



Culture = The Rules of Belonging

Organisational culture is one of the most widely discussed and widely misunderstood concepts in business today. As a result of the increasing focus from regulators and boards, we have recently seen a whole lot of extra activity around culture, most of which might look like it will have an impact, but very little of which will do anything more than make people look like they're doing something.

I totally get this. The pace of life has become so overwhelming and the demands on senior leaders so great, that there is little if any bandwidth to think deeply about anything, let alone a topic as potentially fraught with ambiguity and nuance as culture.

Most people don't really know what culture is. Many confuse it with employee engagement. Just to be crystal clear, measuring culture is measuring the system, measuring engagement is measuring your employees' experience of that system. They are not the same thing.

So if it's not employee engagement, what is it then?

Culture is the rules of belonging.

Culture is what happens beneath the level of individual behaviours and values. It hides in plain sight, if you know where to look, in the spaces between people - in the underlying patterns of 'what it takes to earn belonging in this place'.

Whatever those patterns are, they are the rules of belonging for that group. Those rules are their culture. The rules of belonging live more in the judgments we make about the behaviours we observe than in the behaviours themselves.

We can all identify the rules of belonging within a very short time of joining a new group. I spoke to someone recently who had just had her first meeting with an employee who had joined her organisation only six days before. She was telling me how shocked she was that the new employee was already able to describe the rules of belonging in their organisation to perfection. In six days.

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Once you start to see the rules of belonging in the groups you're part of, you will never be able to un-see them. It's like looking at the matrix and seeing through the code to the constructs within it. Like the character from the movie watching the code drift down the screen and clearly seeing the woman with the red hair inside the patterns.

We humans are hard-wired for this stuff. For tens of thousands of years our brains have kept us alive by helping us quickly figure out how to adapt our behaviour to belong in the groups we join. And of course we're especially motivated to use our evolutionary super-powers of observation when we join a new work tribe because a whole lot of our status, not to mention our livelihood, is at risk if we don't quickly adapt to belong.

We behave our way to belonging.

So much for humans being bad at change. We're actually spectacularly good at change when we need to be. Just think about how quickly we change our behaviour when we get a new boss.

Culture is the rules of belonging. Change the rules of belonging and you'll change your culture.

If you don't, no amount of values roll-outs, missions, visions, purpose statements or strategies on a page will make any difference.



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