



Leading Culture Change

Insights from Leadership Fellows

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Society of Leadership Fellows
St George's House, Windsor Castle

14

Introduction

This is the 14th in our series of “Insights from Leadership Fellows”. It draws on the outcomes of a Leadership Conversation organised by the Society of Leadership Fellows on the theme of Leading Culture Change on January 16-17 2018.

We start off by drawing out five insights that emerged through our discussions, and then set out eleven steps to support you in changing your organisation’s culture for the better.

We have deliberately taken the image of an individual climbing a mountain as the graphic that accompanies the eleven steps. This is because the imagery of mountain-climbing seems rather appropriate to successful culture change.

This requires imagination and determination on the part of leaders, together with a high degree of self-awareness - and sometimes a healthy measure of bloody-mindedness too!

Our only hesitation in choosing the image of the mountain was that we thought some of you who have succeeded in leading your organisation through a process of culture change might feel that a mountain range would be more fitting.

So you will see that we have gone for a few peaks on each page, to get over the message that culture change is one of those processes that needs to be ongoing.

Cultures either continue to evolve in a positive way, or they regress; they never stand still!

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5 Insights

1 Culture change starts in the moment

Successful culture change is achieved – and sustained – through a series of moments.

Sometimes a moment presents itself, and if we seize that moment we have an opportunity to signal a shift in culture that will be remembered for years to come.

At other times we have to create a moment through acting in a way that is intentionally counter-cultural and enables us to draw attention to some aspect of our culture that we are resolved to change.

2 Culture change is about “how” as well as “why”

Successful culture change requires a strong overriding narrative.

Whilst this is vital, on its own it isn't enough.

Change that is just about "why" can end up lacking depth and follow-through.

We also need to focus on how we behave towards each other and how the identity of our organisation is influenced by the habits that we develop together.

Without a clear sense of higher purpose, change that is just about "how" can end up becoming rather fragmented.

Successful change requires the how and why together, with each strand of the wider strategy acknowledging the importance of the other.

3 The impact of purpose-driven culture change is often time-limited

A strong sense of purpose can do so much to help drive culture change in the short-term.

Over time, the rather highfalutin language associated with higher purpose can easily lose its energy and meaning.

To sustain purpose-driven change, we need to refresh our mission every now and again, with opportunities for staff to question priorities and challenge points of tension, so that this process of renewal is open and real.

4 If we want an empowered culture, this needs to be reflected in the process of change

The way we lead culture change is often as important as the specifics of the change itself.

This means that if we say we want a more empowered culture, we need to be careful not to be prescriptive in our approach towards culture change.

Whilst we might set the overall direction of travel, we hold back from seeking to control the detailed outcomes.

5 In leading culture change, we need to acknowledge our own vulnerabilities

There are different views among us about the extent to which we should acknowledge our vulnerabilities as leaders.

Those who favour this view argue that it should make it easier for those around us to connect with us as leaders because they know “who we are”.

The key proposition here is that if we don't acknowledge our own vulnerabilities, they will find a way of “leaking out” anyway and then sabotage the culture that we are trying to create.

For example:

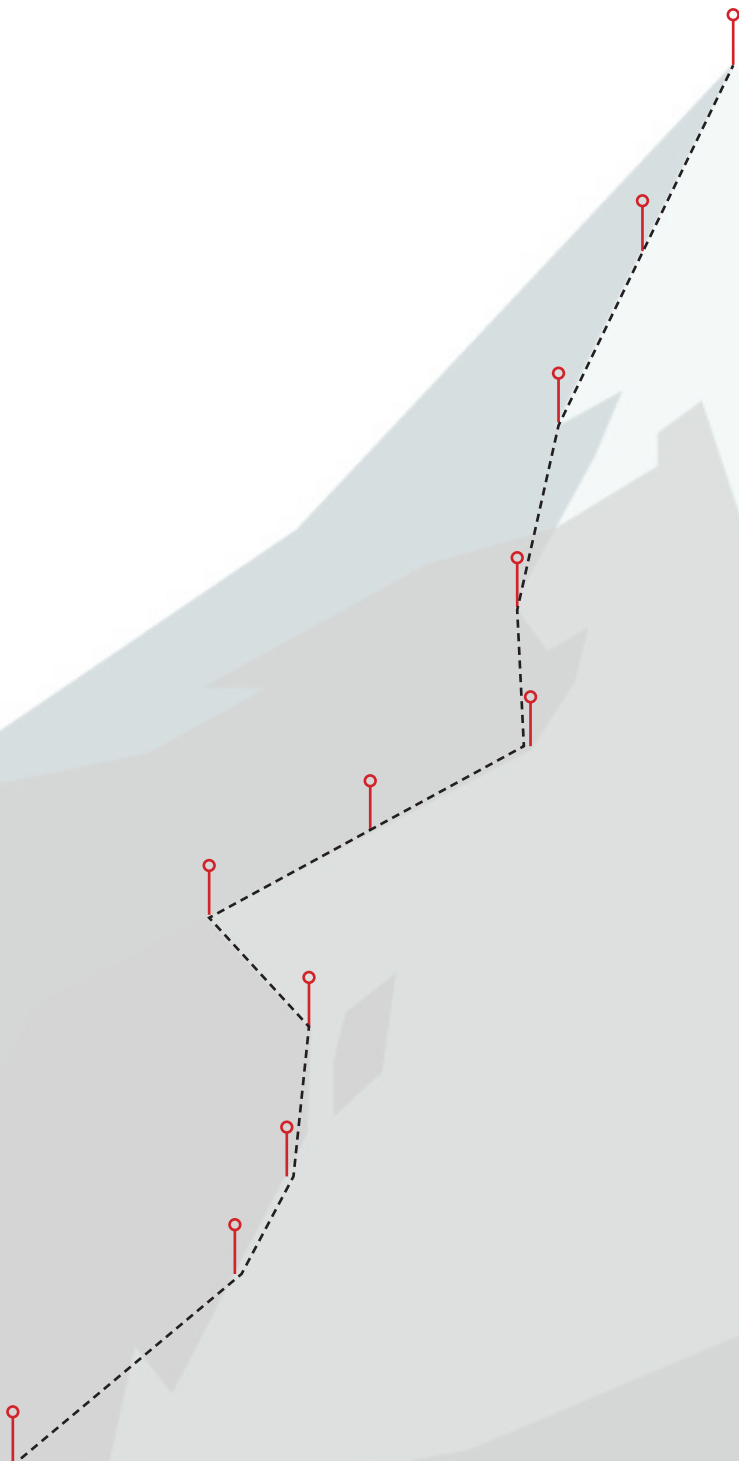
- If we say that we want a more empowered culture, and then have a habit of closing down lines of argument that we disagree with, without acknowledging this behaviour of ours, we invite cynicism because the way we are behaving is so evidently disempowering of others
- If, on the other hand, we invite others to challenge us if we revert to close down behaviours in a moment of challenge, this act of owning our behaviours can make us both more authentic as leaders and more empowering of others.

In leading culture change, we are not required to be perfect as leaders.

If we want a culture of candour, we are required to be as honest as we can possibly be - and that includes honesty about our own behaviours as leaders as well as how we would like everyone else to behave.

Changing Culture for the Better

Eleven steps



STEP I

The bedrock: We need to offer passion *and* vision

These are two essential requirements for lasting culture change.

One can't work without the other:

- passionless vision will fall flat
- visionless passion will be a flash in the pan.

We need both:

- passion that feels personal and REAL, expressed in language that people expect us to use as leaders and as far as possible from that of management textbooks
- vision captured through a core message expressed in plain English, using short phrases and words of few syllables that people can take on and make their own.

STEP 2

The reality check: Passion and vision are not enough

Vision provides the context for culture change and passion provides the energy and drive.

They get us started – and do no more than that!

- Clarity of vision can never deny the reality of the many unknowns that all businesses face.
- Passion that feels personal and REAL, expressed in language that is personal to us as leaders and as far removed as possible from that of management textbooks.

We need more, a lot more.

- This is where our persistence and tenacity as leaders come into play.

STEP 3

Constructive conversation

We need to hold the space for constructive conversation.

In all discussions about culture, it's important that we start by explaining the case for change.

We can then ask people to say whether they feel in any way threatened by what we have just said.

- Everyone needs to believe that we genuinely want them to speak their truth and that whatever they say will be listened to and respected.
- In this way, we should be able to “surface the difficult stuff” as well as reassuring people that the process for developing a new shared culture is truly open and consultative.

We are then in a position to challenge our teams to think ahead and join up the dots:

- *“Let’s rethink our plans for future working and ask how they need to change to reflect the new culture that we are going to create together”.*

STEP 4

Contradictions and tensions

We need to challenge the contradictions and tensions within our current culture.

So often there is a culture of denial about the real barriers in the way of positive change. This is why it is important that we identify the contradictions and tensions within our current culture that are holding us back.

The very act of naming them, without anger or aggression, makes it easier to bring them out of the “shadows” where their capacity to do damage is at its greatest.

For example, many commercial organisations imply that the quest for profitability is completely in line with their higher purpose. Sometimes it is, and sometimes it isn't.

In these situations, choices need to be made.

- It is the refusal to acknowledge these choices that can do so much to weaken the integrity of a culture.
- The more generous we can be in the way we refer to contradictions and tensions within our current culture, the easier it will be for staff to “own” them and share our ambition to leave them behind.

STEP 5

Cynics and saboteurs

We need to engage with the cynics and would-be saboteurs.

We all have an inner voice that has the capacity to be cynical, and so it's never too difficult to know what the cynics are thinking.

- Our role needs to be to draw them out and encourage them to share their cynicism, so that they might be asked to let it go – and at least become sceptics.

One way to draw people out is through asking *“how could we make this fail?”*

- In the process, we will find out who has genuine concerns and might yet be won over to supporting the new culture, and who intends to act as a blocker and saboteur.

We need to weed out the blockers and would-be saboteurs sooner rather than later, and do so in a way that is visible and decisive.

Once we have shown that we won't tolerate behaviours designed to block change, we are in a stronger position to convert some of the cynics into powerful ambassadors for culture change:

- *“At first, I didn't get the case for change, but I can now see how these proposals really will improve things ...”*

STEP 6

We're all disruptors now

Culture change involves disruption - and that means us acting as disruptors.

A vital dimension of culture change is about how we behave in the moment, when we experience teams acting in ways that reinforce poor patterns of behaviour.

- In these moments a leader needs to be ready to act as a disruptor, knowing that sometimes others will get the point we are trying to make, and learn from it, and at other times they won't.

Whenever we behave as a disruptor, we are taking a risk that others will understand why we're behaving in the way that we are.

If they don't understand what we're getting at, we're bound to feel awkward.

- Being prepared occasionally to feel awkward is part of what's required of us as disruptive leaders.

No awkwardness, no risk.

No risk, no culture change.

STEP 7

Less doing

The challenge for so many of us is that more coaching and culture changing require less doing on our part.

Culture change involves leaders spending more time creating an environment in which more people can succeed to a greater degree than they have ever done before.

- This requires us to invest more time in our roles coaching, supporting, cajoling, affirming and stretching.
- To do this, we need to rethink the balance between the time we spend doing and the time we spend coaching.

So often, there is also a need to increase the pace of work. Some resist this on the grounds that more speed equals less quality.

Yet the truth is that greater speed and higher quality tend to go together as one, so long as we have good feedback systems in place.

- Pace can drive higher quality because it shortens feedback loops.

With less doing and more coaching on our part, the result can be more doing - and higher quality doing - all round.

STEP 8

No more workarounds

To succeed in sub-optimal cultures, we've all got used to creating workarounds.

This is something we're all now pretty good at.

If, say, we think that our approvals process is too slow, despite various decisions by various bodies to speed it up, it is bound to be tempting to short-cut this bureaucracy when we want something approved urgently.

If we really want to change culture, we need to do this less – and challenge poor practices more.

We can't create a healthier workplace culture if we look the other way when others don't do what they say they're going to do.

- Workarounds are so often our way of avoiding culture change.
- They reinforce silo mentalities because they're about us creating our own little "bubble" in which we make our own rules.

The moment we say "no more workarounds" is the moment we know we really are serious about culture change.

STEP 9

Words matter

So often the language that we use gets in the way of what we're trying to achieve.

Healthy cultures are those in which there is a practice of “plain speaking”, so that we all feel free to “say it as it is”, whilst assuming the best of each other and never seeking to be ungenerous.

Yet the language that we use is sometimes so abstract and jargonistic that it creates barriers that prevent others from identifying with the message we're seeking to share.

- We should be prepared to stop using terms such as “strategy”, “resilience”, “collaboration” and “market segmentation” that have lost their meaning through over-use and misuse.

If we say that we want to cut out acronyms and jargon and “tech talk”, that will be quite a challenge for some. Bring it on!

STEP 10

Rewarding behaviours

It is time for us to look more closely at how we can reward behaviours that help to foster the culture that we are seeking for our organisations.

One idea is that there should be a “behavioural threshold” that staff need to cross before they can benefit from the bonus system.

- If we were to pick just two behaviours that are key to building the new culture, and all staff had to exhibit to be eligible for a bonus, this could make a big difference.

The knack is to focus on a small number of behaviours and express what we expect of staff in very simple language. (Perhaps one of them could be linked to a contradiction or tension that we have been naming, in line with step 4.)

Assuming that these behaviours become the norm in, say, two years, another consultative exercise could be undertaken at that stage to identify the “bad habits” that are undermining the organisation’s culture.

And so the process could be repeated, with everyone knowing that they have to break these “new” bad habits to be eligible for bonuses.

STEP 11

Contemplating our own departure

To be successful in leading culture change, we need to envisage the culture thriving without us.

In so many ways, culture change is personal. People look to their leaders to model the behaviours they ask others to adopt, and are quick to condemn those leaders who say one thing and do another.

Whilst our role in modelling behaviours is important, we also need to be careful to do all that we can to share “ownership” of key cultural behaviours as widely as possible.

- The more widely the new culture is shared, the stronger it will be if and when one of its primary advocates moves elsewhere.
- This is why it can be very helpful for us all to challenge ourselves about how important we ourselves are to the culture that we are seeking to promote.

If we tell ourselves that our aim is to make ourselves redundant, we might find that we work harder as agents of culture change.

Think you're
at the top?



Don't forget

***"The top of one mountain is
always the bottom of another"***

(Marianne Williamson)