Behavioural Digest

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Culture, Values and Behaviours
By Lynn Dunlop

Values are underlying priorities guiding how a company does business (or how a person lives). Culture could be described as 'what it feels like around here'. Behaviours are the things we say and do. It's important to note that behaviours are observable and measurable, so we're not counting mindsets as behaviours. Mindsets, attitudes and beliefs are closer to values - contributing to our choice of behaviours, but distinct from them.

Behaviours are contingent on three key things; our genetic make-up, our life-history and our local environment. The first two things sum up that people are all different and so will behave differently to each other. The last takes into account why someone might act in a way that isn't in accordance with their values: Why someone who truly believes that remaining calm will always be the most sensible thing will suffer from a sudden bout of road-rage and shout at another driver, for example.

As a result, setting out values and stating, indeed truly believing, that 'this is the culture we want around here' isn't sufficient. Leaders must also focus on the environment they've created for their people to work within. Because even the most safety-conscious, collaborative and innovative of employees will behave in ways contrary to their values if circumstances make their preferred choices impossible.

Catastrophizing - Being A Project Manager Has Changed How My Brain Works
By Mark Penrice

Catastrophizing is the habit of believing the worst will happen; you hear the postie and your mind jumps to the fine he is delivering, for example. I have developed (or overdeveloped) an automatic little bit of my brain that constantly runs through different scenarios looking for all the worst possible things that could possibly happen, thinking of contingency plans, trying to weigh up the likelihood of them actually happening and looking for ways to reduce the risk.

The first time that I realized that catastrophizing was a project management-induced mental health problem was with a good friend who had left the industry before the age of 40. We were discussing the reasons one would want to leave the industry. There are quite a few, but the one that stood out was catastrophizing. Constant automatic following of all risks and issues to their worst possible outcome in "real life" had been wearing her down. She is a smart woman, she knows these things are not really happening, but she noted that it doesn't stop your body reacting to the imagined event. This isn't a healthy way to live, so what can we do?

Identifying the problem is the first step in fixing it – when I spoke to a few other project managers, most had similar experiences. The best way for me to stop thinking about a risk is to write it down. If you notice your brain is going down a catastrophe rabbit hole, consciously recognize it and practice trying to stop. Make a list of questions to ask yourself that are useful to you. Mine includes - "On a scale of 1 to 10 how likely is this scenario to actually happen?"

Collaboration Blockers
By Garry Sanderson

It is now almost a cliché to say that the need for better collaboration to meet the challenges of our modern world has never been greater. We recognise that no one individual, leader or organisation can shape and deliver the solutions that we need. Yet do we really understand what collaboration is? And what are the blockers to collaborative behaviour?

Typical dictionary definitions for the word 'collaboration' include:
1. The action of working with someone to produce something
2. Traitorous cooperation with the enemy

The first gives us no more than a superficial glimpse. People working in siloed bureaucratic organisations may recognise the second. Collaboration, like other important but intangible concepts, falls into the category of things that are hard to describe, yet we know it when we see it. Perhaps more importantly, we have no problem identifying behaviour that is uncollaborative. Arguably, there are two fundamental attributes that set humans apart from other living creatures and underpin the development of civilisation as we know it. Firstly, our ability to use the processing power of our pre-frontal cortex to imagine 'alternative realities' means that we can mentally visualise and construct our projects, our solutions, and even our future lives. Secondly, we have unparalleled ability to work together in groups to realise these plans.

Homo sapiens, or modern humans such as you and I, have been around for approximately 300,000 years. For most of this time, we lived a tribal existence, hunting and gathering to meet our immediate needs. Typically, tribes comprised no more than 150 individuals. In groups of this size, it was possible to know, and therefore collaborate with, all the fellow members of the tribe.

Why then, if human collaborative behaviour is evolutionarily hardwired, do we need to consider it at all? The issue is that the modern organisational structures and typical patterns of corporate behaviour create a multitude of blockers that stifle and discourage collaborative performance. Examples of collaboration blockers include: Out-dated organisational structures, office politics, distracting digital applications, over-complicated contracts, misaligned commercial models, meaningless reporting procedures, multitudinous key performance indicators, time zones, cultural differences, unclear objectives and pointless middle managers.

Collaboration is not a business initiative for management to define and implement. Rather, our human ability to collaborate is innate and unlocks our evolutionary competitive advantage. It is a leadership imperative to identify and remove collaboration blockers.

Shades of BMT

- History is littered with people trying to control other humans and getting more and more furious when it doesn't all work out their way.
- The urban dictionary defines collaboration as: An unnatural act practiced by nonconsenting adults!
- The boss, your peers and the work itself are the major contributors that impact your local workplace environment.

Keeping Safety Fresh?
By Howard Lees

If anything has to be 'kept fresh' then, behaviourally speaking, it means that there are not enough natural reinforcers available to maintain the desired behaviour(s). Most things that work well are littered with reinforcers that support the desired outcomes or feelings. Simple examples are - turning on taps to get water, moving off at green traffic lights, taking a drink, paying a bill on time, playing solitaire. These few examples describe the relief or pleasure derived from getting what you want or avoiding what you don't want. This begs the question, "How do you keep desired behaviours going when they are directly competing against things like 'lack of time', 'discomfort', 'complexity', 'lack of patience' etc?"

Most people are happy to spend a lot of time and consideration regarding the safety of themselves and their own family. Most people will create and maintain safe environments at home. They will deliver enough reinforcers to maintain these desired safe behaviours. Most people don't have a plan for safety at home, there's no audits, no tick sheets, no signs on the stairs. We create a caring environment at home.

If you are struggling with this conundrum at work, perhaps ask yourself, "Am I smart enough to come up with some new reinforcers that will solve this seemingly impossible situation?" Most good people will answer this question with a resounding "yes". If you are still frustrated, then perhaps find some like-minded colleagues, and jointly figure out a sustainable solution. There is always going to be a reinforcing solution out there, if you look hard enough.

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