Disrupting Culture
(Why we get culture wrong, and what cognitive anthropology teaches us)

A recent report by CEB reports that 76% of its surveyed firms plan some form of culture change in 2017. What is astounding about this is not that so many organizations want to change their cultures. What is astounding is that they believe they *can.*

As a cognitive anthropologist who researches organizational culture, this belief runs counter to most of what we know about culture based on the science of the last 35 years, namely, that culture can be easily manipulated. It's as if much of the business world is stuck in the pioneering anthropology of the 1920s and 30s of so-called primitive societies that posited cultures as neat, monolithic wholes with clearly drawn boundaries and easily discernible values. Anthropology has advanced considerably since then, but much of the business world remains idled in paradigm nostalgia. As a practitioner, I am reminded daily of this gap between modern theory and practice.

Cognitive science is upending old ideas; cognitive anthropology is well ahead of the business world on culture. This piece examines how, and why modern science offers a better alternative. Consider this a short primer, and an invitation.

The Great Divide

When your local sports talk radio host says the reason why the local pro team has failed miserably this year is because of its "culture", you can safely conclude the term is the most overused and least understood in society. CEOs, managers and practitioners impugn cultural explanations for most of human behavior in organizations, believing culture can be willfully designed for positive outcomes. Meanwhile, despite decades of work, the academic research community -- anthropologists, sociologists, cultural psychologists and others a bit removed from the culture industry -- still wrestle with even the most basic questions, such as *what is culture, can it be measured, is it a dependent or independent variable, is it causal in*

organizational performance, and if so, how. Is this just academic hand wringing while the rest of the world gets on with the "real" business of culture shaping?

What is doubly curious about the current culture fad is that there is little academic research showing culture can be causally shaped beyond espoused values in any organization larger than about 150 people.[1]The few serious studies on planned culture change suggest ambiguous results, anecdotal evidence, or "skillful parodying" by middle managers struggling to adopt imposed value systems.[2] Simplistic relationships such as 'good performance is the result of strong culture' have not been systematically observed.[3] The data from M&A integration, another area where one would expect advances in culture practice to be seen, is equally ambiguous. In short, organizations have been trying their hand at planned culture change since the early 1980s with little to show for it. Think about it this way: If successful approaches were evident and widespread, culture change practice would not exhibit the wide variation and *Wild West* quality it does. Successful change efforts would be well documented in the academic community, which they are not.

But none of this dampens enthusiasm. In practice, any espoused norm, habit, preference or value can be measured as "culture" on the basis of its apparent effect. The more broadly framed and generalized ("appreciate others", "work-life balance", "don't make assumptions", "be accountable"), the better. The lack of agreement on what culture is aids and abets this tendency. Organizations still adopt top-down or one dimensional merger integration methods only to wonder why they don't achieve post-merger bliss. Meanwhile, a recent Gallup survey finds 70% of U.S. workers do not feel engaged at work, with the problem most pronounced in larger companies -- in other words, those more likely to undertake culture change.[4] These data suggest the field is overdue for disruption.

---

[1] One reason concerns social network effects. See Dunbar (2003).

[2] For example, see Alvesson & Sveningsson, (2008); Balogun & Johnson, (2005); Ogbonna & Wilkinson, (1993); Siehl, (1985).

[3] See Scott, Mannion, Marshall, & Davies, (2003)

[4] Employee engagement is not culture. But this statistic underscores the overall lack of efficacy in culture change because improvements in employee engagement are often stated goals of culture change initiatives.

Are managers wrong to be obsessed with culture? I suggest there is a relatively straightforward explanation: Managers are correct in viewing culture as a powerful normative force, but, like dark matter, popular approaches can't account for it. Practice hasn't caught up to intuition.

Looking for Culture in All the Wrong Places

Ironically, culture's popularity as an explanatory and normative tool may be due to the fact it is *pervasive*. But in seeking to shape it, managers and practitioners tend to focus on cultural syndromes rather than what generates culture to begin with. This inevitably leads to failed or unsustainable interventions because interventions are not targeted at cultural root causes. Traditional approaches tend to suffer from 6 common but flawed assumptions that, for the most part, are drawn from outmoded theory:

1. **We think of culture is a "thing"** like money or physical assets, and therefore assume it can be manipulated like any other asset. This is evident in the many ways we talk about culture: *just get your culture right and success will follow; drive the culture; shape the culture,* etc. The assumption of "thingness" is so taken for granted we miss the metaphor embedded within these statements of culture as a physical object. But is it? Where, exactly, *is* that culture?

2. As things, we assume **cultures have boundaries**. We assume them to be monoliths: one organization, one culture. But do systems of values and beliefs change once off corporate property? And how to measure and reconcile the influence of regional, national, ethnic, or professional effects?

3. As things, culture can be easily **reduced and oversimplified** to singular variables like *personality* or *values.* Such simplification and reduction ironically diminishes culture's explanatory and normative power. In making it simple, we dumb down its value (and then wonder why our culture change "solution" isn't sustained).

4. When reduced, culture is assumed to be **causal** in changing behavior. For example, we believe if the rest of the organization shared top management's

values, success would be inevitable. But the literature in values is fraught with difficulties. Among them: large organizations are made up of multiple value systems based on regional, ethnic, professional and/or task orientations; values are idealizations, beliefs in how I think I *should* be; and people don't always behave according to what they believe.

5. Because culture is considered to be causal, we assume **leaders are its prime movers**. This belief is rooted in essential American schemas of leadership benevolence, self-actualization, and individual agency. Leadership, of course, plays an important role in culture change. But in complex organizations, is it directly causal? In a cognitive approach, leadership effects are more muted. *Which means leaders have to be more sophisticated about culture.* And the emphasis on individuals ignores the more important impact leadership *groups* play in culture change.

6. We assume **culture is borne by language**, and therefore by shifting or switching our language we can change culture. Language is one manifestation of culture, yes. But modern cognitive linguistics shows us that *semantic structure is not the same as conceptual structure,* meaning words are a subset of concepts. We have many more thoughts, ideas and feelings than we can encode in language.[5] To reduce culture change to changing words on a poster, or simply adopting new language, is to mistake the tip for the iceberg.

Calling these assumptions into question may seem heretical, but they underlie the many "quick fix" and one-dimensional culture change programs that dominate in business today. We owe it to our constituents to get smarter in light of research advances over the last three decades.

The Cultural Mind

As the eminent cognitive anthropologist Ed Hutchins puts it (I paraphrase), the way we interact with our physical and social environments provide the basis for

---

[5] For example, see Evans & Green, (2006); Evans, (2004, 2006); Langacker, (1987)

whatever truly internal conceptual skills we have. What Hutchins means is that regular patterns of interaction with regularities in our physical and social environment form the basis for how, and what we think. This idea is at the heart of the new science of culture.

These perceptions are mainly *preconscious*. When shared by others they become collective assumptions from which we think, feel, act, speak, and organize. Culture in this way is first and foremost a *cognitive phenomenon,* the product of interaction between our neurobiology (our so-called "plastic" mind), and the social and physical world. It is made up *shared implicit assumptions*, or cultural schemas, that form a cultural "DNA" underwriting everything from beliefs, values, norms, symbols, language (jargon), how we collectively make sense of our environments, and even brands and office layouts.

You Are What You Do

This means that your environment -- the actual work your organization does and the problems it confronts, including and especially how it formulates problems to begin with -- indelibly shape collective thinking and practice, and by extension, culture. Which has many implications for culture change.[6]

First, because culture is ecologically contingent, change is delimited. This explains why manufacturing companies have trouble adopting software mindsets when they try to implement IoT technologies. What manufacturer is comfortable shipping a product with known bugs or doing updates in 6 -week sprints? It explains why social service NGOs struggle to act as disciplined businesses, or why investment banks, with deep arbitrage orientations, are challenged to turn themselves into customer-first organizations. Culture change is possible, but it is constrained by the nature of the underlying assumptions that originate in the structure and nature of the firm's primary tasks, and/or the professional training of its dominant groups.

Second, interventions in core assumptions and their manifestations will tend to be vigorously defended. Why? Because they lie at the heart of what you

---

[6] Cultural schemas are also called cultural *models.*

collectively do and how you think. *Which explains why culture change is so hard*. A few examples: the manufacturer who operates on a core set of schemas having to do with *lean* and reflexively applies *lean thinking* to all its practices, including the way it enacts succession planning or executive selection. Or the former conglomerate with deep *portfolio optimization* and *quarterly earnings* schemas whose espoused innovation and entrepreneurship initiatives result in adaptations of risk aversion and risk-intolerance, the very behaviors it wants to change. Or the consumer products company with well developed *market intelligence* and *'keep 'em guessing'* schemas that inadvertently engenders secrecy and misinformation between departments. Or the operating systems software firm with dominant *platform* schemas which lead to product teams fighting with each other to be the platform upon which others base their code. These are but a few examples of how cultural root logics inevitably constrain change.

The good news? Interventions in cultural schemas have the potential to be *much* more impactful and sustainable because they are, by definition, interventions at the source. To change culture requires changing the collective cognitive orientations on which culture is based. This is done by surfacing implicit assumptions and then intervening across the many practices (physical, social, communicative) they fuel. By changing practice, and sustaining the change, you begin to rewire collective neural circuitry. I recognize this is more involved than publishing a new set of corporate values. But when you surface dominant schemas and map out the architecture of how they structure formal and informal organizational practices, and orient leaders to these phenomena, you may be surprised: every set of leaders for whom we do this intuitively gets the architecture. After all, physiologically it is their own. And this tends to generate momentum for change. The new science shows us how and why, making possible a whole new generation of interventions that up until now have been out of reach.

(This is an edited excerpt from *Rethinking Culture: Embodied Cognition and the Origin of Culture in Organizations*, to be published by Routledge in 2017).