

Culture and its effect on innovation in the organization

The Nature of Culture

Organizations of all types inherently have some form of business code and methodology to get things done. At the same time, they offer a view to the outside world of carefully harvested company values and corporate mission. Whether overtly expressed or subtle, these displays of aggressiveness, conservatism, intellect, or “old world” tradition, provide the basis for company culture. Even firms that supposedly don’t have an expressed or deliberate culture, have one by the very nature of the ambivalence to one. Loosely defined, innovation is directly correlated to corporate culture.

Culture has come to mean a variety of things over the past couple of decades. The dictionary describes this as beliefs, behavior, language, and way of life for a particular group of people or a certain time. Corporate culture is a set of specific beliefs, methodologies, and characteristics unique to an organization, where the organization becomes the microcosm under scrutiny, hence the way of life for its constituents. Remaining within the boundaries is required to gain acceptance and majority approval. Established companies have an ingrained value mechanism that pervades its employees and guides them while working for the firm. In most cases it is an implicit understanding which gets passed on from manager to supervisor, then to employee. It is a series of unbroken chains that engulf the organization ultimately leading to the “corporate way” and expected behaviors.

The Western Union Telegraph Company (WUTCO) was a classic example of old world, “stodgy” culture. In 1981, the largest percentage of employees was of retirement age. Service records were commonly greater than 25 years. The culture was one of a large monopoly, historic status and indifference to the customer. Telex services, later TWX, messaging and audio program channels were in demand, with very little competition to contend with. Young engineers, eager to complete projects were encouraged to take on responsibility, yet the environment left little tolerance for error or fresh ideas. The culture was one of hierarchy, age, male domination, and strict adherence to supervisors and managers. Promotion only occurred through years of service and relationships developed within. By the late 1980’s and early into 1990, WUTCO closed operations and sold off various operating Q’s (The operations centers) and cable Rights of Way to companies like United Telecom / US Sprint, and Teleport Communications. Many transitions took place before finally closing the doors on one of the most renowned telecommunications companies in American history. Although Western Union resurfaced in late 1990, it was strictly a financial services & wire transfer organization. The first iteration was called New Valley Corp. Did culture aid in the demise of this organization? If the culture had been different, more responsive, less complacent, and generally receptive to new ideas, would WUTCO be around today? Policies and generally accepted behaviors were not stated in a company handbook, but implicitly understood. Experience controlled WUTCO, and new ideas were shunned because they were unproven, and not required to keep the steady state of business. No effort was made to cultivate the next group of managers to take over the reins of the company. The culture didn’t provide for grooming of heirs or the transfer of knowledge. Technical training was taken seriously at Western Union Telegraph. By all measures in the industry, it was considered one of the finest programs. The fault in the training program was not in the content but its availability and justification. For example, only those destined to build microwave radio gear would receive microwave training, and learn how to construct waveguide

and test klystrons. Cross-fertilization was discouraged via specific job functions, and an overall lack of incentives to share, learn or move to a different area within the company. The prevailing culture had defined boundaries, which were not to be crossed if you wanted to be accepted within the organization. A culture that proved very successful in the 1960's and 1970's led to WUTCO's demise in the 1980's. An argument could be made that the general demographics and constituency of the company was the cause of failure, and not culture. If on the other hand, the corporate environment allowed fresh ideas to flourish, and cross learning to occur, innovation may have led to the creation of new businesses and opportunities. Western Union Telegraph Company may have evolved into *Western Net Corp.*

Culture is a conglomeration of essential organizational elements that serve as a foundation and nurturer. Enormous shifts in corporate culture have taken place over the past 30 years. The militaristic and hierarchical styles of former years have become obsolete in present business models. Interaction between business partners and their employees is pivotal in fostering growth, and securing profits. There must be a willingness to change, share information freely and understand that stagnancy is detrimental to personal enrichment and organizational competitiveness. How specific organizations define culture will have a direct impact on whether or not they increase their competitiveness and become leaders in their field. Is culture something taught and enforced among the rank and file of the firm, or is it something that develops through like-minded individuals with the same values and work ethics, using some implicit benchmark? It is difficult to definitively say that culture is not taught, when we look at companies like Hewlett Packard and its' notorious "HP Way". Is the HP Way a methodology that similar individuals in intellect, work ethics, morals and goals use as the benchmark, or is it a methodology for teaching the culture that HP would like to impress upon the world as unique and distinguishable from its competitors? What is the underlying goal of the HP Way? It can be theorized that the HP Way is nothing more than a ploy to change or create a perception to customers and potential business partners of an organization that it is more progressive and innovative than reality. Perception is reality, therefore if successfully created, a self-fulfilling prophecy is realized. Arguably, it can also be a noble attempt at creating an internally standardized, quality driven company, which is focused on producing the very best products with a unified external front.

New culture grows outward from expanding businesses. In most cases it is easier to understand in fledgling companies with few employees. Initially, the founders may share the same interests, attend the same universities, and socialize together. These are all characteristics of like-minded individuals. Their initial foray into business will develop into a culture that will ultimately drive the venture to success or failure excluding external influences. If we assume that the business venture is successful and it begins to expand, the "visual" culture is the element that will attract or deter candidates for employment. In most cases, the founders will hunt for people like themselves, and subsequently the people they hire will continue the propagation. Once the firm is established, it becomes years later after there has been sufficient turnover, that the firm will experience differences in management and culturally related issues. Larger, established companies, especially multinationals have a far difficult task, since they are usually responding to change, and their momentum must be greater to carry this throughout the organization. In this case, sub cultures may exist which make the task of responding and adapting to change almost impossible in a short timeframe. Does a strong culture make a venture successful, and are sub cultures an impediment to innovation and change? A company may have a strong culture, but may not be successful. In the same respect, a company which appears to have a loosely defined environment, and seemingly no

culture may be overtly successful. In both cases, corporate culture is what develops within an organization during the course of business, its' expansion and the inter-relationships among employees.

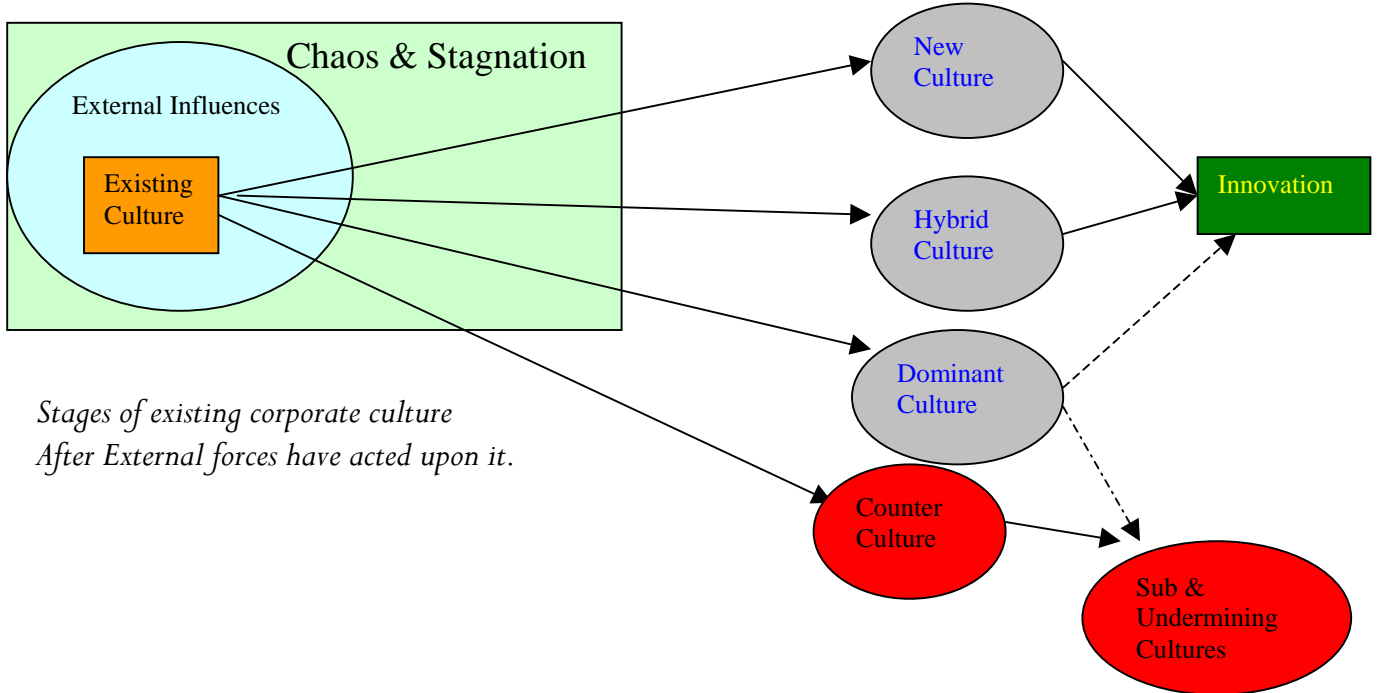
Is it worthwhile for an established and eminently successful organization to establish new criteria for operating in a changing environment? Sometimes there is a need to change the existing business flow and methodology. This could be due to a number of factors such as mergers, new business lines, and acquisitions. Subsequently, a new or dominant culture will emerge, so that adaptation to new influences and exogenous forces is possible. In failing organizations, this may be the ingredient that can turn things around or conversely hasten the demise depending upon the nature of the emergent culture. In successful and profitable firms, a culture change is not usually considered because of euphoria surrounding the company's good fortune. It is in these organizations, that recognition of a shift in business climate and subsequent action to make revisions where applicable before the inflection point, will propel the organization to the next level of prosperity. It is far more important for existing companies to think about their corporate culture than for new ones simply because the new ones are in the throes of developing their own culture for better or worse. Existing organizations need to make revisions that adjust to the new marketplace, its' demands and expectations. The successful business model of last year may not be suitable for the new landscape this year. A change in landscape necessitates a new way of thought, hence the learning organization.

External Influences

Many forces affect company culture. External influences such as mergers, acquisitions, outsourcing deals, and re-engineering efforts all play significant roles in modification of human behaviors and development. The business landscape has changed dramatically over the last few decades. The most notable of these are relative to long term employment, company values, ethics and social underpinnings of our actions. The notion of staying with one company and developing your career, which was prevalent theory throughout the 1960's is no longer the accepted model. IBM in particular had the policy of not laying off, but re-assigning technical members; "*I've Been Moved*". As long as you were comfortable with being re-assigned, your employment was intact. Today, we are converging on free agency, and self-marketability. What does this mean in terms of culture? If we assume that there is an existing company culture, which for all practical purposes seems to foster growth and innovation, any of the external influences will cause upheaval. Chaos will exist for a period of time until some equilibrium is reached, and the dominant culture emerges. In a learning organization, the underlying themes and values of the emergent culture will be similar, with emphasis on knowledge transfer and continual innovation. In traditional organizations, the chaotic period will last much longer, and sometimes counter cultures will develop. Counter cultures are the product of employees presently disenchanted by the new structure, but lacking in conviction or essential skill sets to leave the organization. Free agency develops out of a continual learning process, coupled with the exponentially changing work place. The innovators are comfortable with change, and have desirable skills. The laggards will not thrive, and companies employing many laggards will ultimately fail.

Merger and acquisition activity is a normal business occurrence. With the globalization of many companies, and the increasing growth of multinational organizations, there is strong evidence that M&A activity will accelerate in the foreseeable future. Couple this with new forms of *organizational development* (re-engineering), and the cyclical emergence of outsourcing arrangements, and you have a sustainable chaotic environment. What does this do to creativity, or the pervading culture?

Clearly, any gains in corporate cohesiveness are sure to deteriorate rapidly. Innovation, which is a derivable benefit of a strong culture, suffers as well. The newly formed organization will slowly develop a new culture which may be a hybrid of the separate entities, or simply take on the dominant culture. When this happens, there is a period of uncertainty, and real or perceived loss of organizational slack. Creativity becomes a casualty, and innovation is stifled. Quality of leadership within the new firm will determine the duration of the stagnation period following the initial chaos. Moving the organization from the stagnation and chaotic phase to the innovative level will only be successful if the emergent culture is strong enough to withstand the counter and sub cultures which may have taken hold during the uncertainty period.



The effect of partnerships is very different than the above. Partnerships usually comprise of companies with the same value structure, similar intellect, and closely familiar work ethics. The resident culture isn't shocked by radical change indigenous to M&A, outsourcing, or other abnormal forces. Two separate cultures remain intact, with team members from both organizations assimilating into each other's culture when focusing on joint or collaborative projects. Alliances and partnerships usually work well because of their non-intrusive nature. Acquisitions are viewed as an attack on the very core of the organizational fabric.

Indoctrination

Some companies try exceedingly hard to adopt a culture which will distinguish its' organization from others in the same industry. When does this attempt become self-serving? Nordstrom trains its' salespeople in etiquette and specific language skills, so as to convey a cohesiveness and genuinely polished appearance to customers. Mary Kay Inc., instills a sense of purpose, fulfillment, independence and high self esteem in each of its' employees and consultants. Is this indoctrination, or a focused sense of good business and social responsiveness? For many companies, the early 1990's were transitional years, in which serious changes of policy, equal opportunity, and workforce demographics became an integral part of hiring and retention practices. Universities of

excellence, “In search of Excellence” and centers of excellence were the terms du jour. When does culture become indoctrination?

The Telenet organization, based in Reston Virginia was a packet switched company devoted to building, designing and operating packet switched networks worldwide. The culture was similar to that of a collegiate atmosphere in many respects. A casual, intellectual and very dedicated workforce capable of providing quick and thoughtful solutions, made this company successful for many years. Some of the pioneers of the Internet had ties to Telenet. In 1992, United Telecom/US Sprint, based out of Kansas City acquired the Telenet organization and immediately forced its culture and business practices upon the organization in all respects. US Sprint management replaced much of Telenet’s management. Psychological profile testing was mandatory and specific classes for selling services the “US Sprint way” were required. Questions could be raised about the specific profile desired, and the effectiveness of indoctrination on that given profile. Was this indoctrination being masked as the US Sprint culture of excellence? Direct customer interaction which was key to Telenet’s past successes was forbidden. Only “official teams” and designated US Sprint account representatives could engage the customer. Social events were mandatory, as was sales conventions. Technical proficiency was not a desirable attribute. The effect of this acquisition on two radically different cultures was predictable. Counter and sub cultures existed for some time, until the dominant US Sprint culture emerged. Innovation was stifled during the chaotic period, and the Telenet innovators left to pursue other endeavors. What was the point of the acquisition? A culture should embody creative qualities, stimulate ideas, provoke entirely new thought processes, and ultimately lead to innovation.

Acer is a Taiwanese computer company. Stan Shih, the Chairman and CEO is presently embarking on building a multifaceted facility in Taipei to “Grow a new culture” for Taiwan and Acer. The original plan calls for a 450 acre community (Aspire park) complete with educational, residential, and manufacturing capabilities. The vision of Stan Shih is to grow his predominantly hardware-based business into software and intellectual property. This is based upon his projection that the next phase of the computer revolution will be software development. Hoping to capitalize on this revolution, Stan Shih is planning for the future of his organization by constructing the framework for creativity and innovation, as well as nurturing talent via Aspire Park. Is Aspire Park a well intentioned project to foster growth and adaptation to a technologically based economy, or is it an attempt at subversive indoctrination? The learning organization calls for a transfer of knowledge and free exchange of ideas in order to promote innovation. As part of Aspire Park, the Acer Institute of Experience-Sharing (AIES) is acknowledged as the most important element of this project. Arguably, the project can be considered a whole life experience, with the intention of harvesting fresh ideas and innovating in an environment which is boundless and conducive to experimentation. The line of distinction between corporate culture and subtle forms of indoctrination is narrow, and sometimes unknowingly, there is crossover.

The Role of IT

Information technology, which was always just another division within a corporation, is now the catalyst in corporate cultural change. This is true because of the very omnipresence of technology, digitally stored information and the urgency of our data flow requirements. In some ways, IT managers are the leaders, hence championing the new paradigm. IT managers have recognized that technology is everywhere, and what better way to influence all of their employees, business partners, etc than through technology? Continuous change has always been most evident in IT, and

networking departments within organizations, simply because major innovations have occurred in short cycles. Interestingly enough, corporate cultural makeovers are surfacing via the information handlers. At Becton Dickinson & Co., professionals working on new technology architecture for the medical products maker, have arranged themselves into teams, leaving titles, seniority, and hierarchy behind. The atmosphere is informal, almost collegiate. This culture developed on its own, arising from the same value fabric, and like minded individualism. Becton Dickinson may adopt this casual approach to its' entire company, hoping to capture the energy, creative processes and new culture.

The use of technological tools has in many respects changed the way people view and approach their jobs. For example, Insurance salespeople would traditionally bring rate sheets and statistics to your home when selling life insurance products. The several hours spent with you would be devoted to pricing various coverage options, with little time for anything else. Your perception of them would be no different than that of any other sales person. Their "low tech" cultures were similar across the industry, regardless of their company. Today, laptops complete with spreadsheets and wireless capability to headquarters, convey a different message to prospective clients. Not only can more time be spent discussing financial investments and entire portfolio management, but immediate and current information is available on line. The low tech pen and paper cultures have been transformed into a digital culture. Additionally, since little time is required for number crunching and product pricing, a learning process occurs, and the employee is re-energized. New challenges are encountered, and productivity is increased. The questions of what type of culture is the correct one, and what is required to enhance the competitive ability of an organization do not have a singularly correct answer. What is factual however, is that information technology with its projects and solutions play a pivotal role in defining and propagating a culture. In most cases, there is a cultural shift when a predominantly low tech company starts to embrace new technology, as in the case of the insurance salesperson. Of more significance, is that the cycle time for embracing these changes is much shorter, since there has been a proliferation of innovations in IT. These factors serve to solidify the newly emerging culture.

Another phenomenon occurring in business, is the crossing over of IT executives into and from business positions. Why is this possible and what benefit can be derived from this? Acknowledgment of new business drivers and the leaders that are capable to grow the new organizational frameworks from these influences, both internal such as technological innovations, and external, such as market and economic conditions are the catalysts. IT executives / managers are experiencing and learning from the morphosis within the workplace. Firsthand, they get to understand, and implement the technology. Following this, they get to witness, and sometimes drive the cultural shift that comes from embodying the technology. Corporations that recognize the need to change their culture in order to respond to their customers in the new competitive arena, will look to these IT managers as their "Cultural Managers". As more technology pervades the workplace, cultural differences relative to the innovation will narrow, but other cultural divergence will remain. Also, the workplace will become multidimensional.

Knowledge Management & The Internet

There are many forces at work that help to shape and decide what a culture will be. Knowledge Management, which is the active collection, dissemination, and regular updating of important and relative data, is an important influence. Presently, there is a knowledge revolution taking place within corporations. The desire to build knowledge bases in order to capture intellect is building

momentum. One of the desired benefits of this is the reduction of project cycle time when approaching similar problems. Of course there are several other reasons for creating the knowledge base, but the emphasis has been on efficiency, and creating an entirely new business process within the organization. The technical intricacies are no longer an issue, but the challenge of getting employees to share freely and input the crucial information and tacit knowledge which is ultimately sought becomes insurmountable at times. Knowledge bases can be viewed as a digital or mechanized method of absorptive capacity. Going forward, are fewer employees needed to operate the business? Old habits of hoarding knowledge for job security aren't broken easily. This is a cultural barrier that exists in every industry, both old and new. What will break this cultural barrier? Collaboration between employer and employee with assurances that once the exchange of information takes place, the employee will still be valued is a first step. Clearly the trending of free agency is an impediment to the creation of knowledge bases. Another discouraging trend is the "cataloging" of information accessed on company networks to build employee profiles of knowledge. There are a number of software companies delivering these intrusive packages to corporations. How can collaboration of employee and employer take place when covert methods of gathering personally acquired information actively exist? Also the quality of accumulated information is questionable and difficult to assess in usefulness. Whether or not knowledge management techniques are successful in organizations is irrelevant when discussing the cultural effect on its' employees. Once the cultural equilibrium is disturbed, a divergence occurs, and new offshoots are created. Leadership is pivotal in deciding the fate of the organization when culture is affected. Once a culture is established, there are several internal and external forces that act upon it, ultimately changing it over time. Stronger cultures thrive on this flux, and absorb the benefits. Weaker or fragmented cultures, especially those in the chaotic and stagnation phase tend to remain fragmented longer, as well as develop counter and sub-cultures.

The Internet has emerged as a powerful determinant of culture. It is transforming the workplace and shaping the way people view their jobs and lives. It is no longer possible to remain insular with the Internet instantly providing global capability. How has this shaped the way customer service organizations treat their clients? What new traits are employees required to exhibit? In some respects, cultures are just extended, as in catalog retailers like Lands End. The Internet merely provides an additional vehicle for sales opportunities, and corporate culture isn't adversely affected. For manufacturing companies, the entire business may have to change the way it operates. Potential clients may go on line to view merchandise, collect comparative pricing and look for favorable delivery schedules. Some of the one on one relationships which were prevalent for the past number of years may disappear, due to the proliferation of choices afforded through the Internet. The employee work ethic will change as well. In the past, employees were able to leave at 5PM, and forget about work. Are they compelled to check their E-mail or follow up on leads in the evening? These are all, important questions that have several answers depending upon the nature of the existing culture, and its' "weather-ability" to the new global-centric Internet. There is no doubt that the competitive landscape has already changed due to many factors. The uncertainty lies in the direction it will go, and the new cultures that may develop within companies. Will service organizations become smaller and more efficient, and will manufacturing companies grow to meet the global challenge? With an abundance of available information on line, how will our privacy be compromised, and what effect will this have on employees in general? Will free agency and less dependence on the organization eliminate corporate culture and spur self-serving entities? Some of these questions may seem extreme, but change is accelerated and the digital economy will alter corporate cultures dramatically. The beneficiaries will most likely be, both employer and

employees in successfully run companies having strong and innovative leadership. These are the companies that will continue to innovate, and blaze new trails in products, services and offerings. Companies that are reluctant to accept the technological changes and adapt culturally, will be surpassed or fail.

Essential Elements:

There are a few essential elements required to foster a strong culture and grow an organization. Robert B. Reich outlines them as follows¹:

Money makes It Mutual - Money is a powerful motivator, and has a serious impact on the job market as well as new ventures created, and their subsequent opportunities. Fair compensation is critical in maintaining talented people with a good work ethic.

Mission Makes a Difference – Talented people want to be part of something they can believe in passionately. Sometimes a powerful mission, whatever it is, will drive the workforce to excellence, and directly affect corporate profits.

Learning makes you Grow - Create a culture that values learning. In the knowledge based environment that we are creating, continuous learning is essential in maintaining a business lead, in addition to stimulating the employee, and invoking creative tension. These are critical to the innovative process.

Fun makes it Fresh – Work needs to be fun for sustainability at high energy levels. When work is exciting, stimulating, and enjoyable, people are more pensive, and innovative.

Pride Makes It Special – The best and strongest cultures are created when there is definable accomplishment, and a sense of pride within the organization. Creative energy, talented people, and fresh thought distinguish the best from the others.

Balance Makes it Sustainable – Programs designed to help employees cope with changes in their lives , day care, time off for education, flextime, and even telecommuting are all elements of balance that foster good relations between employee and employer.

In addition to the above elements, it is imperative to note that it is difficult to “grow” a culture in an organization that has not matched its’ true goals with it’s reward system. Many times, companies will publicly state a preference for one thing, but reward something else. For example, the following is taken from Steven Kerr, “An Academy classic: On the Folly of Rewarding A, while hoping for B”, *Academy of Management Executive*.

¹ Parts taken from “The Company of the Future” by Robert B. Reich, Fast Company magazine November 1998

Managers Hope For:	But They Reward:
Teamwork and Collaboration	The Best Individual Performers
Innovative Thinking and Risk Taking	Proven Methods and Not Making Mistakes
Development of People Skills	Technical Achievements and Accomplishments
Employee Involvement and Empowerment	Tight Control over Operations and Resources
High Achievement	Another Years routine effort
Commitment To Quality	Shipping on Time, even with defects
Long Term Growth	Quarterly Earnings

Although the various strains of influence will affect corporate cultures in different ways, strong leadership can help shape its' form to produce excellent results when armed with right mix of ingredients. Nothing is guaranteed when applying different management techniques and methodologies. Continuous change, however, is guaranteed, and the newly emergent culture will either nurture or impede innovation in the organization.

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