

Listening is Culture Change

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Listening does not *cause* culture change. Listening *is* culture change.

Culture changes at the very moment you listen, not later.

In the moment of listening, your interpretation of the choices you are making is suspended. In truly listening, fixed positions and preconceptions disappear into a malleable and fluid world. Culture stops changing the moment you stop listening, the moment choices are made and the past-based point of view is fixated and transparent.

In their efforts to change organizations, leaders come face-to-face with the invisible grip of culture. This grip thwarts many heartfelt efforts to have their organization's future be fundamentally different from its past, even in the face of urgent requirements for cost savings, innovation, customer service, and breakthrough performance. Projects and training, while effective, do not seem to produce the magic needed to alter and sustain people's behavior in a culture rooted in history. What's needed is more personal. The magic begins with truly listening to those around you. To start, people need to recognize that they do not listen this way.

The Power of Not Listening.

The way to stop a culture from shifting is to make sure people do not listen to one another openly, without preconceptions, and with deep appreciation of the feelings and concerns of others. New markets, new businesses, new levels of growth, and new relationships are prevented by 'not listening'.

To illustrate, Ben missed a meeting today. Without Ben, a division head, people felt free to cooperate. Normally, at the slightest hint of criticism, Ben explains and justifies his

division, his people, and his actions. He stops listening, and since he is such a powerful, intelligent guy, everyone is suppressed. Even the strongest among them is bound in cultural cement. Nothing exceptional happens with conviction, except his pet projects. Whenever his turf is approached he is 'reasonable' in reframing the conversation in terms of his own interests. There seems nothing to do but sit in frustration or attack him, which is culturally impolite and frightening in the first place. His ability to 'not listen' is seamless.

Following my last meeting with Ben, I woke up in the middle of the night thinking about the French Revolution and how those people who could have cut off so many heads at the guillotine. They must've been very angry, I thought. For the first time, I saw the terrible power of not listening in its ability to turn normal folk into people who kill off what they don't like. The King of France would have been better off if he had listened.

Today, however, without Ben present, the company briefly had a future of boundary-less engagement. Almost everyone took risks in saying what didn't work and what might be possible. The philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "A challenge is not the same as a clash, and divergence does not mean a conflict." Ben hasn't learned this yet. His first improbable step will be to notice and confront his lack of listening.

In trying to change a company culture, the dilemma is that 'not listening' is more powerful than listening. The effect is suppressive and intimidating and there seems to be little one can do about it since the other party doesn't listen in the first place.

Susan is a CEO who illustrates the power of not listening. In fact, she is better at 'not listening' than anyone else in the group. Usually, a boss creates the boundary conditions for what's possible in the way people listen. No one dares say what Susan won't listen to. She is able to focus her 'not listening' on any topic she doesn't care about

There is an absurdity in not listening. A typical assumption is that, "If I don't listen, I won't have to face it." However, by not listening, you drive the power of it underground.

Susan's career was eventually destroyed. As she lost the support and loyalty of her best people, her position was undermined. Too many people had become angry at being ignored.

Not listening has the power of the Holy Grail in the wrong direction. People shrivel in a glacial hell of polite and business-like suppression. The culture of the company becomes solid as a rock, and doomed to persistence in a changeless universe.

Chief Executives are a particular case in point. It seems that wherever a CEO does not listen, the culture often becomes a mirror of the less attractive sides of her or his own personality. In Susan's company, people avoided public display of problems and differences, instead spending much of their time and energy complaining behind closed doors.

What is Culture?

Edgar Schein, Sloan School Professor of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, defined culture as a pattern of basic assumptions, invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration. These have worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, feel, think, and act in relation to these problems. Because such assumptions work repeatedly, they're likely to be taken for granted and to have dropped out of awareness.

A company's culture is transparent to the people in it. As long as people do not recognize the grip that their culture has on them, they lose their independence of action. It is not the particular culture that's the problem. It is the unthinking transparency, the invisibility of it all. In one international conglomerate, management never came to a conclusion on strategic questions. They met and talked endlessly and, even though they recognized that they were inconclusive, the fact was that management *could not* reach a conclusion on

strategic issues. New members of the team noticed privately, but learned the routine quickly.

In many ways, culture helps a company be as great as it is. Culture gives identity, direction, and stability. However, if you want to improve innovation, culture can be your enemy. If you want to empower people, culture will often suppress your efforts. Culture itself does not care about you or your company's future. Culture is simply there to protect and preserve the company, or whatever the company thinks it is. Culture is a mechanism which operates independently of you and your efforts to improve.

For example, if your organization thinks of itself as entrepreneurial, the culture will suppress people who try to get it to be "professionally managed" or anything that smacks of not being entrepreneurial. If people in an organization identify themselves totally with their client relationships or the contribution to short-term shareholder wealth, they will prevent the development of business opportunities that do not rely on client relationships or that promise long-term growth with short-term risk. If people in a company identify themselves totally with their public image, they may act in self-destructive ways in response to a threat to this image.

Seen from the outside, culture is everything that impacts, determines and shapes what most people do, think, and how they work with each other. Culture is like the weather that transparently dictates whether you live in an igloo or grass hut; whether you eat a diet of mangoes and papaya or smoked salmon and goat cheese. From the outside looking in, culture is all-powerful, all-determining, all-pervasive and unremitting. Culture is what makes an American an American and a Chinese person a Chinese person, and defines what a boss is and what a worker is.

From the viewpoint of the individual, culture is nothing more than the choices one makes. A less obvious truth is that culture determines the options from which one makes choices. At Canyon Ranch Health Spa in Tucson, Arizona, all the choices made are in service of physical, nutritional, or spiritual fitness. The only choices people *can* make are good for

them, or they can choose not to participate. At Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida, there is a culture where the only choices offered are for wholesome family entertainment. Culture as seen by watching the behavior of members inside the culture is nothing but the choices people make, second-by-second from the options given by the culture.

Therefore, to change the systemic imperatives of a culture you need to create new options. This is impossible from inside existing culture. That's the rub. Paradoxically, you need to find a way to step outside of the culture even though it does not give you permission for this.

In a U.K. engine company, I was helping a group sort out some problems when someone came into the room and whispered something to one of the participants. After a quiet flurry of activity, we went on with the meeting. It was odd and the session didn't seem normal after that. Finally, I asked what happened and they said that Harry downstairs had just died, and we should just go on with the meeting. Perplexed, I asked if we should do something and they said no, there really wasn't much to do, and someone was looking for Harry's wife. So we went on with the meeting. A human being had died, a life was no more, and whatever was in their hearts, nobody cared in public. Looked at from the outside, people were simply operating inside the mechanism of a culture which muted most genuine and emotional self expression.

Marilyn Smith, an attorney, mediator, business broker, and entrepreneur has developed an excellent definition of culture change. She says it's 'when a group of people looks at the same thing but sees it differently.' A culture change happens when you are sitting as a group, in the exact same place, looking out at the exact same circumstances, and they do not look the same as they did before. It's a result of talking and really communicating, listening to people you had never truly listened to before, even though you have talked to them frequently. It's in finding words to express things you never fully expressed before. As a result of this communication, old and familiar issues have a new fluidity. This point might then be the sendoff for taking new kinds of actions and having new types of outcomes. When you see a group with a new set of eyes, you can see the expectations and

constrictions that you live and work inside of; and for however long it lasts, you can move about in a new way.”

It's common to change structure, circumstances, equipment, and information systems and still have people operate in very much the same way. Culture change is a change in the collective point of view. It's not the things out there that have to change; it's the point of view of the people who are looking. When Campbell Soup of Canada senior management stood up and spoke with a single vulnerable voice to a large group of employees who distrusted them, they were in that moment seen as human and honest. In that moment, the culture changed from one of non-cooperation, where there was no possibility for working together to a culture of telling the truth, cutting costs dramatically, and having the confidence that they could work out the future together.

Culture change is a vulnerable moment of shifting from one point of view to another. Since it's our point of view that lets us make sense of organizational life, we are very reluctant to let go of this point of view, no matter how self-defeating or how much evidence there is that it doesn't work. Such self-defeating points of view years ago include IBM's 'main frame' point of view' and General Motors, 'We are number one' point of view, both of which kept them noncompetitive and stuck in the past.

In contrast, Apple Computer's success in consistently innovating better than their competitors came from Steve Jobs' consistently pulling the rug on behavior and culture determined by what had been done in the past. Whether a point of view is one that causes difficulty or one that seems vibrant and fulfilling, it's worth ongoing reflection.

Culture Change *is* Listening.

A company culture is constructed of the ways people already listen, to each other and to their customers. It constitutes their point of view and all of their opinions. In the magic moments of listening, there is no culture -- only possibility, a total void of history. A stuck point of view becomes suddenly malleable and people are free to allow for the possibility of other points of view, new action and new results.

While Newtonian physics states that there is one measurable reality, Einstein's physics says that what's real depends on your point of view. In this world, you can't really relate to someone successfully unless you know how it is for them, not as it is for you. Such listening is like an alchemists 'Philosopher's Stone,' turning the base metal of opinion into the gold of potential cooperation. Culture is everything that is affecting you in the moment. Culture change requires moments of the zero gravity that comes from truly listening.

This unique approach means listening with deep appreciation for the feelings and concerns of other people and other groups. When this kind of listening happens, a point of view can shift. When this does not happen, a point of view will not shift.

If culture is history repeating itself into the future, then listening openly without preconception thwarts that process. We are left with what we want in the future in a whole new framework of uncertainty, risk, excitement, fear, and the possibility of true innovation. No wonder most cultures don't change much. If listening is culture change, the voyage one must commit to is like Columbus setting sail on a flat Earth. It is a voyage only for the stout of heart, in the future of unclaimed territory. It's a journey for leaders who mean to have a future not mandated by the institutional and collective past of individual members, and especially themselves.

Such listening is a magnet for new ideas, a force field that attracts creative conversation. Such listening is not a technique. It is not a quick fix. In education and advertising, the subject of listening is largely trivialized and turned into another good idea or admirable, but unused method. Listening, however, *can* become a regular practice in work and personal life, and become as inseparable from one's own life as being a parent or a friend. At this level, it is magical and rare. It's also the Cork in the Bottle of our dreams for what we really want -- for companies and people.