

The Geometry of Character and Culture

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In this essay I explore patterns and variations – and the interplay between contradictions that often emerge from this interplay. Specifically, I address the dynamics of individual character and organizational culture.

I have been a fan of the television series called *Treme*, which portrays the life of men and women living in New Orleans following Katrina. It is a unique series because it blends a set of strong, interweaving story lines with great New Orleans music and food (though unfortunately we as viewers can't actually taste the food!). It is also very special for a more fundamental reason. As one of the creators of the series mentioned during an interview, *Treme* is all about the interplay between character and culture.

As I have thought about this interplay, I have come to recognize that masterful coaching will inevitably address both the character of the client and the culture in which this client resides. The coaching intervention must be masterful because neither character nor culture is usually visible to the client. To use a term applied many years ago by Michael Polanyi (the scientist and philosophy), the dynamics of character and culture are founded in *tacit knowledge*. (Polanyi and Nye, 2015) At some level, character and culture are known by the client, but they are not consciously known nor are they easily articulated by the client. The masterful coach can be of great value to their client in moving both character and culture into the client's conscious awareness.

How is this reflective process engaged – and what exactly are character and culture? Let me address the latter question first. Character is about the enduring traits, values and perspectives held by someone. On a continuum, we can place mood at one end and character at the other end. In many ways, character is equivalent to personality, though the term character seems to imply something more about fundamental values than does the word "personality." I will have more to say about this shortly. The most important point to be made about character is that it does not readily change.

Conversely, the mood which we experience at any one point in time – whether it be anger, fear, joy or surprise (to mention only a few of the many types of mood) – is temporary and dependent in large part on the setting in which we find ourselves. The setting tends to induce anger, fear, joy, surprise, panic, etc. This dimension of human behavior is often identified as state. Conversely, character and personality are often identified as trait (though as I just mentioned “Character” seems to imply something more than trait).

Coaching, Character and Culture

The distinction between state and trait is perhaps most clearly (and importantly) drawn between state-anxiety and trait-anxiety. Anyone can experience state-anxiety when confronted with a situation that is fraught with potential physical or psychological harm. It would be maladaptive not to experience anxiety (and to use this anxiety to activate a fight/flight/freeze response). By contrast, the state-anxiety condition exists when a person is constantly anxious. This person is always (or almost always) ready to fight, flight or freeze and views all conditions as perilous. Typically, a person experiencing trait-anxiety is in need of psychiatric care and will often require some form of medication.

A similar distinction can be drawn between culture, on the one hand, and climate, on the other hand. Organizational (and societal) culture is enduring and highly resistant to change; conversely, organizational (and societal) climate will often change, depending on the conditions confronting the organization (or society). Much as in the case of personal mood, collective climate can be filled with anger, fear, joy, surprise, etc. The climate of an organization might not shift as frequently and rapidly as one’s individual mood, however, it certainly does change and the people working in the organization are likely to find that their own personal mood changes in response to the climate shifts.

The Three C’s

These distinctions to be drawn between mood and character and between climate and culture are not just interesting for those doing psychological research and clinical assessments, they are also important for a professional coach to keep in mind when working over an extended period of time with a client. The three C's can be a key to effective organizational intervention: Coaching, Character and Culture.

Don't try to change character or culture. Rather, help your client figure out how they can take advantage of the character or culture and how the strengths inherent in character and culture can be used in an appropriate manner - and how these strengths can be overused or used in an inappropriate manner.

In seeking to make sense of the ways in which to surface and address the tacitly held dimensions of character and culture, I am reminded of a distinction that is sometimes drawn in the field of mathematics between the domains of mathematical analysis, algebra and geometry. While analysis primarily concerns the nature of change, algebra deals with the nature of structure, and geometry deals with the nature of shape.

The SPA Model

These domains, in turn, brought to mind the distinction that Goodwin Watson (Watson and Johnson, 1972) drew many years ago between the three dimensions through which we can influence the functioning of organizations and societies: (1) structure (S), (2) process (P) and (3) attitude (A). The first dimension (structure) contains the formal elements of an organization: the organization chart and reporting relationships, buildings, technologies, official strategic plans, etc. The structures are visible and can readily be articulated. They are the stable, enduring "snap shots" of the organization.

The second dimension (process) contains the ongoing way in which people inside the organizational structure operate. This dimension is best conveyed not through a static snapshot, but rather through a movie that documents the behaviors taking place. The process dimension includes behaviors related to such critical organizational functions as problem-solving, conflict-management and decision-making.

The process dimension will always “trump” structure. The leaders of an organization can have a formal policy in place, but the “real” way in which this policy is enacted (process) may diverge significantly from the policy. Technologies can be purchased for use in an organization, but this does not mean that the technology is being used in a proper manner – or that the new technologies is being used at all. Process is changed not by issuing additional policies, but by offering education, training, and related developmental strategies. If all else fails, then process is modified by offering rewards (the “carrot”) or imposing penalties for non-compliance (the “stick”).

The third dimension (attitude) identified by Watson can't be seen or viewed either as a snapshot or movie. Attitude is felt but not seen. It is inferred from the ways in which members of an organization solve problems, manage conflict and make decisions – but it is always an inference. Attitude concerns how members of an organization feel about working in the existing structure and engaging other members of the organization through use of specific processes.

Attitude will often “trump” both structure and process. We might be forced to “dance” (process) in a specific “ballroom” (structure), but don't have to like this dance or this ballroom – and we are likely to modify the dance (especially when those in authority aren't looking) and might soon be looking for alternative ballrooms where a different dance is prescribed (or at least allowed).

The first of Watson's three dimensions seem immediately to fit with two of the mathematics domains. The mathematics of structure (algebra) seems, obviously to be related to Watson's structural dimension, while the mathematics of change (analysis) seems to be related to Watson's dimension of process. But what about the third dimension that Watson identifies. Does attitude relate to the third mathematical domain (geometry)? I think there is a bridge to be built between attitude and geometry that provides for new approaches to or at least insights about masterful professional coaching.

Before moving to this analysis regarding attitude and geometry, it is important to note that Watson conceives of “attitude” as a dimension of human life that encompasses the dynamics of character and culture. For Watson, attitude includes anything that can’t be directly observed (as is the case with structure and process). As I have already noted, attitudes must be inferred from the behavior that is exhibited. Though attitudes exist at the level of tacit knowledge for the person who has the attitude, this dimension of human life has a powerful impact on the functioning of an organization or society.

The Rules of Topology

We can now turn to the more focused analysis of character and culture when creating a bridge to the mathematical field of geometry. Specifically, I propose that character and culture are both about the nature of shape. This seems like a very odd (or at least abstract) statement to make. Let me try to articulate what I mean here in concrete terms that relate specifically to masterful coaching strategies.

Topology and the Three C’s

The branch of mathematics that is concerned with shape is broadly identified as geometry; however, there is a sub-branch called topology from which I have gained many insights about the three C’s: coaching, character and culture. In topology, the primary concern is not with the size of things, but rather with the form that is taken and with the ways two shapes can be equivalent even if one is much bigger than the other. One can even talk about a microscopic (or even sub-atomic) shape being equivalent to the shape of a galaxy. In recent years this notion of equivalence has shown up in the analysis of fractals (shapes that replicate themselves at multiple levels). We see that fractal shapes are to be found in the branches of a pine tree, in a river basin, or in far-distant galaxy clusters.

We can also apply this concept of equivalency when examining character and culture. One’s personal character shows up as consistent behavior in everyday life and in the big decisions that are made at critical periods in one’s life. The same values are engaged

when buying a tube of toothpaste as when choosing a life partner or career. Many years ago, I did a study with one of my graduate students regarding the founding stories of couples who have been together for many years. We found that there were certain interactive patterns in the founding narrative that still show up in the lives of these men and women. These patterns even show up in the very special way the founding story is told by the couple.

Similarly, there are cultural patterns in organizations and societies that are displayed in small rituals and in very big rituals. These patterns are evident in the daily habits of those who reside in the culture – and in the clothing, greeting patterns and humor that is on constant (or frequent) display in the organization or society. These patterns are also evident in the less frequent events operating in the organization or society – retirement parties and funerals, holidays and vacation plans. In other words, character and culture are not about how big something is; they are instead about how often and where character and culture are evident. And this is where masterful coaching and can come to the foreground. This is where Watson’s dimensions of process and attitude play a critical role.

It seems that in topology one can stretch, bend or squish a shape, yet it still retains its equivalency. Similarly, we can stretch, bend or squish character or culture and it still is recognizable. This represents the key role played by adaptability of character and culture. Rigid character and culture soon are outdated and eventually lead to death. A pragmatic balance between continuity of character and culture, on the one hand, and flexibility of character and culture, on the other hand, is critical. And here once again masterful coaching can come to the foreground.

A limitation is imposed when we consider the nature of topologies. While we can stretch, bend and squish, we are not allowed to cut or paste shapes (according to the rules of topology). This is an important limitation. In system terms, we would say that we can engage in 1st Order change (stretch, bend, squish) when working with character or culture, but should not engage in 2nd Order change (cutting or pasting) regarding

character or culture. Returning to the insights offered by Goodwin Watson, character and culture are found not in the dimensions of structure and process, but in the dimension of attitudes.

Structures can be cut and pasted (2nd Order), and process can be altered through 1st Order stretching, bending and squishing, but attitude requires something quite different regarding strategies of appreciation and engagement (primary topics I am addressing in this series of essays). As I noted previously, we should appreciate character and culture, and we certainly can leverage and modify (1st order) character and culture, but we should not try to cut or paste character or culture. This is usually counterproductive – or it is highly destructive, Pasting is what leads to contradiction and irony. In 21st Century organizations there is usually a fair amount of pasting: mergers, international outreach (with the presence of multiple cultures) and multi-generational workforces (often up to four generations with the extended work life of many older employees).

Invariants

All shapes have certain invariant properties. No matter how you expand, twist or squish the shape, these properties remain present. Similarly, character and culture are invariants. They remain in place even as the person or organization adjusts to new circumstances. As a coach, each of us can help our clients identify these invariants in their own behavior (character) or in their organization's behavior (culture).

That, in turn, helps them identify their own character or culture and the courses of stability and leverage. In looking at shapes, we find that there are trivial invariants and there are strong invariants. Similarly, there are trivial and strong invariants in character and culture. Masterful organizational coaches can help their clients discern the different between trivial and strong invariants – which can yield critical insights about where and how a coaching intervention should take place in the organization.

Location and Multi-Dimensionality

A second important insight can be derived from the field of topology. This insight centers on geographic complexity and the capacity to locate something in space. How much information does it take to locate any entity? If the entity exists in a complex space, then it takes a large amount of information to locate it. A less complex space enables us to locate an entity with a minimal amount of information. It is possible to conceive (if not envision) an entity that can only be located with four or five or even twenty different pieces of information. This is why it is possible to speak about 4-D space or even 20-D space.

It is useful to remind ourselves when we are using a term like “4=D” that the “D” refers to dimension. This happens to be the same term that Goodwin Watson adopts when identifying the structures, processes and attitudes of an organization. I consider this redundancy in terms to be quite valuable. Watson is suggesting, in essence, that an organization (or any human system) can be described (located in space) through the use of three dimensions: structure, process, attitude.

As I am noting throughout this series of essays: organizational are complex, multi-dimensional entities. When only one or two of Watson’s dimensions are accessed by a leader or coach, then the organization has not been properly “located.” Mistakes are likely to be made when any coaching intervention is engaged if one or more of these three dimensions is ignored. The intervention will inevitably fail in the long-term if the organization is conceived as a one-dimensional or even two-dimensional entity. Leaders need to consider all three dimensions. We can be of great service to our clients, as coach, if we encourage the exploration of all three dimensions.

In returning to the application of typology we can consider what type of entity would be simple and what would be complex. A one-dimensional entity can be located by one piece of information. For example, a street number enables us to locate a person when

we are on a specific street. If there is only one street, then all I need is the street number. In this regard, the street operates like a straight line and it only takes this one number to indicate where on this straight line a person or house is located. Similarly, if there is only one index of success in an organization (for example, profit or the bottom line), then it is easy to locate the organization on a one dimensional plain. What about multiple indices – which require that we conceive of the organization as occupying multiple dimensions (and as a result becoming substantially more complex)? What about an organization that requires all three of Watson’s dimensions?

When living in one dimensional space, one is simply looking up and down a line. There is no freedom of movement, As noted by Edwin Abbott (1992) in his classic piece of science fiction, *Flatland*, we can’t even imagine a 2nd or 3rd Dimension. One-dimensional character and one-dimensional cultures are set on a line. There is only more or less of the same thing (1st Order change). There is no freedom, no depth of perspective (1st Order Learning) -there is nothing more than a “bottom line” mentality or a “my way or the highway” attitude regarding leadership and top-down control.

Concluding Comments

The message contained in this essay is quite simple: we can help out client, as coach, recognize the need for an appreciation of all three dimensions identified by Watson. Additionally (and perhaps even more importantly), we can help them acknowledge that this broadening perspective on life in their organization will inevitably lead not just to new insights about their organization and about appropriate change strategies, but also to ironic recognition of many contradictions that inevitably arise when multiple dimensions are being explored.

In other words, we invite our clients to acknowledge that they are living in Hard Irony. They come to know that a multi-dimensional understanding and appreciation of the complex, unpredictable and turbulent world in which they work will inevitably produce irony and contradiction.

References

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