



You can't recruit your way to a new culture

First let me deal with the folks who know that the most senior roles in an organisation have a disproportionate impact on culture. I assure you we're on the same page. It's often essential to change some of the most senior leaders if you want to shift your culture. I'll explain why below. Even so, I stand by the statement - you can't recruit your way to a new culture.

Frequently throughout my career I've heard the following argument - it goes like this: if we just recruit ethical people, we'll stop unethical behaviour. If we just recruit smart people, we'll stop bad decisions. If we just recruit curious people, we'll increase innovation. And so on and so on. Insert attribute here and rely on recruiting people with that attribute to shift your culture in that direction.

It all sounds so logical and plausible. Surely more ethical people would lead to more ethical behaviour. Surely more curious people would lead to more innovation.

Trouble is, it doesn't work. It doesn't work because it fundamentally misunderstands how culture operates. Culture is not changed by adding more of the right ingredients to the system. Culture is changed by changing the system itself.

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Think about the last time you joined a new group. Chances are you cared about how that group operated. You wondered what was considered acceptable in that group. You wondered if you would feel welcome. You hoped the others who were already in that group would like and respect you. You wanted to learn how they did things.

When you arrived, you used your powers of observation, which are, from an evolutionary point of view, extraordinarily well attuned to the task, to figure out what good looks like in this place at this time. You very quickly worked out who had respect, who had influence, who had power and who didn't. You saw particular behaviours that earned greater approval, respect and status and you saw behaviours that reduced those things.

Humans are spectacularly well designed to figure this stuff out.

Mathew Lieberman is a Professor at UCLA's Department of Psychology, Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences and is also the Director of their Social Cognitive Neuroscience Lab. He and his team have done some very cool research that helps to explain what's going on in our brains at an evolutionary level.

One of his experiments has proven that the brain has completely different systems for working on analytical problems and social problems. He calls these the 'analytical brain' and the 'social brain'. This in itself is a remarkable finding - more about that in another article - but what's relevant to this topic is once they had figured that out, they went about trying to understand how these different systems work together, or not.

The experiment they conducted was a straightforward one - people were asked to lie in an MRI scanner and do simple maths problems (3+4 etc.) for one minute and then given one minute to rest and do nothing, another minute of maths, a minute of rest and so on. Predictably, the analytical part of their brains would light up during the one minute they were doing the maths problems and drop back to a baseline level in between.

What was particularly interesting is that no aspect of the experiment called on the use of the social part of their brains. There is no social activity involved in doing maths problems or in lying in a scanner doing nothing for a minute. So they expected to see no activity in the social brain. But that's not what they found.

What they saw was that every time the analytical brain was allowed to rest, the social brain lit up. And it happened instantly, within 300 milliseconds of the end of each maths task. As soon as the next maths task began, the social brain returned to a baseline level and then immediately lit up again as soon as the maths task ended.

Two crucial things can be concluded from this. First, when one of these systems is activated the other is dampened. When we're engaged in an analytical task, our ability to do social tasks is diminished. When we're engaged in a social task, our ability to do analytical tasks is diminished. They work a bit like a see-saw (remember those?), when one is up, the other is down and vice versa. They each come at a cost to the other.

There are huge implications in this finding alone for the way we organise work, but the second and more relevant for today's topic is this:

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How is this relevant to culture change and recruitment?

Humans are very deeply socially wired. This by itself is not new news, but the extent of it is. As is the extent to which it impacts organisational cultures and culture change in particular. We crave social connection - belonging - above all else, and we get it by behaving our way to belonging when we join a new group.

This is why recruiting for a particular attribute doesn't work. If the prevailing culture of the group rewards a particular behaviour with greater belonging, the people we recruit will do one of two things - they will either 'go native' and start to adopt that behaviour as their own in order to earn belonging from their new group, or they will leave to seek belonging elsewhere. Their departure might be the result of their own decision that their values are not aligned to the organisation, or by being ejected by the 'immune system' of the culture. The result is the same. The rules of belonging trump any attribute you could recruit for.

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If you start to think of culture as 'the rules of belonging' at a particular time in a particular group, you start to see that the only way to change the culture is to change the rules of belonging. This is where strategic changes to who sits in the most senior leadership roles can be effective, though not in isolation.

In most organisations, the rules of belonging typically spring from the top. What pleases the CEO (earns belonging from them) usually pleases their direct reports, what pleases their direct reports usually pleases theirs and so on. There are exceptions to this, but for the most part that's how it works. That's why changing the CEO is a common way to attempt to change a culture - and it can work, but only if there are other changes made around it. I've also seen CEOs of large organisations battle hard over many years to change cultures and ultimately be defeated. The system is stronger than any one player, even the one who is supposed to be the most powerful.

You can't recruit your way to a new culture by bringing in people with particular attributes unless you simultaneously change the rules of belonging. If you don't change the rules of belonging, no amount of recruitment will help.



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