

DANIELLE BRAUN
AND JITSKE KRAMER

THE CORPORATE TRIBE



ORGANIZATIONAL LESSONS FROM ANTHROPOLOGY

ROUTLEDGE



THE CORPORATE TRIBE

No challenge is entirely new. All through human existence, nearly every problem we face in modern business has already been seen...and solved. We just have to figure out how to apply that age-old tribal wisdom to our current circumstances.

The Corporate Tribe will take you on a journey to discover the essence of culture and the secret to successful change programs. Along the way, it will introduce you to the cultural traditions of different people across the globe and provide you with the practical tools you need to apply what you find to today's organizations. Through thirty compelling stories, *The Corporate Tribe* will reveal what, deep down, you already know.

At turns unfamiliar and disruptive, illuminating and inspirational, *The Corporate Tribe* offers a powerful paradigm and skillset for tackling organizational and leadership challenges in the twenty-first century and beyond. It is a book for leaders, consultants and advisors who are looking for a fresh perspective and proven solutions, for those who want to build strong communities that are safe for diversity and ready for change.

DANIELLE BRAUN and **JITSKE KRAMER** are corporate anthropologists. They look at organizations as tribes, organizational charts as kinship systems, leaders as chiefs and mission documents as totem poles. Travel with them to places where spirits linger after death, magic is real and rituals are the key to maintaining order and facilitating transition. You will never look at your organization—or approach its problems—the same way again.



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

THE CORPORATE TRIBE

ORGANIZATIONAL LESSONS
FROM ANTHROPOLOGY

Danielle Braun and Jitske Kramer

First published 2019
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2015 Vakmedianet, Deventer—Danielle Braun and Jitske Kramer
© 2018 Vakmedianet, Deventer and Danielle Braun and Jitske Kramer

Translation: Poppy Eveling
Editing: Jenn Hallam

The right of Vakmedianet, Deventer and Danielle Braun and Jitske Kramer to be identified as authors of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Published in Dutch by Vakmedianet 2015.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN: 978-1-138-36158-4 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-429-43267-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Minion
by codeMantra

CONTENTS

<i>About the authors</i>	ix
INTRODUCTION: A JOURNEY THROUGH THE CORPORATE TRIBE	1
PART 1 CULTURE CREATES ORDER FROM CHAOS	11
CHAPTER 1 WHERE TO FIND “ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE”	13
1.1 <i>A 2% margin of error</i>	19
1.2 <i>A beef tartar sandwich</i>	21
CHAPTER 2 THROUGH THE EYES OF THE ANTHROPOLOGIST	25
2.1 <i>From inside out: emic and etic</i>	28
2.2 <i>Find the story: participative observation</i>	33
2.3 <i>Learning from what we already know</i>	40
2.4 <i>Making change</i>	44
PART 2 IT HAPPENS IN THE RELATIONSHIPS	49
CHAPTER 3 RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS IN OUR OWN GROUP	53
3.1 <i>Organization chart as kinship system</i>	55
3.2 <i>New ways of working</i>	64
3.3 <i>Rewarding, punishing and motivating</i>	69
CHAPTER 4 RELATIONSHIPS WITH LEADERS AND POWER	73
4.1 <i>How low must you bow?</i>	75
4.2 <i>A good leader does the haka</i>	79
4.3 <i>Every opinion is heard in the kgotla</i>	82

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 5	RELATIONSHIPS WITH OUTSIDERS, CUSTOMERS AND COMPETITORS	87
	<i>5.1 If we believe in frames</i>	89
	<i>5.2 Circles of relationships</i>	93
CHAPTER 6	RELATIONSHIPS WITH TIME, SPACE AND THE COSMOS	103
	<i>6.1 The influence of physical space on behaviour</i>	106
	<i>6.2 Time determines the rhythm of life</i>	110
	<i>6.3 Corporate cosmology: structuring the extraordinary and designing rituals</i>	115
CHAPTER 7	RELATIONSHIPS WITH RELATIONSHIPS	125
	<i>7.1 Joking relationships: laughing with your mother-in-law</i>	126
	<i>7.2 Holiday parties, potlatches and LinkedIn</i>	130
PART 3	CULTURAL TRANSITIONS—BUILDING AND MOVING A TOTEM	135
CHAPTER 8	CULTURAL CREATION	143
	<i>8.1 Messages from the ancestors</i>	147
	<i>8.2 Put six children in the sandbox</i>	154
CHAPTER 9	CULTURAL CONTINUITY	161
	<i>9.1 A Jewish child asks four questions</i>	164
	<i>9.2 Carnival as stress relief</i>	169
CHAPTER 10	CULTURAL REORIENTATION	173
	<i>10.1 Organizations full of spirit</i>	175
	<i>10.2 Soulless organizations and the mystification of violence</i>	180
CHAPTER 11	CULTURAL HEALING	187
	<i>11.1 Cannons or campfires?</i>	190
	<i>11.2 Spirits of the ancestors and consultants</i>	194

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 12	CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION	201
	<i>12.1 It happens in the in-between</i>	203
	<i>12.2 How do you move a totem pole?</i>	207
CHAPTER 14	I WENT ON A JOURNEY OF CHANGE AND I TOOK WITH ME...	213
	<i>Inspirations and sources</i>	225
	Inspirations	225
	Sources by chapter	226
	<i>Index</i>	243



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

DANIELLE BRAUN, PH.D., CORPORATE ANTHROPOLOGIST

Danielle's motto is: "No man is an island." She is committed to helping build impactful organizations, starting with leaders.



Danielle is an expert in the fields of leadership, change and organizational culture. After her studies in African and Asian witchcraft and religions, she did her Ph.D. in leadership and organizational culture, focusing on the Dutch police force. She has also worked as a consultant and regional director of refugee centers within the Netherlands. Dedicated to deciphering the cultural DNA of organizations and helping leaders fulfil their responsibilities, Danielle shepherds organizations and executives through complex transitions. She seeks to build strong tribes, safe for diversity and ready for change.

A highly sought after speaker who takes you on an unforgettable journey, Danielle is co-founder and director of the Culture Academy. She is the co-author of *De Corporate Tribe* (Dutch Management Book of the Year 2016) and *Building Tribes* (Dutch). In 2018 she published *Da's gek* (Dutch) an anthropological view on what is considered 'normal'.

JITSKE KRAMER, CORPORATE ANTHROPOLOGIST

Jitske believes in a world that is safe for diversity. She is committed to helping leaders and organizations create environments with a balance of power and love.



Jitske is an expert in the fields of diversity, international teamwork and corporate culture. As a trained ethnographer, she did research in Botswana and Uganda before becoming an organizational consultant. Jitske is dedicated to cracking the code to powerful leadership, while teaching and championing inclusive decision-making processes. It is her desire to fix human fragmentation by (re)connecting people through their differences.

A highly sought after speaker who energizes audiences to really make an impact, Jitske was co-founder and director of the Culture Academy and (re)started her own company HumanDimensions again in 2018. In 2013 she received the “Trainer of the Year” award from the Association of Dutch Training Professionals (NOBTRA). She is the best-selling author of *Deep Democracy* (Dutch), *Managing Cultural Dynamics* and *Wow! What a Difference*, and is co-author of *De Corporate Tribe* (Dutch Management Book of the Year 2016) and *Building Tribes* (Dutch). In 2019 she will publish *Jam Cultures* (Dutch) on inclusion, the dynamics of power and diversity.

INTRODUCTION

A Journey through the Corporate Tribe

A lot has been written about organizational culture. It has been discussed, debated, defined and redefined. *The Corporate Tribe* is, undeniably, another book on the subject. But it's more than that. It is also a study of *human* culture.

The Corporate Tribe starts from the premise that the challenges we face in our organizations are both new and, at the same time, centuries old; they are both unique and universal within human experience. Just look at cultures around the world. Nomadic leaders have been managing network organizations where no one has a fixed workstation for hundreds of years. Countless tribes across the globe have figured out how to broker successful mergers. In Mali, people have found a way to facilitate mutual feedback through humour. And a chief in the interior of Brazil is adept at switching from going concern management to change management. The truth is, as humans we know how to solve these perennial problems; we have just forgotten how to apply them in our office spaces and meeting rooms.

So how do we revive this knowledge within our organizations? By focusing on people.

CORPORATE ANTHROPOLOGY

Our colleagues and clients often ask us how we can grasp what is actually happening under the surface of their organizations so quickly. How do we familiarize ourselves so rapidly with a new job? How do we get a management board to agree again? Our roots in anthropology are the secret. After all, the study of people and their cultures has traditionally been the purview of anthropologists.

We often refer to those who hypothesize about other cultures from afar as “arm-chair anthropologists.” But since the early twentieth century, “real” anthropologists have been leaving the comfort of their homes, libraries and studies to live for extended periods among indigenous people in villages and communities around the world. In this way, they hope to learn about the local practices and habits from the inside out, to gain a better understanding of the meaning those people find in the world and a deeper appreciation for how they express that meaning through symbols, behaviour and rituals.

Since the 1990s, methods and techniques drawn from classical cultural anthropology have been increasingly applied to groups of people who live closer to home. Today, anthropological concepts are applied to everything from marketing and design to medicine to entertainment. The premise of the popular television show *Survivor* is anthropological, albeit in a rather simplistic way, and the series *Undercover Boss*

is, in effect, a demonstration of a CEO undertaking anthropological fieldwork among his or her own tribe. In the realm of business, Simon Sinek's wonderful book, *Leaders Eat Last*, puts leadership in an anthropological context, and author and journalist Malcolm Gladwell draws on anthropology, along with sociology and psychology, in best-selling books such as *The Tipping Point*. It is not surprising that the *Irish Independent* ranked anthropology number two in the top fifty jobs of the future.

Our book comes out of the application of cultural anthropology to management and consultancy. The relatively new professional field in which we work goes by various names: organizational anthropology, business anthropology and corporate anthropology. We prefer to call ourselves corporate anthropologists for no other reason than we like the sound of it.

If you were to add together our experience, then we have had our feet firmly planted in the corporate soil for forty years—as executive coaches, as leadership and communication trainers and as consultants on change processes for profit and not-for-profit organizations. Danielle acts as a leader in strategic management functions, while Jitske has built up extensive experience in international organizations and teams. Both of us have backgrounds in cultural anthropology.

In 2013, our passion for bringing anthropological methods to business management led us to set up the Culture Academy. At the Culture Academy, we understand how people shape cultures and how cultures shape people; our aim is to equip organizations and leaders with the tools they need to build strong cultures that are safe for diversity and ready for change. (For more on the Culture Academy, visit www.avorganisatiecultuur.nl) With this book, we are sharing our knowledge in the hope that you can use it to get the best out of your client's organization or your own. In 2018, Jitske branched off to continue her travels with her own organization HumanDimensions (www.humandimensions.com).

DANIELLE BRAUN, PH.D.

I began my cultural anthropology degree at eighteen with complete dedication. My parents shared my enthusiasm but were also slightly concerned. How would their daughter ever earn her living studying these rituals and stories of distant peoples? I chose one of the hardcore anthropological disciplines: political-religious anthropology. I studied religions of possession in Africa and ancestor rituals in Asia (and took a brief detour to research the conflict management styles of nuns in

a convent, just for fun). Then, after three years, a new opportunity presented itself: corporate anthropology.

I was fascinated. I decided to bring the knowledge I had gained through my studies of ancestor spirits and magical rituals to planning and checking systems, human resource management (HRM)-instruments and change management. I rode along in a police car for a year and took my doctorate in organizational culture and the perils of management in law enforcement. I continued this work as an organizational advisor to a police force and with a large consultancy bureau. Eventually, though, I felt compelled to move from my place contributing ideas on the sidelines into the leadership chair, taking on strategic management roles in the reception of asylum seekers and within the public sector. For more than two decades, I have been guiding organizations and leaders within organizations through complex cultural interventions.

JITSKE KRAMER

As a child, I was very curious about why people did the things they did the way they did them and why they didn't do them differently. Later, I was surprised and annoyed that people treated those who did things differently in a hostile manner. I chose to study anthropology in order to understand cultures and their dynamics. For my ethnographic research I lived in a small village in Botswana, and later I travelled through Uganda with theatre groups to study "theatre for development." The use of indigenous learning tools, like drums and dance, turned out to be highly effective in communicating complicated information about privatization to local villagers.

Back in the Netherlands, I entered the corporate world as a trainer/consultant. To be honest, this was probably a greater culture shock for me than the previous transition to life in an African village. The particular rituals and habits of the members of the corporate tribe soon fascinated me. Since the late nineties I have been working with teams and leaders in both Dutch and international organizations, where decision-making, leadership, diversity, intercultural communication and inclusive cooperation are recurring themes.

THE CORPORATE TRIBE

Organizations consist of groups of people. It follows that if we want to influence, change and manage those groups, we must understand how groups of people operate. In anthropology, a group of mutually interrelated families, clans or subgroups, each with its own chief, rituals and rules, is referred to as a tribe.

The most important binding element within a tribe is the culture—the common language, religion, beliefs and customs. As corporate anthropologists, we look at an organization as a tribe. In doing so, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex symbols, stories, habits and unwritten rules that comprise their culture.

TRIBE

In anthropology, a tribe refers to a group of people who share the same language, customs and beliefs. It is made up of different families and relatives, and may include individuals without immediate family members as well. In corporate anthropology we also like to use the term “tribe.” We are aware that for some the word ‘tribe’ may have negative connotations, due to colonial history and misuses of the terminology. However, we do like to use it in a more neutral and matter-of-fact way. After all, in organizations, people are still people, social animals who organize themselves in groups, using stories, symbols, habits and ranking systems. When we apply an anthropological lens to the “corporate tribe,” we can better understand organizational culture and the mutual relationships within it. We can help people understand other people and apply our knowledge to some of our most pressing problems—in business and in the world.

Corporate anthropology illuminates the dynamics of an organization that are at work beneath the surface. It reveals the difference between the formal organizational structure and informal sources of power. It allows us to identify and analyze patterns of behaviour, rituals, relationships and defining narratives at work within the organization. With such knowledge of group processes we can offer up fresh solutions for building or maintaining a strong organizational culture or restabilizing an organization’s culture when it is in crisis or transition. Indeed, this approach is indispensable for achieving sustainable cultural change.

Where there is organizational culture, there is cultural change. Just Google the term “organizational change.” The number of hits (more than 6.5 million at the time of writing) indicates tremendous interest in this area. Why? Because in the process of rolling out transitions and instituting change in an organization, all kinds of things can—and do—go wrong, leading to frustration and wasted capital resources, among other negative consequences. In fact, about 70% of cultural change processes fail. From this, you might deduce that organizational culture, or culture in general, has an inherent tendency to be unshakeable and immutable.

Or, you might conclude that the leaders and managers of organizations are making a mistake when it comes to understanding culture and implementing cultural change. This is our position. If a strategy fails to work time after time, we need to look at the basic assumptions and underlying principles that are guiding us. We argue that cultures are, in fact, constantly changing, that cultural change is a completely natural social phenomenon and that resistance to change is not inevitable.

This book is for leaders, managers, consultants, trainers, coaches and anyone else who has a professional fascination with organizations and the people who work in them. You are probably well educated in one of the organizational disciplines, or maybe you have made yourself at home in the corporate world through your work. You know all the familiar management theories and models and you know what their value is. You have learned, personally, that the reality of organizational culture change is more exciting, more frustrating and more challenging than it appears in books. But you still keep working at it...because you know that it is possible.

Corporate anthropologists take the dynamic between different worlds as their starting point. There is always tension between a management world and a work floor world. The customer's world and the organization's world. The world of training courses and the world of daily work. With changes, tension emerges between the world of the planned and the experienced organization. The planned organization exists on paper, is shown in KPIs (key performance indicators), in figures, in strategies, mission statements and vision. The experienced organization appears in stories, emotions and relationships.

As corporate anthropologists, we learn the language of each of these different worlds and translate between them. At the same time, we hunt for parallels between the worlds in which we work and those of diverse cultures. Where we find them, we figure out how to apply the models of organization and change that are used in tribal societies around the world to our own corporate tribes. During a merger, with an anthropological view, you can see not only two departments but also two tribes, each with its own spirit (mission, drive, history). It is not only the people but also the spirits that must be integrated; otherwise you are left with two parties that distrust each other. Looking at a dysfunctional management team, you ask yourself how the kinship system is structured—who helped whom, covered for whom, advanced whom in the past.

One theme that every anthropologist studies in the first year of his or her coursework is the *rite of passage*. Rites of passage are transformation rituals that exist among many cultures and are frequently used to mark the transition of a young

girl or boy into adulthood. They vary widely and often seem bizarre to outsiders. But they are often so powerful that they are fully transformative events, after which there is no fall back into old behaviour. Rites of passage can provide an answer to the difficult question of how to intervene in organizational culture to bring about permanent change. Admittedly, facilitating change within groups of people remains a challenging process, but once equipped with old wisdom, cross-cultural models and anthropological knowledge and skills, it can become an energizing, even exciting, experience.

Have you ever thought about your organization as a corporate tribe? Try it.

- Undergoing a merger? It is useful if you know something about inclusion and exclusion mechanisms and tribal wars.
- Going through re-organization? Familiarity with how rites of passages work can inform the way you manage the insecurity that change often brings.
- Implementing flex-work and other new ways of working? Take a lesson from the nomads.
- Struggling with a dysfunctional corporate culture? Think about how campfires have been used to cultivate resilience and renewal in a community.
- Afraid that cultural change is impossible within your organization? Take heart. Cultures are continually changing and every generation does things differently.

NARRATIVE TRADITION

This is not a methodical book with action plans and lists to tick off. Rather, it is narrative, expressive, exploratory and expository. We dabble in both the magical and the practical. *The Corporate Tribe* is intended to shake up your way of thinking.

If you were trained in another academic discipline, you will likely miss statistical analyses and hypotheses stated upfront in this

“Anthropology demands the open-mindedness with which one must look and listen, record in astonishment and wonder that which one would not have been able to guess.”—Margaret Mead

book. Instead, in the tradition of cultural anthropology, we have chosen to rely first and foremost on the power of stories. Anthropological studies of indigenous cultures provide a rich treasury of stories about how people all over the world cope with the universal matters of life—change, leadership, community forming, barter, birth and death. In *The Corporate Tribe* we will use these to take you on a journey to far-distant lands and introduce you to unfamiliar peoples. The stories we tell might astonish you or fill you with wonder. But they will also provide insight into, and tools for, managing, leading and transforming organizational cultures.

Stories have been important since the development of cultural anthropology. And herein lies one of its methodological pitfalls. Given that people love to hear stories, that stories help us to understand, and sometimes to change, reality, it is tempting to embellish them. Just like other fields, cultural anthropology has had to deal with academic fraud and researchers who have told too good a story. In this book we will tell you stories of different cultures and organizations. Some of these stories come from our own or our colleagues' research and advisory practice. There are also stories that are based on the classic studies undertaken by famous anthropologists. Some stories have very clear sources and some have been transmitted orally through generations of anthropologists or by the peoples themselves. Does a story become more wonderful over the course of time as it is transmitted? Who can tell? Our sources are named at the back of this book.

THE TRAVEL PLAN

In our daily work, we rely on lessons from the discipline of cultural anthropology and on the wealth of wisdom we have accumulated from people all over the world. In this book, we share some of what we have learned over the years in the hope that it will help you look at your organizational culture in a new way and be better prepared to implement cultural change successfully.

We have divided this book into three parts. The first part, *Culture Creates Order from Chaos*, explores how anthropologists understand the concept of “culture,” how they investigate cultures, and how we, as corporate anthropologists, apply this knowledge and these skills in cultural change projects within organizations. It is an important part of the book that offers access to the corporate anthropologists' outlook and the language used by anthropologists to talk about (organizational) culture and change.

The second part is titled *It Happens in the Relationships*. Like the undercurrent of relationships within a tribe, those within an organization are often best conveyed through stories, metaphors and case studies. In Section 2 you will find stories that reveal how to identify, read and change the dynamic within a group. We refer here to the *space between* people, where culture is formed.

The third, and final part, bearing the title *Cultural Transitions—Building and Moving a Totem*, explains how to distinguish between various types of cultural change, offers five models of cultural change drawn from all over the world and explains how to choose the appropriate intervention for the organization for which or within which you work. We conclude with a sort of checklist for the traveller who is on a change mission. This is stuff to put in your backpack for the journey beyond the book.

You might notice that we skip over Chapter 13 in this book. Why skip Chapter 13? This is not because we really believe that the number 13 is unlucky, but because, just as some hotels (no Room 13), airlines (no row 13 in the airplanes), buildings (no 13th floor), and Microsoft (no version 13 of Microsoft Office) do, we prefer not to take any chances...

Of course, you could sit down and read this book through from Chapter 1 to Chapter 14. If you are interested in what the added value of corporate anthropology is to thinking about organizations, or if you are using this book for study purposes, the first part is certainly very important. It provides a framework. If you mainly wish to be inspired, however, we actually recommend that you not read this book from front to back cover. Instead, put it on your desk, leaf through it, look for a theme that is current for you, let yourself be seduced by the wonderful images and look for stories and parallels in your own organization. We hope that the stories will inspire you, that you will look for ways in which to translate what you have read for your own cultural and organizational context and that you will, from time to time, use the corporate anthropologist's lens when you are engaged in a large reorganization, an intervention in a team or a discussion with a client or colleague. To build strong tribes. Safe for diversity and ready for change.

Enjoy *The Corporate Tribe*. Safe travels.

Danielle Braun and Jitske Kramer



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

PART ONE

Culture Creates Order from Chaos

When a psychologist looks at an organization, he focuses on the motives, behaviour, and convictions of the individual people who work there. When an economist looks at the same organization, she might come home with stories about cash flow; meanwhile, a business administrator might zero in on work processes. When we, as corporate anthropologists, look at the organization, we see groups of people bound together by a common culture. Another way of putting it is that we deal in the “spaces” or “invisible lines” between people, that is, the assumptions, beliefs, rules and norms that they share, that make the group act as a collective and ensure that each group member knows the intention of the collective and how he or she should behave within it.

The spaces between people are filled with invisible threads that make a group more than just the sum of individuals. Compare it to a plate of spaghetti: if you try to extract just one piece from it, you end up pulling out a whole clump. This is how culture works.

Now, you might be wondering: How do you *see* the spaces or invisible lines? Spaces are empty, aren't they? And invisible means not able to be seen, doesn't it? Maybe you are thinking: If a culture is invisible, how do I work with it? How do I influence or change it? If it's invisible, how do I even know it's there? That's where corporate anthropology comes in. In this part we will show you how to find and describe a culture. And how to approach culture change in an anthropological way.

CHAPTER ONE

Where to Find “Organizational Culture”

*People shape cultures and
cultures shape people.*

There is no doubt that there is such a thing as culture. Just as you feel the unseen pull of gravity, you experience culture constantly. Every time you step out of an airplane, you are reminded that it exists. Because the customs officers in Malaysia appear much fiercer than those at Orlando International Airport. Because in India no is not no, and yes is not yes. Because the patterns of speech in Mexico are different from those in England. Because you never know which shops are open during the siesta in Spain. Because your Japanese colleague bows when greeting someone. Because a Moroccan child kisses your hand.

Now think about your workplace. If silence falls when you, as the director, walk into a room; if unrest arises over a proposal to move the cafeteria; if you are excluded by your colleagues; if you, as the only woman in a meeting, are talked over when you try to make a point; if there is still reference to “the other organization” three years after a merger; if medical specialists say that their professional sphere is endangered by the new financing system; if a police officer would rather be reprimanded than talk about his or her colleagues to a superior...that’s culture you’re experiencing, too.



Figure 1.1 Culture is found in the spaces between people.

Credit: Agus Sunantra/Bali Travel Photography

HOW DO PEOPLE SHAPE CULTURE?

Culture shapes people. But people also shape culture. Culture is, after all, not innate but constructed. It is a means for humans to create order from chaos. In culture, together, we find ways to answer questions of existence, to cope with time, power, scarcity, love and loss, to structure our lives and arrive at mutually determined social norms. We are not born *with* culture; we are born *into it* and we create it together with the people around us.

From infancy, we are taught how we should look, how we should behave and how we should perceive and experience the world. Some of these lessons are explicit. Mostly, however, cultural values and messages are so ingrained that they pass from generation to generation without conscience, motive or intention. For example, did you know that, at least in Western countries, the way we approach babies differs according to their gender? Research shows that adults actually make different greeting noises depending on whether an infant is a boy or girl and pick up baby boys just a bit more firmly. Our cultural gender lessons on how to be a boy or girl start very young. Just think about it: we are more often inclined to say to a boy that he is cool and to a girl that she is pretty.

We transmit our culture through language, gestures, rituals, symbols, stories, the honoring of heroes and role models, induction programs and initiation rites. Indeed, culture is so deeply rooted in the way a group of people thinks that it is difficult to think outside the box of one's own cultural pattern.

It is no different in organizations. People also create organizational cultures together, and the elements of those cultures are passed on to newcomers. If Mary leaves a department in an organization and Lawrence replaces her, after some initial hubbub, it is expected that Lawrence will assume the cultural behavioural norm, adjust himself to the new environment and things will settle down. The team member has changed, but the culture hasn't.

But the fact that culture is learned also offers the possibility that it can be altered. In terms of culture, change can be described as any modification to the existing arrangement of relationships, meanings and patterns of behaviour. To return to our example: it's entirely possible that Lawrence, even while his thoughts and behaviours are influenced by the existing culture, will come into the group with new ideas, that he will develop his own power dynamics within the group and that the culture itself will change as a result. People shape culture and culture shapes people.

The truth is that cultures are changing constantly, sometimes subtly and sometimes radically. They change with the arrival of Lawrences (for example, new people), in response to technological innovations, as a consequence of events in the external world and shifts in the zeitgeist. But most of this cultural change happens the same way that our enculturation does—without design or even desire. It is much more difficult to change a culture actively and intentionally in a specific direction. After all, how do you consciously influence an unconscious process? How do you get people on board with a new way of doing things? How do you tempt them to behave differently? How do you refocus people on achieving future goals when they are fixated on the way things were done in the past?

The reason that some leaders and managers avoid planned culture change altogether is because they know how hard it is; they anticipate failure. Instead they choose to concentrate on things like business operations and target numbers. Meanwhile, those who do attempt change frequently complain of resistance from members of the corporate tribe. The problem with this resistance, of course, is that it leaves culture in a liminal zone, threatening the tribe with a return to chaos.

The good news is that it is entirely possible to overcome, or at least reduce, this resistance to change. First, however, you have to understand what culture is, how it works and where it comes from. You have to find a way to grasp the intangible, to see the unseeable. You must recognize that most resistance to change arises not because people are *against* the new but because they do not want to lose what they find valuable in the current culture. Resistance is an expression of different, and often valuable, views. This kind of insight into the spaces between people creates opportunities for the successful re-ordering and transformation of a culture.

Anthropology is concerned with the “power of in-between.” A corporate anthropologist looks at how various players and departments within an organization arrange their reality and give it meaning. How people shape culture and culture shapes people. Insight into the spaces between people creates opportunities for the successful re-ordering and transformation of a culture.

GRASPING CULTURE: THREE APPROACHES

How can we understand organizational culture? With language. We need a language that structures the way we see the spaces between people and helps us describe, and ultimately, interpret the meaning of what we find there. There are all