Nurturing Your Corporate Culture

From early industrialisation and the drive for increased production efficiency, there has been a problem. That problem was 'dehumanisation'. This loss of humanity led to a reduction in worker morale and commitment, and an increase in the friction between workers and management.

This problem has largely been with us ever since. The exception being the enlightened organisation that aims for success through focusing on improving … *their culture*.

Defining Culture

Why are these things so true? Culture can be said to be the discourse within an organisation. It is the rituals that support its true character, identity and values. Culture provides a sense of identity and commitment to the big picture and guides the behaviour of its members.

Describing Culture

The purpose that organisational culture serves can be categorised by some underlying metaphors (*Alvesson, 2002*). These can be used to understand how a culture influences its members. Culture is formed on observable characteristics and through people's perceptions, and as such, can be characterised by a number of specific activities:

Metaphor	Description	Specific Activities
Exchange regulator	Control mechanism regulating delivery and reward	Get **incentives** right. Competencies. DRIVE MAP (**Mastery; Autonomy; Purpose**)
Compass	Giving direction and priorities	**Values; Mission & Vision** determining priorities **Risk Analysis**
Social glue	Common ideas, symbols, values, providing a sense of identity	Common Identity provides bonding as well as inferring **Responsibility (CSR)**
Sacred cow	Basic assumptions and values to which people are strongly committed and which they will strongly guard	**Integrity** **Tone from the Top** Protecting common values
Disorder	Ambiguity and fragmentation	Divided we fall – United we stand; Having each other's backs. Provide **Safety (Help lines)**
Blinkers	Significant unconscious aspects leading to blind spots	Remove Blind spots. For example, Bribery and Corruption through **ADKAR**

The question is how to influence the organisational behaviour for sustainable change? The most effective approach is to target the behaviour above the majority of the organisation; starting with the Tone from the Top (CEO, C-suite) and facilitate this subconsciously permeating down aiming to influence the value-sentiment within managers, first level leaders and the rank and file.

Influencing Culture

As well as influencing utilising Tone from the Top and leadership modelling, the question often asked is "can culture be taught?" Simple teaching can easily change group politeness, like respecting each other's time by keeping to meeting protocols, or embracing diversity and inclusion. Changing core moral behaviours for when the chips are down and when stress is highest is more difficult. Such situations might include the moral dilemmas of falsifying sales, or

areas of bribery and corruption, when your own livelihood might be at stake. *[Ref Maslow's hierarchy of needs].* But these can be addressed through a more structured and concerted effort.

The teaching element of culture change needs to address these deeper challenges. Firstly, by drawing **Attention** to an imperative in such a way that it develops a widespread **Desire** to change the flawed status quo. WIIFM is often a strong motivator and can override such **Desire** when your own livelihood might be at stake. *[Ref the Mao Tse Tung maxim of "Food before ethics"].* Training can then channel this *Desire* into meaningful **Knowledge** with practice to embed an **Ability** to be confident to adapt and change as required when required. increasing knowledge of the higher moralities required to protect the company's and their own reputation. Group workshops help build trust and awareness of how your manager has got your back. Taking this Ability into practice and behaviour in the workplace then develops **Reinforcement**.

Reinforcement must incorporate the incentive structures. These need to coherently motivate all employees in adopting and sustaining the new *desirable* behaviours. This adds to providing a common (sense of) identity for widespread engagement for the bigger picture (Mission and Vision) while nurturing a sense of safety, well-being, business and personal development.
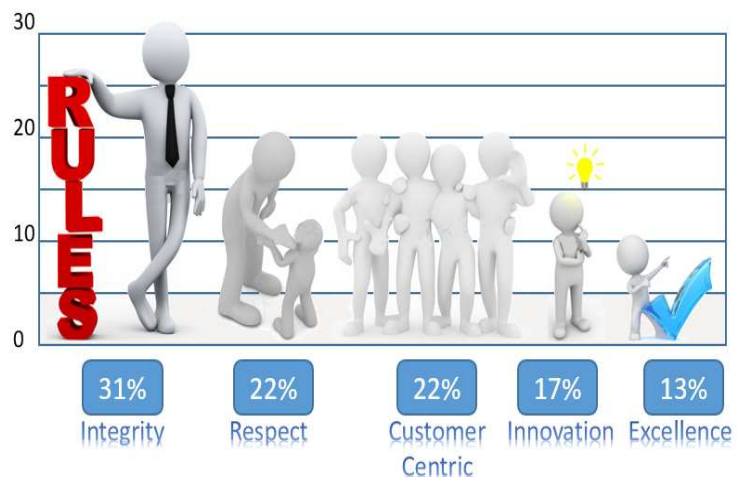
Relating Culture to Typical Corporate Values

Which of your company values express the behavioural sentiment of your Goals, Vision, Objectives or Ambitions? Perhaps Teamwork, or Reliability? Hmmm perhaps not! The top five values cited by FTSE100 companies (Nick Liddell, 2016) are:

1. Integrity (31%)

It should surely be cause for concern, rather than matter of pride, that so many companies feel the need to include Integrity as a guiding principle for doing business. What do they think is the alternative?

2. Respect (22%)

Respect is one of those 'nice to have' values – after all why would anyone not want respect? Surely it's unobjectionable. The problem is how does it really help anyone to make better decisions? – Unless they are callous and insensitive enough to think that behaving disrespectfully (and without integrity) might otherwise be acceptable in the workplace.

3. Customer-Centric (22%)

Customer-centricity seems to be the modern day mantra for business. This seems to set-up up a conflict for companies aiming to maximise shareholder value whilst espousing that employees are their most valuable asset. Indeed, there is little evidence that these companies are prioritising the happiness of their customers above that of their employees or shareholders.

4. Innovation (17%)

The preferred value of CEOs told to 'innovate or die!'… and looked at their pension schemes.

5. Excellence (13%)

Who wouldn't want their business to be excellent? It's another value that seems designed to be unambiguously positive. What useful direction can this possibly give to an employee that would help them do their job better?

Values are Underperforming … So what should be done to improve Values and Culture?

There are at least two reasons to substantiate the assertion that companies with more imaginative, differentiated values would develop a better performance culture and therefore perform better than companies with more generic values. Firstly, a unique set of values suggest a company's leadership has consciously identified a clear, meaningful point of difference and is confident to defend it. Secondly, these distinct values demonstrate a culture of conviction and a willingness to make difficult decisions. After all, *Good values should involve some form of meaningful sacrifice*.

Companies with generic values take the lazy way out and join the unthinking crowd probably because it feels safe to go with that crowd. What is alarmingly is that they flaunt their laziness and lack of imagination for all stakeholders to see, presumably in the hope that they won't notice or care about their lack of identity. What an example to them!!

Your corporate values should be more than a shortlist of words that you just happen to like. 'Integrity' and 'Excellence' and 'Respect' indicate a lazy approach to your culture, and breed cynicism and a lack of leadership and direction. Applying the following process can help you avoid denigrating your culture and values to the lazy bucket:

1. Set a clear business vision of the future

Your values will be most powerful when they help achieve your ambitions for the future. They are not meant to be a shopping list of the qualities you believe you already have. So it is better to begin by understanding what you want your business to achieve, rather than trying to sum up what makes you successful or nice people today. The clearer your vision of the future, the easier it will be to tell whether your values will help deliver your ambitions.

2. How many Values

It is amazing how many business leaders expect their colleagues to remember a whole host of values, behaviours and competencies … as well as the information needed to perform competently in their roles. It is unrealistic to expect employees to remember more than three values… even if they are alliterative. So stick to three if you possibly can!

3. Each Value should have a Specific Role

It is hugely helpful to assign a clear role to each value to aid employees in the development of the business towards achieving its vision, goals and ambitions. For example, a value that is:

    a) Rational   that grounds the logic of your vision, goals and ambitions
    b) Emotional   that drives the passion of employees (hearts with minds)
    c) Aspirational   a desirable quality that the business has yet to really achieve

4. What would be the Alternative?

For values to be a helpful guide for decision-making, it is important to understand why using them would involve some sacrifice against taking a lazier way. This isn't an easy task, but a good way to do this is to list a positive quality that is opposed to each of the values under consideration. For example, take of often employee-demanded 'fun' aspect of work:

The Alternatives	Describe why 'Fun' overcomes these alternative behaviours
'Boring' or 'Tedious'	Really doesn't involve a choice at all – no manager would propose 'boring' or 'tedious' as a positive work quality
'Solemn' or 'Sedate'	These could be positive values to certain businesses. 'Fun' would provide more meaning and direction to otherwise naturally solemn/ sedate tendencies
'Powerful' or 'Profound'	Likewise, for a 'Deep' business
'Calm' or 'Composed'	Likewise, for a very 'Sensible' business

5. Nurturing your new Values through 'Getting to Know the Values' Workshops

Everyone seeks acceptance for their proposals, so ironically, if everybody likes the list of values, then the values are probably too inoffensive and possibly too easily forgettable or ignorable. Instead look for:

- The values to inspire delight and fear in equal measure (especially at board level)

- Front-line employees to interpret the values in a way that can help them improve what they do, how they do it, and why they do it

Values can be most effective when they are used to inspire rather than control people. That's why it is important to give people at all levels a chance to interpret them for themselves. Firstly, this reduces the risk that people might misinterpret them. Secondly, inviting employees to interpret them for their own work environment creates the possibility they will unmask surprising and innovative approaches to carrying out their work. This gives substance to approach of thoughtfully applying as well as carefully conceiving your values.

Treat your new Values and Culture as if they are a rare species that needs very careful nurturing. This will build a high trust culture which generates better employee engagement that in turn leads to better performance. A far cry from the early industrialisation approach that dehumanised workers and stripped them of morale and commitment.