

Learning and Behaviour: Addressing the Culture Change Conundrum (Part 1)+

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In situations such as tackling corporate governance failings or wanting more entrepreneurial and creative approaches to both challenges and opportunities one response from those within businesses and external commentators is to call for culture change. In part 1 of this two part article we will examine some issues relating to culture change and, in particular, whether it is necessary or desirable if there are quicker, practical and affordable ways of altering behaviours while organisational cultures remain unchanged.

Meanwhile criticisms of corporate cultures continue. On occasion those responsible for corporate learning are asked by CEOs to contribute to initiatives to change a corporate culture. How should training and development professionals respond? What questions should they, directors and boards be asking in relation to changing corporate culture and conduct? In part 2 of this article we will examine some particular problem areas and the implications of one alternative to culture change for leadership and training and development.

Underpinning Investigation

The investigation on which the two parts of the article are based follows a programme of critical success factor (CSF), 'issue' and other surveys that have identified CSFs for key corporate activities and what high performers do differently in these areas (Coulson-Thomas, 2007). Using a mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2003; Tashakkori and Teddle, 2003; Creswell and Clark, 2007) it builds upon and complements their findings with the use of more recent case studies to understand twelve early adoptions of performance support in different sectors to assess its use as a means of enabling average operators to emulate the superior approaches of high performers (Coulson-Thomas, 2012a & b, 2013; Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003). The applications examined were discussed with the relevant technical architect and the results obtained corroborated with commissioner/user performance data and/or documented assessments/reactions.

Access to both quantitative data from surveys and qualitative data from case studies allows one to triangulate findings, and this two-part article presents those that specifically relate to how an approach to learning and changing behaviour, namely performance support, can address a culture conundrum (Jonsen and Jehn, 2009). However, one should start by endeavouring to understand the drivers for change, what is meant by corporate culture, and how a desire for different behaviour has given rise to demands for changing corporate cultures.

Whether one's interest is governance, sustainability, innovation or entrepreneurship one often finds that what is being sought is certain changes of behaviour in particular areas rather than a fundamental shift towards a common set of values and beliefs, such as might be sought in a totalitarian state. The question then becomes whether behaviour can be changed independently of corporate cultures (Coulson-Thomas, 2014a, b, c & d).

Requirements for Change

Corporate entities whose stakeholders may represent a diversity of religions, nationalities, cultures and political viewpoints can face multiple challenges. They may have to respond in a variety of

ways in different locations according to the context, division, function or applicable policies, laws, regulations or codes. The Chairman of the UK's Financial Conduct Authority has expressed the view that while there may be calls for culture change the priority is often to influence and/or change the conduct of those in front-line and customer facing roles (Griffith-Jones, 2014). The challenge is helping them to behave in desired ways.

Many boards face a dual challenge of preventing malpractice and inappropriate behaviour and encouraging and enabling responses that achieve corporate objectives. Corporate boards need to secure competitive advantage for their companies as well as ensuring compliance (Charan, 2005). Ideal approaches are those that can simultaneously achieve multiple desired outcomes (Coulson-Thomas, 2012a & b, 2013).

The South African King III Report (2009) stresses the importance of ethical conduct and the responsibility of boards for ensuring the values and conduct they espouse are adhered to across corporate organisations. In response to the challenge articulated by John Griffith-Jones is there a cost-effective way of preventing unacceptable conduct and ensuring effective, ethical and sustainable decisions and actions, particularly in areas of high risk and where the impacts of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour can be significant?

Many boards endeavour to provide effective governance, but they also want to build high performance and creative and entrepreneurial organisations. Howard Oden (1997) has linked innovation and intrapreneurship to the management of corporate culture. New offerings and additional options and choices are often the consequence of appropriate behaviours. Calls are often made for an entrepreneurial culture when the need is for a combination of supporting infrastructure, relevant behaviour and a removal of barriers to enterprise.

Managing Corporate Culture

The management of change is a common element of management development programmes. The ability to lead and manage change can be an important consideration when supervisors and managers are selected and/or considered for promotion. It is also a key requirement when CEOs are selected (Kotter, 1995).

Judging by the number of culture change and/or management of change programmes are under-way many boards seem to be seeking to change behaviours within organisations for which they are responsible. The drivers of these initiatives include traditional concerns such as improving performance and preventing favouritism, corruption and the abuse of power and a desire to avoid a repeat of behaviours that have led in recent years to governance failures, financial bail-outs and compensation payments for mis-selling.

It is over twenty years since early study of the management of corporate culture (Baker, 1980). A desire to change corporate cultures and the 'management of change' have become lucrative fields of practice for management consultants. Corporate culture has also been related to performance (Kotter & Heskett, 1992). It is sometimes viewed as a core component of leadership (Block, 2003) and relevant to concerns such as sustainability (Probst & Raisch, 2005, Coulson-Thomas, 2014c).

While a desire to change behaviours might be understandable in the light of recent experience why is there so much emphasis upon changing corporate cultures? Are such changes possible and desirable? Returning to the central question posed above, is a change of culture always needed in order to change behaviours? To answer these questions we draw upon findings of an enquiry into more cost-effective, quicker and less disruptive routes to high performance organisations that has led to reports on change, talent and knowledge management (Coulson-Thomas, 2012 a & b, 2013).

Differing Views of 'Culture'

The significance of culture change depends upon one's definition and view of culture. One regularly encounters people who describe corporate culture in terms of "the way we do things around here." Others see behaviours as but one manifestation of culture which itself - and in varying degrees - might reflect aspects of peoples' social, economic, ethnic, national, religious, educational, family and historical background and experience. Such diverse, and at times deep, roots might influence aspirations, assumptions, expectations, pre-dispositions and views as well as behaviours.

Edgar Schein (1989) identified various elements of culture which he categorised in terms of artefacts, values and basic assumptions. While influencing certain behaviours, many of these elements may not need to be altered in order to change an approach to particular jobs, which raises the possibility of changing conduct independently of culture (Coulson-Thomas, 2012 a & b, 2013).

Elliot Jacques (1951) adopted a pragmatic view of organizational culture and defined culture in terms of a "customary and traditional way of thinking and of doing things". Changing an entrenched way of thinking and behaviour in general might be regarded as a significant challenge. However, what if one focused upon how best to undertake particular jobs or tasks such as innovation that many people find difficult? Would they willingly adopt a quicker, easier and more rewarding way of doing them?

Pettigrew (1990) has raised the question of whether culture is manageable. The findings of the five-year investigation led by the author suggest some aspects of a deep-rooted culture and associated and sincerely held beliefs may be very difficult to change, if not impossible within an available time-scale. In comparison, certain changes of behaviour can be quickly and relatively easily achieved. Those who devise incentive plans and fail to think through their consequences sometimes regret that changes of behaviour can so rapidly occur.

The results of the investigation suggest the contemporary focus upon 'culture', and creating or changing corporate values and cultures, should be questioned by those who favour evidence-based approaches, and might be difficult to justify in terms of the results obtained (Coulson-Thomas, 2012 a & b, 2013). Achieving a change of values and cultures is often problematic, and may not be needed if pursued as a means to an end, the objective being to achieve a change of behaviour.

Handling Cultural Diversity

Organisations today may serve customers, buy from suppliers, recruit staff and engage with other stakeholders from a wide range of cultures. The cultural mix can vary by area and location and might change over time. Certain cultures may expect and even demand responses that are quite different from those sought by others. Staff in one function or business unit may need to behave differently from colleagues working in other areas. A culture that is suitable for one group and the relationships it needs to build might not be appropriate for another. Also diversity might be a stimulus to creativity.

Population movements can increase the diversity of a labour force. Mergers, acquisitions and international expansion can increase the range of national and other cultures to be found in an organisation (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Various micro-cultures may exist in larger organisations. Could their differences be addressed by a job, task or work-group focused approach. Executives sometimes play up the challenge of managing across borders to inflate their grades and salaries, but studies of critical success factors have shown that the best way of undertaking particular jobs is often very similar in different contexts and cultures (Coulson-Thomas, 2007, 2012 a & b, 2013).

Preferences, aspirations and values can also vary within and across different groups. Exercises to define common, universal, human or corporate values often result in statements pitched at such a high level of generalization as to make them of limited value when navigating the nuances and expectations of a particular situation. One wonders why so much attention is paid to cultures and values when the priority is often to quickly achieve some form of behaviour change. Is it because people persist in thinking sustainable behaviour change is difficult to achieve?

Challenging Culture Change Assumptions

The evidence suggests that many boards need to challenge assumptions that cultures and values need to be changed (Coulson-Thomas, 2012 a, 2013). The case for effective teamwork is not new (Adair, 1986), but is a common culture across diverse activities necessary and desirable? Might a commitment to building a common culture and entrench a particular set of values result in the marginalisation or exclusion of certain groups and communities? Might more diversity lead to questioning, consideration of a wider range of options and greater creativity? Could a drive for unity lead to group-think (Janis, 1972)?

Far too much effort may be devoted to expensive, protracted and at times disruptive initiatives to change corporate cultures and structures that deliver very little in terms of tangible results, when far more cost-effective options are available (Coulson-Thomas, 2012 a & b, 2013). Should the aim be to ensure people behave appropriately and excel at responding to requirements, wherever they are, whenever they encounter challenges and opportunities, and whatever their cultures and values?

Achieving what is required is often a question of providing better and more appropriate support that helps people to understand and do what is expected of them. There is evidence that people who are better informed, trained and prepared are likely to perform better in ways that impact upon the customers and other people they serve (Kling, 1995). As well as understanding what needs to change and why, and what they can do to help to bring it about, people may also need to be properly equipped and enabled to do what is required in an effective way that is compliant with relevant laws and other applicable requirements.

People also need to remain current and vital. In diverse, uncertain and insecure but exciting, competitive and rapidly evolving business environments in which future developments and possibilities are not always easy to foresee setting out to create a community of cultural clones may be both dangerous and risky. It might also be unnecessary when cost-effective means exist of providing 24/7 support that can change approaches, ensure compliance and enable responsible and sustainable responses as and when required (Coulson-Thomas, 2012 a & b, 2013).

The need for flexibility is increasingly important. Schein (1991) 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, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore is to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems”. The best way of undertaking a particular task can vary as circumstances, requirements and priorities evolve and new problems arise. Performance support that can be quickly updated and is available on mobile devices can enable rapid adaptation.

Quickly Changing Behaviour

There are various ways of changing behaviours irrespective of corporate culture. Incentives such as sales commission can change the behaviour of a sales force over night when payments for orders of certain offerings are increased and those for other products and services are reduced. Another option

is performance support which can be employed in a wide range of situations and contexts. The recent five-year investigation reveals that in various forms from paper check-lists to mobile device applications it offers a cost-effective route to high-performance organisations and the simultaneous achievement of multiple objectives (Coulson-Thomas, 2007, 2012a & b, 2013).

The power of incentives to change behaviours can be dangerous when driven by greed and an excessive focus upon short-term organisational needs or when they lead to conduct that is contrary to that sought by regulators (Moxey & Berendt, 2008). A heavy focus upon organisational targets can lead to the interests of customers and other stakeholders being short changed. In the run up to the 2008 financial crisis certain bank boards should have been more vigilant in regard to the use of incentives and targets. The effective chairmanship of boards is a vital requirement (Cadbury, 1990).

In comparison, performance support can allow a wider range of interests to be accommodated and can embrace checks and balances to ensure compliance. A focus upon helping and supporting is conducive of greater customer focus. Conversations with developers, adopters and users suggest that the use of performance support can lead to a reduced need for incentives and targets. It can also result in a greater alignment of interests. Individuals in front-line roles can learn from each use of a support tool and hence grow in confidence and competence while delivering greater value to customers, clients and the public.

Performance support can 'work with the grain'. It integrates learning and working and aims to make it easier for people to behave in desired ways and more difficult for them to undertake courses of action that could lead to financial, quality, regulatory, relational or other problems. The support provided can be designed to increase understanding with each use, capture and share how the most effective people undertake certain tasks, and make it easier for people to do difficult and stressful jobs (Coulson-Thomas, 2007, 2012 a & b, 2013). Help can be provided wherever and whenever needed, including when on the move.

Providing better support is in line with Skinner's (1951) classic early experiments on reinforcing positive behaviours and reducing negative ones. The rewards come in the form of enhanced understanding, better results, improved relationships and the easier and less stressful accomplishment of difficult tasks. People adopt it independently of corporate culture because it benefits them, their employers and those they are endeavouring to help, whether customers, clients or members of the public.

Delivery could be by means of simple prompts, telephone, internet, mobile device or social networking. Users can be enabled to access support that is relevant to particular issues or situations as they unfold and arise. In effect, each user can receive personalised support appropriate to their requirements and directed to where further guidance can be obtained when they reach the limit of what is available. By capturing and sharing superior approaches average performers can be enabled to emulate the approaches of superstars when tackling challenges and seizing opportunities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the case studies examined during the five-year investigation suggests that performance support offers an affordable way of altering the behaviours of key and front-line work-groups, ensuring compliance with applicable laws, codes and rules, and enabling them to adopt the superior approaches of their higher performing peers with an existing, i.e. unchanged, corporate culture in place (Coulson-Thomas, 2012 a & b, 2013, 2014a-d).

We will examine the implications of this finding for addressing certain problems and for leadership and the training and development and HR communities in part 2 of this article.

Further Information

Transforming Knowledge Management, Talent Management 2 and *Transforming Public Services* by Colin Coulson-Thomas which summarise the findings of a five-year investigation into the most cost-effective route to high performance organisations are published by Policy Publications and can be obtained from www.policypublications.com

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