



What if Maslow was wrong? (aka: Why are cultures so ‘sticky’?)

Humans want to belong. In fact, humans want to belong so strongly that they will do almost anything to ensure they do. Recent research by Professor Mathew Lieberman, who heads the Social Cognitive Neuroscience Lab at UCLA’s Department of Psychology, Psychiatry and Biobehavioural Science, suggests that Maslow’s celebrated hierarchy of needs is wrong. It turns out that belonging is actually more important to human beings than food, water or shelter. How can this be true? Because in social animals, of which humans are the ultimate example, belonging to a group is a precondition that ensures we will receive food, water and shelter. Without that belonging, we will die, particularly when young.

So, our brains are hard-wired to make sure we do what we need to do to belong. As far as our brains are concerned, it is interpreted as literally a matter of life or death, even if food, water and shelter are abundant.

Why does this matter in the case of organisational culture? If humans will do almost anything to belong, that means each of us must spend time and effort working out what it takes to belong in a specific organisation, at a specific time and do whatever we can to ensure that belonging, once earned, is fiercely defended. So when we join an organisation we ask ourselves, consciously or unconsciously, ‘what do I need to do to belong in this group?’. We watch what others do, particularly others who are successful. We see what behaviour is approved of by the people with power, the ones others look up to – then we experiment. What happens when I do this behaviour? Is it approved of, by my boss, by my peers, by my team members? We listen to the gossip, particularly that gossip that tells us who is gaining status and who is losing it. We read the organisational ‘tea leaves’.

If we try out a particular behaviour and it is approved of by those we want to impress, then we will do that behaviour again. If we try a behaviour and it is frowned upon by those we want to impress, we will do that behaviour less, or not at all.

Humans adopt the behaviour that is successful in the group they join.

So first we watch. I call this the ‘examine’ phase. We watch what others do and say, what they wear, what time they arrive and leave, how they speak in meetings, the kind of work outputs they produce, what they say in front of senior people, how they lead their teams and who they eat lunch

with. The better we are at noticing the behaviours of others, the more chance we have of working out which behaviours are important.

After we've watched others for a while, we decide which of their behaviours gains them more status and belonging and which gains them less. I call this the 'evaluate' phase. We see how those with power react to the behaviours we've been watching. When someone arrives at 7 am do the people who matter admire their hard work and dedication or do they talk about what a 'try-hard' that person is and how neglected their family must be? When someone produces a PowerPoint pack full of graphs and charts do the people who matter praise their ability to express complex data in meaningful ways or do they roll their eyes and make comments about 'death by PowerPoint'? Is the woman in the neatly tailored suit and patent leather heels seen as the ultimate professional or do the people who matter talk about her as being a 'desperate escapee from the 80s'?

It's obvious that the answers to these and countless other similar questions will be different in every different place of employment and will change over time. There will be very different answers in a law firm in 2010 than in a construction company in 2018. But there will also be different answers in different law firms at the same point in time, though the differences will be more subtle. These nuances matter enormously. Those skilled at picking them up are more likely to earn belonging.

So we 'examine' and we 'evaluate' – and we do these things constantly throughout our working days. When we've seen enough of a certain behaviour to believe that it will be met with approval and will enhance our status and belonging, we try it out ourselves. I call this the 'experiment' phase. We try it and see what happens. In a culture where a 7 am start gains the respect of the right people, we start arriving earlier and earlier. In a culture where PowerPoint is king we brush up on our graph creation skills or make friends with those who can teach us - or who can do it for us in exchange for something we can do for them. In a culture where tailored suits and heels are admired, we find ourselves browsing in the beige patent pumps section of the local department store.

If a behaviour we adopt is met with the approval and belonging we hoped for, we will keep doing that particular behaviour. I call this the 'embrace' phase. This is where we slowly adopt a set of behaviours as our own that makes us blend in with the norms of the group we have joined. We start to seem more like 'one of us' instead of 'one of them' and feel a stronger and stronger sense of belonging. As time goes by we further refine our behaviours, tweaking them to ensure they still apply as we progress, all the while deepening our sense of being a fully-fledged, welcome and embraced member of the tribe.

And all the while ensuring that we have more and more to lose if the norms of the group were to change.

This is vital. If the norms of the group start to change, then the things that have made us successful, the things that have made us belong and be welcome and accepted here, might start to be frowned upon. If that were to happen, then we may risk losing the belonging we have worked so hard to earn. This is interpreted by our brains as a significant threat to our survival.

We're so hard-wired for belonging that, consciously or unconsciously, we will expend significant effort to ensure we protect the belonging that we have. That means when someone new arrives and

suggests that there might be a better or different way to do something, we look as though we're listening and interested, but find small ways to make it clear we're not too sure about their idea.

New people and new ways of doing things threaten our belonging. They threaten our status and our safety. So, knowingly or unknowingly, we work individually and collectively to ensure that things stay more or less the way they were – or at least close enough to the way they were to ensure our way of doing things remains the best way to guarantee our continued status, belonging and acceptance. I call this the 'enforce' phase. It's about self-protection.

“... a sense of decreasing status can feel like your life is in danger.”

Dr David Rock, co-founder of the NeuroLeadership Institute, stated in a recent blog “... a sense of decreasing status can feel like your life is in danger.”, and “A perceived threat to status feels like it could come with terrible consequences. The response is visceral, including a flood of cortisol to the blood and a rush of resources to the limbic system that inhibits clear thinking.”

So it isn't as simple as 'people don't like change'. Resistance to change is actually a perfectly rational response to a threat that feels very real.

Perhaps this helps to explain, at least in part, why so many change efforts fail. Cultures fight for survival – and they fight very hard.



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