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Organisational culture change — from the bottom up

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A complex process that calls for an understanding of individual and organisational values.

January 10, 2011: The changing culture is a complex problem faced by many organisations. It's a lot like repairing the engine of a moving vehicle. While new firms have the luxury of gradually building the culture that best serves their interest, larger organisations tend to find themselves 'stuck' with cultures that may be completely at odds with their stated vision or strategy. The big question then is whether it is possible to change culture mid-course. The answer may lie in understanding how culture is created in the first place.

INDIVIDUAL & ORGANISATIONAL VALUES

The crux of culture is values — in simple terms values expressed in the form of behaviours is what is perceived as culture. Values themselves may be of two kinds — individual and organisational.

The source of organisational values is usually the values of the founders. However, with time, as the firm transitions the values could change. This could be due to a lack of attention paid to the developing culture, particularly when meeting the demands of rapid growth. This takes the form of indiscriminate addition of individuals whose values may be at odds with the founding values. While organisational values may be documented formally, the 'real' organisational values are informally "stored" in the minds of members of the organisation.

Individual values may be of two kinds — expressed, and suppressed. Expressed values are those that members of an organisation choose to express in their behaviour based on their assessment of what is required in the organisation or 'what works'. The other values possessed by an individual member may be suppressed, at least in the organisational context. It is this interplay between "stored" organisational values and individual values that develops into "culture" in the manifested form. The metaphor of an iceberg could represent this interplay. What is seen above the surface is culture, but what lies beneath is the cause — the complex, ever-evolving dynamic of organisational and individual values.

THE RIGHT CULTURE

The next question that arises is — what is the right kind of culture for a particular organisation. The simple answer to this would be — the culture in which there is no conflict between organisational and individual values, and where organisational values themselves are aligned to what the organisation seeks to achieve. It is important to recognise that the culture manifested at any time is indeed already the most appropriate culture for the current interplay between organisational and individual member values.

However, this culture may happen to be completely counter-productive to the organisational goals, owing to degraded organisational values or high conflict between individual and organisational values. Any attempt to transform culture by simply manipulating the manifest dimension of culture will not succeed unless the underlying interplay of values is not addressed.

Thus, culture transformation must address both organisational and individual values. On the organisational values front, one may first need to begin with an assessment of what the organisation's values really are. If the current state of values is a diluted version of the original intent, a fresh rediscovery or redefinition of values may need to take place in order to define an ideal state.

On the individual values front, the first intervention should be at the 'input' stage, where new members are inducted. If a well-defined organisational identity or value is in place, it is not difficult to identify and add individuals who are in alignment. The bigger challenge is for existing members. Here, the solution is likely to be a more gradual one. It may involve a reassessment of all levels in the hierarchy to determine the "culture" icons best suited for leadership roles in the "new world" as it were. Leadership roles are the key fulcrums upon which culture is reinforced. This is because leadership behaviours typically tend to activate the relevant individual follower individuals

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the followers subscribe to those values at least partially).

Over time, a culture transformation process would start to work on the organisation's memory, replacing negative versions of the organisation's values that are "stored" in the minds of members with fresh versions, till the new version becomes the new normal.

Setting right a malfunctioning or poorly aligned organisational culture is undoubtedly a complex process and may require an intuitive, right-brained mindset on the part of the designers, as well as multiple iterations to arrive at the right solution.

Finally, culture needs to be an integral component of organisational strategy, as it is the foundational building block upon which the organisation's purpose can be manifested into reality.

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Keywords: organisation management, human resources, corporate value

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