
Adaptive Cultures: Understanding Culture in Organizations

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The word **Culture** comes from a Latin word [*“colere”*] meaning to till or tend. [the *ancient Roman philosopher and political theorist*] Cicero used it as a metaphor [*“cultura anami”*] for the cultivation of the soul [and later meaning the cultivation of the mind, faculties, or manners.] It was not until the 19th century that Culture emerged as a noun encompassing a dizzying array of phenomena including artifacts, rituals, and beliefs [*artifacts, rituals, practices, stories, morals, beliefs*]. The sheer scope of Culture’s sweep makes a pithy definition difficult, a challenge further amplified by the dynamic, overlapping, and nested cultural contexts we strive to make sense of. Culture is often named as contributing to the success or failure of organizational efforts such as globalization, mergers & acquisitions, and cultivating diversity. One place to start when exploring whether and how cultural forces might be leveraged to help organizations adapt to internal and external change, is by asking: **how do cultures work?** and **how do they adapt?**

[*how do cultures work?*]

One model of culture builds on **values** -- what we collectively hold dear and strive towards – as a foundation. Values – both shared and competing-- show up in the stories we tell, the categories evident in our language, and the frames we adopt that act as filters befitting a given context [*inquiry, action, specific domain*]. Our **Stories** and **Frames** help us to articulate our understanding of causal relationships, creating social narratives of how we believe the world works. This all contributes to a repertoire of tools [**toolkit**] that allow us to function within a culture. In comparing the values of a "triple bottom line" company guided by its social, ecological and financial impact with those of a profit-driven company, it is easy to imagine the starkly different cultures that might emerge.

[*how do cultures adapt?*]

A complimentary perspective offers culture as a product of evolution -- a uniquely human adaptation enabled by the advent of social learning, and the capacity to pass skills & knowledge onto future generations. The result is the **collective** human intelligence that far exceeds our individual capacities [*rockets, skyscrapers, symphonies*]. The same key elements that make biological evolution possible [*inheritance, variation, selection*] also enable cultural evolution. The human tendency to instinctively imitate others without understanding why provides a way to transmit cultural learning across generations [*high-fidelity transmission*]. While this might seem counter-intuitive, it allows us to use our grandmother’s bread recipe even if we know nothing of fermentation. But we don’t just copy everyone and everything – we tend to copy [*learning biases*] those who have skills we want, who are successful or prestigious, or what the majority of people are doing. As individuals, we are not perfect replicators and we sometimes come up with new ideas. Which of these novel practices & ideas survive & spread is influenced by how they are valued within a culture.

These theories and frameworks deepen our understanding of how culture works and adapts, but can we *change* culture? Since cultural knowledge is mostly tacit, before we start doing anything it might be a good idea to surface our underlying assumptions & implicit beliefs, as these often reveal themselves only at times of instability. [*Iceberg or anthropological digs*]. One tool for illuminating culture [*cultural distance using cultural Fst*] uses methods borrowed from genetics to compute cultural distance based on the world values survey data.

In tackling intentional cultural change, the interventions we design will depend on how we see culture as fitting into our causal frameworks [*independent variable/cause/input || dependent variable/effect/output || moderating variable/amplifier-weakeners/process*] but it’s important to remember that organizations, like all living systems, seek homeostasis. As a result, attempts at creating a new normal are likely to be

met with resistance. The good news is that culture itself evolves and research points to ways we can boost the rate of innovation needed to drive organizational adaptation [**sociality** *[size and connectedness]*, **transmission fidelity**, and **cultural variations**].

So let's say we succeed in allowing "a thousand flowers to bloom", how can we tell which budding ideas & practices best serve our cultural aspirations, and what can we do to help them spread to the wider culture? We'll explore this and other questions as we continue our inquiry into what it means to be an adaptive culture.