



You have to notice before you can choose

Many years ago I came across the FISH! philosophy of organisational culture. It has been around for just over 20 years and is based on a well-known video created by American filmmaker and owner of ChartHouse Learning John Christensen about the famous Seattle Fish Market. On a visit there in 1997, he was struck (almost literally) by a group of fish sellers who made their work fun.

They threw the fish through the air to one another in an exuberant display of high spirits, laughed and joked continuously, focused their full attention on every customer and delighted everyone who saw them. They also sold a huge amount of fish, so they weren't just doing it for the laughs. It was serious business too. If you haven't seen the video, it's much better to watch it yourself than for me to try and describe it to you. A simple Youtube search will find it quickly and easily.

Christensen subsequently wrote a book detailing what he had observed and breaking it down into four main ideas that he felt every business could apply. The ideas are: 'choose your attitude', 'play', 'make someone's day', and 'be there'.

At the time I first heard about it, I was particularly struck with the idea of choosing your attitude. To be honest, selling fish day in and day out would be pretty close to my worst nightmare from a career choice point of view. The smell for one thing. It would also be cold (Seattle's top temperature only reaches around 22 celsius even in summer), physically uncomfortable, relentless hard work. So anyone who can not only enjoy themselves, but delight others in the process, is clearly doing something right.

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I later heard about an interesting way to put the idea of choosing your attitude into practice. In the emergency department of a hospital in the UK, every worker was asked to visit a particular noticeboard in the staff room at the start of their shift. On the noticeboard was a series of coloured badges that each indicated a particular type of mood. There were sad coloured badges, grumpy badges, neutral badges, happy badges and downright ecstatic badges. Each person was asked to choose a badge that represented how they were feeling that day and wear it.

There's much that can be said about something like this. First, you'd need to have created a culture in which it is genuinely ok to be honest for this to work. Otherwise, people would just wear fake 'happy' coloured badges endlessly and that would be way worse than no badges at all. Second, you'd need to be reasonably sure that your patients or customers or whoever didn't know the badge colour system themselves. Not too many patients would be thrilled with the idea of being treated by a self-declared grumpy doctor.

But the thing that struck me the most about the badge system wasn't the act of wearing the badge, it was the act of choosing it. And, even more specifically, it was what had to happen before the choice could be made. People had to notice their own mood. Only when they had noticed, could they make any sort of choice. If they noticed they were grumpy, they could think about why. They could choose to stay that way and declare it to their co-workers or they could decide not to be grumpy and be neutral or whatever they had decided would serve themselves and their colleagues, patients or customers best that day.

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The genius is certainly in the choosing. But there is even greater genius in the noticing. Without the noticing, there is no way to choose. We could debate the extent to which it is possible to change your mood by deciding to, but one thing is absolutely certain. You can't change it if you don't notice it.

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I've seen very effective ways to bring this into everyday interactions with team members. I knew a leader who used to ask everyone at the start of a team meeting to estimate what proportion of their attention was in the room and why. This led to people saying things like "I'm about 60% here today because my mother is very ill and I've been visiting her in hospital all week." Or "I'm 95% here today because I got some positive feedback from a colleague and it has really made my day." Whilst it's very important to know how people are travelling and what their personal challenges are, it's even more important that they are encouraged to notice how they're travelling for themselves. This simple exercise achieves that improvement in self-awareness and instantly increases empathy within the group at the same time.

So how does all this relate to organisational culture? Well, there's the obvious point that people choosing a more positive attitude would presumably improve morale and that would wear off on others. After all, attitudes are contagious. But probably more importantly, you can't choose your culture until and unless you first notice it. And the fact is, that most people don't. They might notice the culture when they first join a new group of people, because they're seeing that group through fresh eyes and will be hyper-vigilant about any clues to what is considered good behaviour in that group. At that point they are figuring out the 'rules of belonging'. But pretty soon they 'go native' and stop seeing the culture altogether.

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At a recent AICD (Australian Institute of Company Directors) lunch on ethics in the Boardroom, one of the panelists observed that executives who were questioned about a decision they made that was later seen as less than ethical, when asked what they were thinking about at the time of their decision, most replied that they weren't. Thinking that is. They were simply on 'auto-pilot' going through the motions of their very busy days. They were complying with the dominant 'rules of belonging' in their group (their culture) and not noticing, and therefore not questioning, what they were doing.

Your culture is changing whether you're noticing it or not. You need to notice it before you can choose it.



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