

## February 2017 Animation: Creating Cultural Contagions

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### LILA Feb 2017 Animation Script

*Adaptive Cultures: Creating Cultural Contagion.*

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Culture is so omnipresent that it's hard to get a handle on. We enact & navigate it automatically at many levels -- from our grammatical rules, to our corporate vibe from our informal associations to our work teams. Often we become aware of it only when cultures clash. If we can't easily see culture, how will we know if it's getting in the way of organizational success and how can we change it?

One way of characterizing culture is by looking at it through a Tight <->Loose lens. If tightness is characterized by formality, discipline, clear norms, and low tolerance for deviation, looseness is marked by a lack of formality & discipline, flexible norms, and a high tolerance for deviance.

While the application of the tight-loose lens gives us a sense of where our organization fits on a spectrum, the polarity shows up at any level to which you apply the lens

Environmental factors such as a dense population, scarcity of resources, and even the perception of elevated threat tend to push individual mindsets & whole societies towards tightness. There is research indicating that societies that are too tight or too loose have higher incidence of some health issues suggesting that **adaptive** cultures might need to be both tight AND loose .

The conventions that emerge within a culture can be passed down from leaders, but they also bubble up organically. What emerges from the combination of top-down and bottom up forces is not necessarily functional – in fact, collectively we often converge on and then socially reinforce norms & decisions that NOBODY wants!!! So if we find that our organization has converged on a norm that is not serving us or we recognize we're lacking the agility to be both tight AND loose, how do we change this?

Zooming in to look at the patterns of who interacts with whom can shed light on the dynamics of cultural change as these patterns have a big influence on whether and how fast a group converges on a convention. Lab experiments suggest that even in the absence of centralized coordination, a single convention will emerge, but only if everyone has the **potential** to interact with everyone else. On its own, this **homogenous mixing** is not enough to unseat an established convention --you also need enough people using an alternative [24-25%]. Before reaching this critical mass it will appear as if there has been little to no progress. **Homogenous mixing** is a tall order and not likely to happen on its own, highlighting the need for being intentional about mixing things up.

On one hand, it makes sense that changing a culture is no small feat-- we know how hard it is to get global adoption of new behaviors-- but on the other hand, it goes against our intuition: we see things "go viral" all the time. As it turns out – there is more than one kind of cultural contagion.

The study of social networks reveals that the **ties** that connect us to one another have a big impact whether and how fast, ideas & behaviors spread. People with whom you have strong ties tend to know one another, while you can have a weak tie with someone you happen to sit next to on a plane. Gossip,

ideas, and the flu can spread through both kinds of ties, but “weak ties” work even across long social & geographical distances. Although weak ties have a strong influence on the diffusion of simple contagions, these bridges are too narrow to carry behaviors that are “costly, risky, or controversial”. Research suggests that a single exposure is not enough for things like adopting a new technology or changing one’s diet, rather the spread of these complex contagions depends on exposure from multiple sources, something network topologies with “wide bridges” make possible.

Building wide bridges, fostering homogeneous mixing, and other forays out of our tight-loose comfort zone can trigger resistance simply because they are new. Might there be there mindsets & practices that can help us cultivate a culture that knows how to transform itself? We’ll explore this and other topics when we continue our inquiry into what it means to be an adaptive culture.