Communication, values and culture - why bother?

An evolutionary approach to communication and culture

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Surviving a high-velocity environment, tapping the emerging source of value, and rebuilding civic trust lost by the intensification of laissez-faire capitalism: three bottom-line reasons for attending to the cultural chemistry.

Imagine this: Life inside organisations works!

Actually, it more than works. It's fantastic! Organisations are good for people. Good for society. Good for the environment. They're generative. Productive. Bold. Visionary. Their energy, time and resources are focused on what's really important.

The people who work there spend their days learning, growing and collaborating with like minds to improve themselves, the quality of their working environment, the quality of the work they do and the quality of their organisation's contribution.

They're fully engaged, enthusiastic, committed. They have personal and professional dreams, and they find they can realise their potential at work. They have a stake in what happens, and how it happens, so they care. They're proud of what they do, and come to work believing they matter, proud of what they do, believing their contribution is valuable, not only personally and to the success of the organisation but to the wider system they're part of.

Because of this, they're proud of their organisation. Proud of its reputation. Proud of its respected and honourable place in society. Proud of the behaviour of those who hold privileged positions, and proud of the decisions they make.

Their organisation is publically committed to quality,

excellence, customer care, respect for employees, for the community and for the environment, and from their vantage point on the inside, the people who work there know this is true. They know this is what the organisation really cares about. These are its values, and all of its decisions, everything it does, its entire culture is devoted to living these values with integrity.

If this is not a leap of the imagination, but your everyday lived experience, then we'd love to hear from you. Seriously.

But if this sounds like an attractive but impossible wish list, then we need to ask, *Why?* Why is it that the lives of good people are routinely spent in service to systems that let them down? Why do organisations and institutions regularly fail to express the best of what's possible, frequently disappoint, often cruelly betray, and sometimes destroy... not only those who work inside them, but those they claim to value and serve?

Why does that happen? Is it inevitable, or is something better possible? How can we get past this state of affairs? What needs to change? And where might we begin?

Everyday organisational and leadership practice focusses primarily on what is visible and tangible. While the rhetoric of *intangibles* may be quietly

moving into the mainstream, in practice leaders and organisations largely persist with 'more of the same' - seeking to address 21st century issues within 19th century institutions using a mindset and worldview rooted in the Middle Ages.

This paper focuses specifically on the invisible, intangible dimensions of organisational life - on communication, values and culture - because we believe that a willingness to shift the organisation's focus towards the invisible and the intangible is necessary if we are interested in change that is transformational and lasting.

Culture for realists: The Business Case

For those looking beyond the philosophical to determine practical and pragmatic reasons for deepening their engagement with these issues, we'd highlight three we feel are vital.

1

Surviving a high-velocity environment

To be effective, and in many cases to survive, organisations need to be much more flexible and responsive than in the past. Today's marketplace is global, fast-moving and increasingly complex, and organisations of all shapes and sizes face the direct and indirect challenges of a constantly shifting context.

You simply can't respond efficiently if you don't have a robust communication infrastructure in place, or if the communication process isn't functioning properly. This is the first and most basic reason for attending to the communication culture.

2

Tapping the emerging source of value

In a me-too world, everyone is chasing productivity and innovation. Communication is an essential element in creating the relationships and the context that nurture both.

Organisations are just beginning to appreciate that the new source of value is in hearts and minds, rather than bricks and mortar or mechanical hardware, that value is increasingly *intangible*, and therefore the quality of an organisation's internal relationships is an increasingly important contributor to value.

Because issues of recruitment, retention and engagement are on every employer's agenda, employee communication is now vital.

In an ESRI survey of 5000 employees and 1500 managers carried out for the National Centre for Partnership and Performance in Ireland, the majority of employees said they are rarely told in advance about workplace changes that affect them.

More than half said they 'hardly ever' receive crucial information, and while 50% of managers said they regularly communicate with their staff, 4 out of 5 firms had no structures in place to inform employees of changes.

ESRI Research: June 2004

People need **context**: to see how what they do fits in to the company's overall operations, to see how their **personal input** translates into the global output of the company. They need to be kept in the loop, so they can **track their progress**: how they're doing, how the company's doing, and where it's going. And they need ways in which to **participate** in shaping the decisions that affect them.

Cultivating the internal relationship territory is more than just **giving information**; it's also about **listening** to people and **responding** to their needs. All of these are communication issues. How productive, innovative or engaged can a person be, if they don't understand the context in which they're working, don't know how they're doing, don't know how the company's doing, and feel they have no control over their destiny?

And yet, even the latest research shows there's little understanding of the powerful role communication plays in maintaining the health of organisational life.

Employees also need to understand the **purpose** of their work. Yet again, research reveals a growing crisis of meaning in the workplace - especially among 25 - 35 year olds, just as people are reaching their professional prime.

In the world of work, people increasingly feel they're just small cogs in a diffuse supply chain - distanced from the consequences of their work, and therefore from the source of meaning. If you want their commitment and contribution, then work must have meaning for the people who do it. The organisation really has to care as much about employees' fulfilment as it does about the organisation's financial fulfilment.

And all of this of course, is central to cultivating mutual trust, so communication has to move away from the old-style one-way, top-down, need-to-know, command-and-control model ... to a multi-way communication model involving top-down context setting, and bottom-up listening, as well as horizontal communication to stimulate and enable cross-company dialogue, understanding and co-operation.

In other words, a deeper and more holistic approach.

The qualities most organisations say they want.... productivity, cooperation, innovation, creativity and so on - real organisational value - are totally dependent on the *nature* and *quality* of the relationships in the organisation - all of the relationships ..... between employees, between the employees and the organisation, between managers and staff, and so on.

Quarter-Life Crisis - the new phenomenon

A quarter-life crisis is now a reality for young people, a time when they evaluate what they're doing and what they want from life. Research with 1000 employees between the ages of 25 and 35 clearly shows that young people thirst for meaning in their lives, and are not fulfilled by their work. Fear that they are not finding this meaning is leading to a quarter-life crisis, where younger people often drop out of their fast track or job-hop in an attempt to satisfy their longing to make a difference. They will not stay with employers who do not support their efforts to find purpose in their lives.

The implication of these findings are that it is no longer acceptable to expect young talent to put a whole part of themselves aside in the workplace. Employers must work even harder to uncover the passion that fires their younger managers' vision of what is possible, and provide opportunities for them to develop it and nurture it.

And they must be proactive in this, by seeking out opportunities for young managers to learn how society works and to find their place in it. Only this way will they attract and retain the best people, and avoid mass defection and burnout. Employers must address the needs of the whole person, and recognise that the desire to make a difference will not go away. Instead, employees will.

From *"Searching for Something: Exploring the career traps and ambitions of young people"*
Common Purpose UK, 2004

And the quality of those relationships depends fundamentally on the quality of the communication culture. Organisations need to see communication not as a means of getting information around, but a means of **building relationships** and enhancing the quality of those relationships in order to cultivate **cohesion and commitment**, and create a culture in which appropriate discretionary behaviour can flourish.

3

Rebuilding civic trust
Studies in developed countries everywhere show that trust in institutions has literally evaporated in recent times, and business especially is under the spotlight. A recent UK study shows that trust in corporate institutions has plummeted from 2:1 *in favour* in 1970, to 2:1 *against* today.

People don't trust business, especially big business, or its products. People don't trust banks or pension providers. People don't trust hospitals and especially hospital consultants...

A 2003 survey in Britain showed that only 5% of respondents were willing to trust business to tell the truth about pollution.

The pattern is repeating itself in Ireland. Market research company Amárach Consulting says that three-quarters of Irish adults believe organisations put their shareholders above all other concerns. they say their attitude is selfish and that organisations "become cold and impersonal as they grow".

Who you are and what you stand for are set to become as important as what you do. In a global shift which is seeing more and more being demanded of organisations of all shapes and sizes in terms of responsibility, accountability and corporate governance, the need to rebuild credibility and civic trust is a growing component of reputation and brand value.

When you join the dots between all of these things - flexibility and responsiveness, the kind of workplace we create, trust, credibility, fairness, transparency, who we are in the eyes of a critical world... they're all linked by one word: *culture.*

Not only outsiders but senior and respected *insiders* are becoming vocal about the need for business to attend to its culture. The world is downstairs asking questions about intangibles such as governance, ethics, values, trust, transparency... the buried

treasure which organisations don't traditionally include when calculating corporate value.

The 'C' word

There's a lot of talk in recent times about the need to address culture in general, and the culture of specific institutions and organisations in particular. The commentary however, even at the most senior level, suggests an understanding of culture as something we 'have' that can be changed - like a machine or component of some sort that can be tweaked or modified by the addition of a few more controls and regulations.

This is not the case of course. Culture is something we *are*. Something we *create* moment by moment, through a myriad of individual choices and decisions... that translate into behaviours... that *communicate* clearly who we are and what we stand for, as individuals, organisations, communities or indeed, nations.

And it's precisely because our actions speak louder than words, that many years ago we redefined communication in our own work, as *'communicative behaviour'* - a definition that encompasses everything we say, everything we do, everything we are, everything we stand for, and all that that says about us.

What we communicate in totality is the *uncensored evidence* of who we are and what we stand for. In other words, our culture.

Communication is the everyday means by which culture is produced and reproduced. What we get is the predictable outcome of the underlying values, beliefs and assumptions that shape the communicative behaviour in the system. It's dynamic, not static. It's constantly in production, so the only way to influence the cultural outcome is to influence the 'production' process itself, and that means dealing with the deeper, invisible drivers of culture.

Communication values and culture: the connection

Values are the source. Silently at work within all of us, consciously and unconsciously influencing every choice and decision, values colour our perception of the world around us, telling us what is important, what to prioritise, how to respond to what we experience, how we should act.

Because values are central to human behaviour, they're right at the heart of corporate culture, firmly embedded through recognisable, patterned behaviour communicated over time. Just as the ocean currents guide the fish, values structure the space in which relationship unfolds and is sustained. So while they may often be perceived in organisations as vague or elusive, values have explicitly tangible consequences and are a critical shaper of culture.

Discretionary behaviour

If organisations are to respond consistently and appropriately to today's fluid and constantly shifting context, inflexible rulebooks and top-down edicts need to be replaced with core values and guiding principles which can be freely interpreted in the moment of decision by everyone across the organisation. Such "discretionary behaviour" has been identified by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) as one of the key distinguishing features of high performing workplaces of the future.

According to the dictionary, 'discretionary' means "*freedom to decide* what should be done in a particular situation". This freedom is not boundary-less of course, and in the world of work the CIPD defines it as behaviour that is "positive to the aims of the organisation".

But the words 'freedom to decide' point to a deeper issue: discretionary behaviour by its very nature, can't be mandated. Or re-engineered. We can't 'train' for it. If we want our organisations to be genuinely flexible and responsive in a fluid and constantly shifting business world, we must be able to trust people to do what's necessary and appropriate in the moment. And the only way to stack the odds in favour of the desired behaviour is to work with the context in which all behaviour is shaped - the culture.

Addressing the Cultural Chemistry

When an organisation is seen not as a 'machine' or a collection of components that can be 'fixed' or

controlled, but a living system of relationships, it becomes clear that working with *culture* means working with the chemistry of those relationships in all its dimensions.

It's necessary to attend to the more visible, tangible and practical dimensions of communication, of course - the tools, channels, processes, strategies and so on - but if we are looking for lasting cultural change, the focus needs to turn to the *intangible* and *invisible.*

The organisation that wants to evolve beyond where it is now needs to journey inwards and journey outwards. The **journey inwards** reconnects the organisation with its core ideology - the purpose, direction, vision, mission and values that hold it all together. The **journey outwards** reconnects it with the wider system it's part of - to update itself on the needs of the system it serves, renew its relationship, and refresh its role and its responsibilities.

The journey outwards informs the inward journey. By opening itself up to the needs and values of its entire community of interest, and the needs of the wider context in which it operates, an organisation can develop its capacity to learn and evolve. It becomes more self-aware, more connected-up to itself and to its internal and external reality, and so, more appropriate and effective in its responses.

And by being willing to learn and evolve, an organisation can trigger genuine intelligence, innovation and creativity, and become more resourceful, more relevant and therefore more resilient and viable in a changing world.

Until we begin to work on the powerful but invisible drivers of culture, much of the work undertaken to improve the visible, tangible dimensions of communication will remain partial, even superficial, and often at odds with the organisation's everyday purpose and activities, breeding inconsistency and eroding the trust upon which all value is based. Credibility demands a genuine integrity between who we are, what we say, and what we do.

Finally, it's worth remembering that organisations don't exist outside of the people who comprise them. Individual consiousness and behaviour defines organisational consciousness and behaviour, so organisational transformation must begin with personal transformation - and that starts with raising to consciousness some of the unconscious processes and values that drive our attitudes, beliefs and behaviour, and make us what we are.

At a time when faith in organisations and institutions of all kinds has diminished, the deeper purpose of organisational communication must be to facilitate the cultural evolution that will rebuild internal and external trust, and renew and invigorate the chemistry between organisations, the people who create them, and the communities and environments they serve.   **||| dya**

about the authors

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Paula has a Distinction in Communication Studies and a Masters with Distinction in Responsibility and Business Practice from the University of Bath and has studied Systems Thinking at the Open University. David is a qualified Cultural Assessment Practitioner.

They are co-authors of *Exploring the Communication Dynamic: 301 Building Blocks to Enrich your Working Relationships.* They have also created *Q5 - New Leadership at Work* to prompt a movement for personal and organisational change, in which each of us begins to see our working and professional life as an opportunity to address the critical issues of our generation.

Both speak and write on the challenges and opportunities of system change.

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