



## **Culture Change Without the Shock** **By Deborah Slobodnik, President, Options for Change**

When people complain, “We need to change the culture around here,” what do they really mean? Do they really want to transform it completely, or do they want to evolve it into a more mature, functional culture? Transforming means getting rid of the old beliefs and behaviors and starting from scratch. Evolving means incorporating new beliefs and behaviors to create a more enabled culture. Evolving acknowledges and preserves what is working and is more achievable and practical as a strategy. Transforming is usually not necessary and is a sure fire way to produce shock and resistance. Here are six key steps towards evolving a culture to a more enabled version of itself and making it stick.

### **1. Link the culture to real business goals.**

If breaking down silos is a business imperative because it takes too long to bring a new product to market, for example, you’ve got leverage for culture change. Look for the business pain. Ask, “What behaviors need to change to make this happen?” Now you’ve got a real conversation started. My experience is that most leaders are aware of the cultural barriers to business success. They don’t tackle them because they either don’t know how or don’t believe they can be changed. Try these conversation starters with key stakeholders to raise awareness and test commitment:

- How important is culture change to the business, on a scale of 1-10?
- What are the business implications if it doesn’t happen?
- How does the culture need to change to support the business direction or strategy?
- Is there a felt need for change? Are there complaints or frustrations about the present culture? What are they?
- Are you willing to hold everyone accountable for this change?
- Do you have real buy in from key people?
- What kind of resistance do you expect and how will you de-escalate it?
- Are you willing to change your own behavior to model the expected behaviors?
- Is there an executive sponsor willing to devote 15-20% of his or her time to this effort?
- Have you identified an implementation team and have they been given time and resources to do the job?

### **2. Agree on what needs to be preserved and what needs to be changed.**

Making the “soft stuff” concrete is critical, especially when dealing with analytic types or doubters. Use a tool or instrument to benchmark the existing culture. Make sure it’s behaviorally based so you can measure results.

One example is the “Culture Compass™,” based on a model originally developed and researched by Kantor, Constantine and Olson. This common language and framework allows the culture change conversation to end with a concrete strategy. Follow these steps to drive

your culture change effort:

- Identify the culture or sub-culture (department, team or process) to be enabled.
- Determine its dominant beliefs and behaviors:
  - Closed culture values structure, stability, accountability
  - Random culture values individuality, creativity and flexibility.
  - Open culture values teamwork, collaboration and direct communication
  - Synchronous culture values alignment to a common purpose and goals
- Determine whether the dominant culture is within the functional or extreme range.
- Determine the culture's secondary characteristics.
- Develop a strategy for adding the missing characteristics from the other quadrants to enable the culture to support the business goals.

### **3. Lead by example.**

Change will not happen unless it is modeled at the top. Start by clarifying the observable behaviors that will be expected from leaders at all levels, such as, "treating each other respectfully" or "holding each other accountable for meeting deadlines." Culture change never takes hold if leaders are saying one thing but doing the same another. Getting leaders to model expected behaviors is probably the most difficult task and requires commitment, feedback and accountability by at least 50% of the top team. Using again the example of silo busting, no one will take the intention of "cross-functional collaboration" seriously if the top team continues to have turf issues. Setting an observable example is key to the culture shift initiative having credibility.

### **4. Change the way people work together.**

Restructuring into cross-functional project teams or re-engineering processes will not create a culture shift. But it will create a less calcified environment with new lines of communication and opportunities for collaboration. Without implementing and internalizing a parallel program of behavioral change, the cultural issues will bleed through the new structure. Six sigma, new product development, project management processes, or ERP solutions are all undone by assuming that changing structure will change behavior. There are many examples in the management literature of expensive re-structuring initiatives where the existing culture essentially defeated the change.

### **5. Teach new cultural norms.**

Culture is the collective beliefs and behaviors, also referred to as norms, that get communicated either directly or by example. Start by identifying and communicating the new or expected behaviors. For example, "making decisions by consensus" or "leadership at all levels" describe behaviors expected in the emerging culture. Aligning the expected behaviors to business strategy grounds them in reality and makes the business case for what's important and why. However, simply articulating the expected behaviors will not create behavioral change. Consistent, repeatable tools or strategies must be introduced and practiced to give people the knowledge and skills to make it a reality. If the expected behaviors are loosely communicated or improperly taught, they will not take hold. New norms will be welcomed if they make work easier. This openness will enable learning to take hold like a positive virus. I have seen, for example, an efficient and repeatable structure for managing meetings spread within a company because meetings had been a waste of time. You will reach critical mass when 20% of the population has adopted the expected behaviors.

### **6. Reward desired behavior.**

Expected behaviors need to be reinforced in a number of ways. Don't expect one training program or new tool to do the trick. Research has shown that after 6 months, 80% of classroom learning is lost if it's not reinforced. Leaders at all levels need to model, coach, and give feedback about behaviors. A reward system that includes recognition, compensation and leadership promotion to reinforce the message really helps. As does a strategy to deal with the minority of outliers and challengers who refuse to get on board. Coaching will turn some of them around. Some stuck challengers select themselves out because "it's not like the old days." Others will have to be removed if they are holding the rest of the culture change back and taking up too much energy. Action on these issues sends a positive message throughout the system. Over time, rewarding people who exemplify the new behaviors while not tolerating dysfunctional behaviors in others, helps internalize the new culture into the deepest levels of the system.

Enabling a culture is not a quick and easy job. Few succeed, not because it can't be done, but because few understand that it requires a change management strategy and tactics. It is not simply about communication. The process requires patience, discipline and willingness to be uncomfortable some of the time. However, without a growth in the culture, business success is usually self-limited by immature and underdeveloped behavior.



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Her well reputed workshops, Making Change Happen™ and FasTeams® for Leaders have been praised as "the antidote to the real human issues that undermine all change efforts." They have been presented to hundreds of organizational change professionals and leaders throughout the United States, Canada, Europe and the Middle East.

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