



CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

ABSTRACT

Is your culture an accident? Are the different communications saying contrary things?

Motivation Matters Limited



Common culture

Many years ago I worked near an IBM office. On Friday lunchtime we went to the pub and the IBMers were easy to spot in their regulation blue suits and white shirts.

Other than a uniform, what people have in common in organizations is the culture. The culture is the driving force, the leitmotif, and it needs to be managed.

All organizations have cultures whether managed or informal. If you don't manage your culture you have an informal one and, probably, it is different between locations, departments and functions.

The only way to manage your culture is to communicate the vision from the top.

Cultural communications need to be managed like all things, with three simple questions.

- What is our culture now?
- What do we want it to be?
- How do we go from here to there?

What is our culture now?

The big question is what is the balance between formal and informal communication? Is your culture an accident? Are the different communications saying contrary things?

There is, or should be, a big overlap between brand and culture. Imagine working for an organization that advertises its products as "no expense spared" but the culture is that you cut corners and "it's good enough" is the rule of the day. The external and internal communications must be similar.

Perhaps you have an opinion leader in the organization espousing his or her own views at odds with the formal communication? Machiavelli was right when he said keep your friends close but your enemies closer!

People left behind in re-organizations or passed over for promotion can be a source of respected opinions to eager listeners.

Is there a common theme to the official communications? Style matters so much. Tone even more. I hesitate to bring Disney's Jungle Book into a management piece but do you follow Baloo's advice and "accentuate the positive"?

Finally in our mini-culture audit is the issue of pay.





Pay policy

If you are communicating that you are the world's/country's/sector's biggest and best player you had better make sure your pay policy backs that up. It is no good spewing forth fine words when your pay rates are miserly.

If you say you are better than average as an organization, your pay rates should be better than average too.

Remember people are not stupid. They will listen politely to what you have to say and then watch what you do.

What culture do you want?

Formal objectives are always a good idea. They provide a focus to the plan even if the contribution of the cultural communication is difficult to measure.

The organization will have goals and the cultural communication should support them.

Often the culture you are trying to embed is based even further back in the organization's purpose, values and ethics. This foundation gives organizations a direct link to their founders. We have all met these organizations. They strike us as focused, different and energised. They "live the brand".

Myths and legends

All cultures, all organizations need myths.

The myths may not always be true but they should be at the heart of the brand, the culture, the message.

I'm sure that Dave Hewlett and Vance Packard did start their business in a garage with the simple view that they could make the electronic equipment better: higher specification than the market offerings. But what a fantastic myth! There wasn't an electronic engineer in the 1960s to 90s that didn't salivate at the thought of getting his hands on the latest model. That culture of working in the garage gave rise to a tremendous innovative surge throughout HP as they took a leading position in their market.

The culture and the myths need to drive behaviour. You need to know the HP way and behave in line.

Coherence, coherence, coherence!

If people do behave in line with the culture do make sure that other management instructions and objectives are coherent. If someone spends an hour on the phone resolving a customer's problem in line with your culture, don't then complain about missed targets for calls per hour.





How to change

How do we go from here to there?

This is a cultural change programme and like all change programmes needs a Champion.

A senior person needs to “own” this change and provide the muscle needed to make it happen.

I have seen several organizations that have run joint programmes between HR and Marketing. The external brand and internal culture need to be similar in every case.

The HR people get to see how to sell a message and the Marketing team see how the message is received by people who won't be shy in saying how they see it.

Changing culture requires a lot more communication than simply trying to maintain one. The richer the variety of communication channels and the more unexpected the message, are both key factors in how much communication is actually received.

You need to decide who communicates and how often. Communication must be frequent, particularly in the beginning of the change process.

Coherence

I'm sure we have all been caught by the Chinese whispers game after management briefings? How many problems arise from passed on briefings that a manager has misunderstood. Make sure they get a printed handout to brief their people.

There are many tools at your disposal: staff meetings, newsletters and executives walking about being but three. Physical changes to office layouts, re-decoration or giving everyone the same mobile send loud messages.

Coherence

People listen to what you have to say and then watch what you do.

Finding out what people understand the culture to be now is an interesting question.

I have always taken the view that the managers should know the answer if they are not hiding behind their desks. This does presume a culture of blame and failure does not exist. Otherwise everyone reports things are fantastic!

Surveys are an alternative of course.





Surveys

My thoughts are that staff responses to surveys are:

“If only they would come and ask they would know
They never listen to the surveys anyway
I’m not risking saying anything detrimental”

Perhaps surveys are like bonus schemes. I am sure a good one is possible
I just haven’t seen it yet.

Finally like any managed task, like any marketing plan and any change
programme there are three simple repetitive tasks to complete:

- Plan
- Do
- Review

Don’t launch a big cultural communication change programme without
these three steps. Do review progress to plan regularly and make
adjustments as you go.

Is that part of your culture anyway?





MOTIVATION MATTERS LIMITED

VISION

Inspiring good management, and thus achievement, within organizations will improve employee attitudes, engagement and job satisfaction to create stronger companies with more productive people.

More productive companies build competitive advantage creating a sustainable business with safe growth, healthy profits, secure well paid jobs and contribute to the well-being of the UK.

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