

brandinstinct*

Using narratives as an agent of change for people and organisations

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As consultants, our mandate is to help clients better understand their cultures and the behavioural patterns that are helping and hindering their progress. Our clients want to hold on to the best of their culture during times of growth and evolve the culture when setting a new vision or strategic direction. Different agencies have different ways of beginning this process. Since we straddle brand development and organisational development, we often look for ways to extend learning from one field to the other. This short paper explains our view on how cultures are formed and how we can use narratives to help develop cultures and brands.

First, let us examine the way that cultures are grown. Company cultures are made up of accepted patterns or 'ways of doing things'. These patterns should not be confused with operational systems, but are derived from the way all employees go about their daily activities.

Compare the way two people walk up a hill. One is focused on getting to the top as quickly as he can. The other takes a meandering route looking at this and that as he goes along. Both people have the same goal, but the way that they go about achieving that goal can be as different as day and night. If we continue this metaphor a little, we can also predict the results of doing things one way or another. One man achieves his

goal quickly and one slowly. One man experiences the joy of self-satisfaction that comes with reaching the summit as quickly as he can. The other man enjoys the discovery of learning along the way and experiencing every little pleasure that comes from paying attention to the journey.

It is important to recognise that both ways of climbing the hill are valid. For the study of human behaviour and company culture, it is useful to understand what compels one person to go up the hill quickly and one person to take his time. One might suppose that a person driven by achievement or social recognition may want to ascend as quickly as he can. The other person may be motivated by notions of contentment or wisdom, so would therefore want to enjoy the journey and observe the environment.

These differences in what each person values are how the practices of branding and organisational development are fundamentally connected. As human beings, our values guide our behaviour. This axiom is just as true for the group as it is for the individual. In organisational development, we connect what we value with how we behave to focus or modify our behaviour towards our goals. In branding, we focus on the outward expression of our values and behaviour in the market through the stories we tell.

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If we were to listen in on a conversation with the quick man later on in the pub, we might hear him recount how fast he got up the hill, how sublime the view was from the summit and about some of the techniques he employed to get there so quickly.

In the same way, we can listen to people in a company tell stories in order to understand the rules and values that underpin their behaviour. When we join a new company, one of the first things we do is try to learn the rules which we are expected to conform to. Many books have been written about why people seek to conform to rules. For the sake of brevity, let us say that conformity to these unwritten rules helps everyone get to the top of the hill without bumping into each other too much along the way.

These rules form the culture and are the accepted norms that newly inducted employees use as markers for their behaviour. Some of these rules propel a company toward its vision and some hold it back. Some rules have been with the company since the beginning and some have been more recently brought into the mix. Some rules are widely accepted across divisions or even countries and some are to be found in isolated pockets of the organisation.

As agents of organisational development, our first task is to facilitate insights into these rules and understand their affect on the company's march toward their objectives, vision and desired state.

While these stories can be uncovered in one-on-one meetings with employees, we find that both our clients and ourselves are able to identify more stories and at greater pace when we get groups of people together. Listening to multiple perspectives reveals the rules from the different ways that people add to the stories that are being told at that moment. The people in the room shape the stories together; which enables the dynamic

required for others to gain insights and see what patterns are occurring.

There are key moments when listening to these stories that make us sit up and pay attention. Critical phrases like 'when I see a customer in the street, I walk the other way' or 'we need research to support every decision we take' indicate a pattern of behaving. Taken alone, these indicators – or rules of behaving – may point to something or indeed, they may not. In order to understand their relevance, we need to investigate whether these rules will help us get to the desired state of the organisation or whether they will hold us back.

The first example above was heard at a company that wanted to promote greater intimacy and empathy between customers and staff. The second example was heard at a company that required greater risk-taking in decision making as part of its desired state. So, our task was to help these clients move past these unhelpful rules by gaining insight into when these patterns were useful in reaching their vision and when they were not. We further coached them towards different ways of acting to reach their vision.

Large change consultancies primarily focus on implementing processes and restructuring systems that surround the culture of a company. Every tangible component of the business can be considered – from policy to IT – but as you can imagine systems alone will not change the culture. Structural changes need to be complimented by insights into behaviour.

If we go back to the hill analogy, system changes are akin to creating a path on the hill, but these systems do not guarantee that people will use the path we build. Research shows that many large change efforts fail. We suggest that failures result from a lack of appreciation of the rules that govern behaviour. The wanderer will not race to the top simply because a nice path is provided. We need to

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encourage the intrinsic motivation that comes from a connection to their values, and an appreciation of the new vision that guides them. Only once this appreciation is encouraged can people see what, if anything, is preventing the company from achieving it.

This kind of appreciation is only gained by identifying personally with the new direction and the ability to put the vision into context. If this important step of generating context and meaning is missed, then the new direction will remain something that is not relevant for the employee. It's important to appreciate that most change programmes are about identifying a new direction that will undoubtedly feel alien to the current accepted way of doing things; the rules that define the current context and culture. So, if context is the key, how do we go about encouraging a shared meaning of the new direction so that everyone can understand and personalise the vision to their own working lives?

There are two parallel practices we can look to for inspiration. Narrative-based marketing efforts have been helping us transmit complex, value-laden stories to customers for decades. The advent of social marketing has focused even greater attention on narrative-based marketing techniques, getting customers to participate in the narratives that companies propagate and to contribute to the greater dialogue being generated online.

The other link can be found in mental health with narrative-based therapies helping people reframe the way they think about their own situation. Therapists use this method to elicit the stories that have led the patient to their current distress or situation. By helping the person re-author the way in which they approach their story and position themselves and others differently in their story, we are able to change the way the patient sees themselves and others. Armed with a reframed view of themselves and their future,

a patient creates more possibilities for acting to achieve their desired state.

By using stories and narratives, we are not only able to transmit complex ideas clearly, we also benefit from the transformational character of a story. We can help people reframe the current story of an organisation and understand the need for a shift in behaviour – as a group and as individuals. Stories are also a superior tool since they perpetuate themselves beyond the original nucleus of the narrative. Once the core of the story is understood, people use it to create awareness; a trigger to act differently in similar scenarios. The learning we can derive from the little boy who cried wolf, goes well beyond that particular limited scenario.

Using a narrative-based approach to cultural growth also has benefits for creating consistency between the external stories told about the brand to the market and the stories formed inside the organisation.

Identifying narratives within your own culture is not easy. The unwritten rules that are learned when a new employee joins the company are soon forgotten as they become subsumed into normal working practice. Once uncovered, our clients always recognise the patterns we identify, but they are rarely ever able to spot the patterns and rules that have formed the current culture.

Recognising the patterns does not mean that they are easy to change. Cultural patterns are like meandering rivers. Once the course of the river is cut, it is difficult to change. Powerful tools like narratives help clients tackle ingrained behaviours in order to move onto new directions while preserving existing successes and positive ways of acting.



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