

Is cloning good for your health?

Culture is at the heart of any organisation and is key to delivering brand promises. This article explores how desirable or feasible it is to have a clear and consistent culture across practice areas, offices and countries.

What is culture?

Culture is the way we do things around here. One definition of culture is a pattern of shared assumptions and beliefs that underpin the way we think, act and feel. People new to the organisation have to “learn” the culture if they are to fit in by adapting to it and adopting it.

Clients and people from outside sense the culture when they come into contact with us. The way they are greeted in reception, the look and feel of our offices, the way we work with stakeholders and with each other, the stories we tell about ourselves all provide clues to our culture. Ultimately, as clients we speak to each year tell us, culture is a key way in which clients distinguish one organisation from another.

One view of culture is that it is imposed from on top and prescribed in manuals. In this view, culture is defined (usually by senior management) communicated and adopted.

Another view is that organisational life is much messier than this. Alongside the “official” culture are many informal ones, often not openly acknowledged and frequently powerful and undermining the more rational version. In this view, everyone in the organisation helps to re-create the culture day in, day out. This happens from the myriad interactions people have with each other and with the outside world – face-to-face, by ‘phone, email and in written documents.

Some people are more influential in this than others – either because of their position in the formal hierarchy or because of their ability to influence the informal culture, through, for example gossip and creating informal coalitions. One of the most influential people in one organisation we worked in was the receptionist. Lots of people stopped to chat to her so she was a good source of information and she spread gossip (and knowledge) very enthusiastically.

Is there such a thing as one culture?

In any given organisation there are likely to be several cultures – for example, in the IT department compared to the HR department. These different cultures exist whether we acknowledge them or not.

Different departments attract people with different skills and do things differently, partly because they do different things. So in professional services firms, the culture in tax with its attention to detail is likely to be different from that in corporate finance where the demands of deal making require more spur of the moment decisions and behaviours.

In one professional services firm, where we helped partners and associates from different departments make sense of a new strategy for their everyday jobs, people were surprised to hear how different the cultures in different parts of the firm were. As we problem-solved a number of issues people were grappling with, the participants acknowledged how they benefited from the different perspectives people brought with them. (An additional benefit was creating relationships between people from the different “silos” in the firm which had little occasion to talk to each other.)

Increasingly in multi-national firms different national cultures co-exist and need to be accommodated. This can cause problems if these differences get stereotyped rather than explored for what they can offer in different perspectives and new learning for the firm. In our experience, acknowledging the different cultures and exploring their different perspectives on issues is the first step in beginning to integrate them.

The importance of diversity

Ideas from the complexity sciences point to the importance of difference if organisations are to develop and adapt to changing environments (Figure 1). Too much agreement and certainty can lead to complacency and ultimately to death through stagnation. Equally, too much diversity can lead to chaos and disintegration through lack of direction and cohesion. Somewhere in the middle there is enough sameness and difference for the organisation to develop and survive.

Paradoxically, culture is always changing and at the same time staying the same. The change potential comes from the opportunity to do things differently each time we act. And small changes can have big and unpredictable effects as they ripple through the firm. The stability comes from patterns of behaviour that people tend to follow in order to be accepted into the organisation. It's like a river – moving all the time with new water flowing through and at the same time following a discernible course. Culture is living and dynamic and in healthy organisations it is open to change and adapting all the time.

Conversations that explore similarities as a way to integrate differences

So recruiting everybody in the same mould can seriously damage the health of the organisation. Equally, you need to have some tools to allow difference to be explored in ways that don't tear the organisation apart. Conversations are at the heart of culture and they too can be stuck or chaotic. Somewhere in the middle they can paradoxically contain sameness and difference *at the same time* and lead to innovative learning and adding more value.

As the chart below shows, we need enough (but not too much or too little) agreement about what we are aiming for and how to do it. This is in the context of a world where most of the time we are not close to certainty about how things will unfold nor too far away to make some reasonable guesses.

In one large organisation, we worked with a senior management team that had got stuck in the way it was leading. It felt that it wasn't being effective but couldn't constructively explore the different views within the team on what it should do to change.

During an initial workshop, we asked the team to articulate in small groups its purpose. There was a lot of overlap between the ideas (which were written on post-its and grouped to provide a "map" or visual) and there was some difference. We first explored the similarities and then the differences. These were mainly expressed by one individual whom others in the team saw as a bit of a nuisance. We could have gone along with this view and lost the benefit of her different perspective. Instead, we encouraged her to articulate her views and others began to join her and build on her ideas. The result was an agreed view on purpose. In a later workshop, the team identified structures, procedures and attitudes they needed to change to enact their new agreed purpose.

This took place over a number of months and, as with any change work, there were no simple solutions or guaranteed outcomes. And the start was, as always, to be more aware of what was happening (and people's different perspectives on this) in order to begin to engage with it, rather than deny its existence or legitimacy.

Figure 1

