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Changing Corporate Culture

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Have you ever noticed how difficult it is to change corporate culture? Except for startups and newly formed groups, organizational culture is entrenched.

Yet, difficult or not, leaders must sometimes tackle the daunting task of changing organizational culture. To succeed, they must keep in mind certain fundamental realities that make corporate culture resistant to change.

A Systems Perspective

First, leaders should think of organizational culture as a system. A living, breathing, interactive system. As such, it functions according to certain principles that govern all systems. For starters, systems serve to maintain balance.

To illustrate, think of some familiar systems all around you. Electrical systems make power avalable at a specific voltage, a balance point. Heating and air conditioning systems maintain a balanced temperature. Inventory systems maintain a certain balance of goods on the shelf.

The reason corporate culture resists change, therefore, is that culture, being a system, strives to maintain balance. When change is thrown at a system, the system immediately reacts to restore the former balance point. For example, if you open an outside door on a frigid day, cold air rushes into the room. The heating system immediately throws its resources into bringing the temperature back to a balance point set by the thermostat.

Fighting Against Change

For change agents, then, reality number one is that culture fights back. Trumping change is in its very nature. It's the way the culture maintains stability. Indeed, the ultimate purpose of a system is not to maintain balance. Balance is simply the means to a greater end, which is to maintain stability and predictability. That's the end design of every system.

Does this mean that corporate culture never changes? Not at all. Unlike a lighting or cooling system, culture is living and interactive, and living systems (think of eco-systems, for instance) are adaptive. They change in response to forces that act upon them.

But adaptation within living systems tends to be incremental, not sweeping and broadscale. Remember, the purpose of a system is to maintain stability and predictability. As such it protects itself from disruption by evaluating change carefully before embracing it. This hesitancy to embrace change is the way the system protects itself from pathogens that might otherwise invade.

Slapping The Mobile

This then leads to reality number two for the change agent: the more radically you disrupt a system the more intensely it fights back. To illustrate this principle, we might borrow an analogy offered by Virginia Satir a half-century ago. Satir's specialty was studying families as interactive, interpersonal systems.

She compared interpersonal systems to a mobile suspended from the ceiling. Imagine the mobile hanging motionless, in perfect balance. If you walk over and tap one of the elements of the mobile, the device begins an intricate dance. The purpose of this dance is to bring the mobile back into balance.

Now picture yourself walking over to the mobile again. This time, instead of tapping it, you slap it sharply. Again the mobile begins its dance. But this time the dance is much more exaggerated and elaborate. The harder you strike the mobile, the more extreme its reactive dance. And the dance does not end until the system is back in balance.

Contrast this situation to what would happen if you were to walk up to the same mobile, not to strike it, but to attach a jumbo-size paper clip to one of the elements.

Again the mobile reacts by trying to reestablish a balance point. But because the disruption from adding the paper clip is only minor, the dance is not particularly elaborate. Balance is quickly restored. However, while balance is restored, the balance point itself has shifted. The slight modification has forced the balance point to relocate. The system has changed, but with little reactivity.

Incremental Change

Which brings us to reality number three for change agents: the likelihood that cultural change will take root increases to the degree that change is incremental rather than wholesale. Another way of saying this is that cultural change cannot be rushed if we want it to succeed.

Instead, time permitting, cultural change should be planned as a protracted series of sequential steps. Each step should be chunked small enough that the culture can absorb it without becoming unduly reactive. And the steps should be spaced far enough apart that the culture has time to establish a new balance point before further change is thrust upon it.

Where possible, begin with small changes whose benefit is likely to be quickly and widely recognized across the culture. Gather low-hanging fruit first. In this way you build early credibility for cultural change. While living systems do adapt, they only adapt when they sense that the change serves their own self-interest and well-being. Ultimately culture changes, not because of great leaders or thoughtful change design — both of which are essential — but because the culture itself sees the benefit of change and develops a desire to embrace it.