



Corporate Culture and Complexity Part 2D: Cultural Evolution

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“... tight controls reduce the need for a lot of checking, employees can feel secure and confident that they will not be unfairly dealt with so long as they follow the dictates of the processes and respect the small variances and operating limits. But this kind of security is empowering only to individuals who have chosen to be pawns. Such people value defined limits precisely because, if they respect them, they will be left alone and not required to question anything. In other words, they are safe from being responsible.”

— Chris Argyris, **Flawed Advice and the Management Trap** (2000)

The last three newsletters focused on memes and their effect on people and their organizations. This newsletter focuses on how memes are the building blocks of culture,

and the effect this has on thinking and action in specific cultures. A culture is a memplex, or an aggregate of memes, that together create the attributes of a specific culture. The memplex of a culture sets up a context for our thinking and actions by defining which thoughts and actions are appropriate, and which are not. This has led to a new way in which humans can evolve that is different than genetic evolution. This new form of evolution is called *cultural evolution*.

If humans can evolve culturally, then humans are able to create new ways of being and living, new memplexes — in other words new cultures. To do this, it helps to be aware of the current memplex that is operating, how it is operating, and whether or not it is producing the results that benefit the inhabitants of that culture. This requires people to become aware of how they unconsciously use *meme defense* to make sure that they and

others do not question the status-quo memes that are operating (see previous **InfoMine**).

We see cultural evolution as a gift to humanity. At its best, this means that humans can learn to live on this planet in ways that are sustainable.

However, we believe that to tap into the gift that cultural evolution holds, we need to understand the power of memes. And, we think the most powerful meme that is operating in most cultures today is *meme defense*. Yes, we think *meme defense is itself a meme*. Meme defense supports a culture that encourages thinking and actions rooted in defending the status-quo memes and not critically questioning them.

Recall that a culture or memplex is made up of memes that have won. So, what do these cultural memplexes look like? Argyris has described two forms of cultural memplexes that can operate in organizations. He calls these memplexes Model I and Model II. In his extensive research he has found that Model I operates in most organizations. *Model I* is described below. As you read the following, notice how each of the four memes *support* the idea of meme defense, and which ones may be operating in your organization?

Model I

1. **Control the situation by defining goals and pushing to achieve them at all costs.**

Convince everyone that your way is the right way. Move quickly to make sure that there is no

discussion, and little or no opportunity for diverse and disparate points of view. Measure everything, and value efficiency over effectiveness.

2. **Maximize winning and minimize losing.** Make sure that you win, at all costs. Own the task, do not share responsibility, and do not ask for help. Make sure that you learn what helps you to survive and win. Don't lose face. Never admit that you don't know or that you may be wrong. Pretend that you know the answer, even when you are uncertain.
3. **Suppress any negative feelings.** Follow the leader, defend the leader's position, even if you yourself disagree. Help others to realize that their feelings are unimportant, even if others are hurt by your actions. Make sure that the leader's decisions are not questioned or tested. Make it difficult for people to voice any concerns or ideas that may not fit with the leader's perspective.
4. **Be rational.** Rationalize your position so that others cannot argue with you easily, debate every point, and require certainty in all evidence presented that is contrary to your own thinking. Value reason over anything else. Be defensive and protect the status quo by blaming, intellectualizing, and invalidating any emotions, such as intuition as irrational.

In a Model I corporate culture, people learn to "feel secure and confident that they will not be unfairly dealt with so long as they follow the dictates of the processes and respect the small variances and

operating limits" (from the opening quote). Argyris describes another memplex called Model II (described below). As you read the following, notice the difference between the two models, how the three memes in Model II *discourage* meme defense, and which ones may be operating in your organization.

Model II

1. **Validate information and invite ideas.** Reward joint control of tasks and collaborative involvement. Make sure that there is opportunity for questioning, and that disparate points of view are considered. Continually bring memes to the surface, and question the validity of those memes.
2. **Maximize free and informed choice.** Validate the difficulty that accompanies making choices with which people may not agree. Help people to be open to new ways of doing things, to become willing to experiment, to take risks, to make mistakes, and to learn from both successes and failures.
3. **Maximize internal commitment to the choice.** Create an environment in which people are willing to participate and be accountable for actions. Test ideas and solutions in public.

When Model II defines the corporate culture, people work collaboratively by questioning operating memes, and share "... power with anyone who has competence and is relevant to deciding about implementing the action in question. Saving one's own face is resisted as a defensive, anti-learning activity." Which model would you prefer to have operating? Currently, which model is operating

in your organization? When we ask people in organizations, including senior management, to describe a culture in which they would like to operate, invariably everyone describes some form of Model II. However, when we ask the same people to describe the culture that is currently operating, they invariably describe some form of Model I. And, in Model I, the meme for meme defense operates with no mercy. Even when people become aware of the gap between what they have and what they desire, they often use meme defense to stop themselves from exploring and creating Model II (see previous **InfoMine**). What we find hopeful is that people genuinely do want to create cultures that are based on Model II.

"When thinking about cultural evolution, don't get wrapped up in the particular people or peoples. Instead, keep your eye on the memes. People and peoples come and go, live and die. But heir memes, like their genes persist. ... culture, the aggregate menu of memes on which society can draw, may well have evolved. Eventually, social structure will follow, coalescing around the newly available technological base. It may take awhile for the social structure to catch up with the technology ... But given enough time, it will."

— Robert Wright, **Non Zero: The Logic of Human Destiny** (2000)

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