture. If we can understand how culture develops, perhaps we can learn how to modify

a culture, or even create a different culture.

Blackmore explains that "... in practice, because we use memes so much, most of our thinking is coloured by them in one way or another. Memes have become the tools with which we think." When you learn something, memes are being transmitted from the teacher to you. You are learning to do something by imitating an idea or a way of doing a task. When you learn something, you are learning a cluster of memes. The term for a cluster of memes is *memeplex*. When you learn to live in a culture, you are learning a memeplex that is a specific collection of memes. That culture is also a *memeplex*.

Robert Wright, author of **Non-Zero**, states that "A meme can be just about any form of non-genetic information transmitted from person to person: a word, a song, an attitude, a religious belief, a mealtime ritual, an engineering concept. Bodies of memes [memeplexes] can be whole religions or ideologies or moral systems or technological systems." Or memeplexes can be corporate cultures like the ones in which most people work.

Like genes, memes also compete with each other. Unlike genes, however, which compete to get into the next generation, memes compete for space in your brain at this very moment. As a result, some memes win and others lose. Right now, you're living among memes that have won. Look around you and notice what gets done and what doesn't get done, who gets told what and who gets left out, who is allowed to make mistakes and who

is not, what is rewarded and what is not. It's a memeplex of winning memes — learned ways of working and being with each other.

According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of **The Evolving Self**, "Memes require only our minds to feed on, and they will replicate images of themselves in consciousness. A catchy tune I hear on the radio may colonize my mind for several days, surviving there thanks to the psychic energy I devote to it. If the tune is good enough, others who hear me whistle it may take it up, too." This is how songs become number 1 tunes, as well as how corporate cultures are created and sustained. At some point, the assumptions upon which the corporate culture was created were appropriate, even wondrous; these assumptions were a *good tune*.

One of the reasons why humans are able to replicate memes so well is because humans have language. We are able to tell each other stories. The better the story, the more attractive the meme, and the more likely it will be to survive to be told to someone else. One of the facets of human language is our ability to *gossip*, to believe what we hear, to exaggerate it, and to tell others about what we thought we heard. Like a catchy tune, gossip spreads like wildfire through the *rumour mill*. Any way you look at it, culture is created by the memes that have been unconsciously accepted by the multitude.

For example, the 16th Century gave birth to the Enlightenment, the Reformation, the Renaissance, and the Scientific Revolution. These new memeplexes excited people at that time, and continued to excite more

and more people for the next five centuries. These memeplexes created Western culture as we know it today. Like the monkeys in the previous newsletter, we don't understand how this culture came about — we simply live in it. As a result, we are trapped in these memes and memeplexes, unconscious of our power to change our situation, believing that this is the only way in which to work and to live. Memetics offers an option, a way to introduce a different set of memes — memes that can win, and that have the potential to create the kind of change that we all seem to be seeking. What does this mean? It means that memes will always be spread, and that some will win. But it also means that we may have an influence on which memes will win.

"You will doubtless notice that thoughts just seem to pop up out of nowhere and grab your attention. You may also notice what kinds of thought they are. Typically, they are imagined conversations or arguments, reruns of events with new endings, self-justifications, complicated plans for the future, or difficult decisions that have to be made. ... *You* cannot command them to cease. You cannot even command them to go slower nor tell yourself not to get sucked into them. They seem to have a life and power of their own."

— Susan Blackmore, **The Meme Machine** (1999)

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