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# A discussion on Leadership Development as a Tool for Cultural Change

by AJ Powell 0 Comments 7 min read



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“‘Cultural Imperialism’ in the United States, in Europe, and in other developed countries is strong. History, however, has shown that it is never sustainable in the long-term” (Moran, Harris & Moran, 2011, p. 99).

What does this statement mean? It indicates how a number of societies are culturally driven to self-identify with existing pretexts already familiar to the individual, to dismiss the notion of expanding beyond the cultures accepted norms, and that these aspects are inherently disinterested in anything outside of themselves. Yet, the documented facts remain that there exists little to no sustainability in any isolated cultural concept. Economics, history, statistics, and sociology all attest to this. It would seem then, the best course of action for leaders is to understand that you simply cannot row your boat alone... you need help outside of your own effort if you are to ever break the tide, sail the sea, and return to shore safely. And as any sailor, past or present, will tell you, there is real benefit to learning from every culture you call to port upon. But getting entire societies to realize – right down to the individuals within – that such closed-mindedness and indifference to the facts would amount to eventual disaster is no easy task. After all, if they see no reason for change – yet – why should they care?

I'll tell you why: Because organizations that refuse to change will eventually cease to exist, leaving those indifferent individuals without a culture to belong to in the end. Leaders know this, and the answer to the problem of change resistance... is Leadership. "Leadership" is all about "change". So, let's talk about change then, shall we?



At the very foundation of "Leadership" lies the never-ending development of the "self". Leadership can only begin to develop when the individual realizes that they cannot change the world before changing the self. What this means is that you have zero control over the world, but total control over yourself. You cannot demand the world change for you, but instead you must realize that, to become successful at life, you must improve yourself first. Once you finally come to terms with that, you will understand that by focusing on changing yourself for the better, you will eventually create change in the world by consequence. Leadership, therefore, is the perpetual habit of looking in the mirror every single day, taking in the reality check, finding and identifying your own faults, humbly admitting them when found, and making real effort to correct them. Create change within yourself, and you will improve upon your own faults. Improving yourself will make you a better example. Become a better example, and others will follow.

Now, leaders are not "Leaders" because people follow them. After all, unlike managers who, without anyone to manage, are no longer "managers", leadership is a practiced concept of self-improvement that by consequence inspires others due to becoming the example to follow. "Leadership" involves the total encompassment of the self, and as such can be practiced daily even when no one is around. However, practiced leadership inherently attracts followers, and therefore real leaders often find themselves steering organizations. If such organizations are ever to survive for any lengthy period of time, they will surely eventually influence an increasingly global reach, and in doing so must continuously change and adapt to move with the trends. Organizations that refuse to change will eventually cease to exist in the world, and herein lies the reasons why Leadership Development is so beneficial to organizational change.

You see, organizations themselves are self-contained societies all their own, each with cultures unique to themselves. For leaders trying to steer an organization into a new, more positive direction, this means they face every individual within that society as an obstacle resistant to change. Moran, Harris, and Moran (2011) explains, "We have a set of highly organized constructs around which we organize our 'private' worlds.

Literally, we construct a mental system for putting order, as we perceive it, into these life spaces. This intellectual synthesis relates to our images of self, family, role, organization, nation, and universe. Such constructs then become psychological anchors or reference points for our mental functioning and well-being” (p. 113). What this means is that human beings naturally grow attached to the cultural aspects they identify with as it applies to their lives, and as such tend to resist any notion of change that might remove those aspects they become attached to. Leaders therefore interested in provoking a change within an organization often find themselves fighting against the entire organization that refuses to allow such change because:

1. The idea of “change” represents a disruption in the comfort of their “private worlds”, and,
2. Because individuals have anchored themselves strongly within their comfort attachments, they are often indifferent to the idea of change as they see no need for it in the first place.

So if our organizations are ever to survive for any length of time, how then do we create change when the culture refuses to allow it? How do we gain more oarsmen on our boat? The answer is complicatedly simple really... promote “Leadership” and Leadership Development.

As we just discussed, the foundations of all leadership – the very concept of what leadership “is” – is a self-motivated individual affair; however, once internalized by the individual, it will become a cultural affair as a byproduct. So if we, as leaders, are ever to overcome resistance to change from within our own cultures, we can remove those barriers through the planning and promotion of Leadership Development throughout the culture itself. However, in no way is this to suggest that changing an entire culture is as easy as that. Indeed cultural change is a much longer process than many seem to think. Treviño and Nelson (2014) point out, “The development of organizational culture takes place over a number of years; effective culture change may take even longer, as much as 6 to 15 years” (p. 191). In a globalized organization, we could rightfully expect those numbers to be on the higher side, yet Moran, Harris & Moran make a good point that, “Global leaders are engaged in a continuing change process, primarily through strategic planning and management. As the introduction of many changes threatens both the existing culture and power structure, strategic response to change needs to be both decisive and planned” (p. 110).



Our conclusions on change then?

We all know the benefits of change. We know we can't go at it alone; we'll never break the surf otherwise. Yet, enlisting help is difficult without the understanding of purpose and direction. Leaders of all organizations can therefore promote change by providing the motivation within individuals through helping them down the path of internalized self-development. As individuals change themselves to adapt to their environments, the culture itself will slowly begin to change as a result. After all, a culture is nothing more than a reflection of the individuals that make it, and if all individuals within an organization learn to seek to better themselves on an habitual daily basis (Leadership Development), the organization as a whole will seek the betterment of the organization. Waking up every morning and looking at itself in the mirror, recognizing a need for a change, humbly accepting faults, and taking action to make change happen may be the definition of Leadership Development... but it is also the method to internalized cultural change.

#### References:

Moran, R. T., Harris, P. R., & Moran, S. V. (2011). *Managing cultural differences: Global leadership strategies for cross-cultural business success* (8th ed.). Oxford: Routledge.

Treviño, L. and Nelson, K. (2014). *Managing Business Ethics: Straight Talk About How To Do It Right*. Sixth Edition. Wiley.

**So tell us, what are YOUR thoughts on this subject?  
What have you learned? How can it better yourself and others?  
Share your knowledge in our comments below!**

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### About the author



#### AJ Powell

AJ is a retired U.S. Army NCO who served in both the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army. He is a combat veteran, and has participated in contingency operations around the world. AJ is the Owner of Veteran Leadership Solutions, the Founder and Editor in Chief of The Warfighter Journal, and is a published Sociological Analyst, Researcher, Guest Lecturer, and Public Speaker. He is a graduate of Pennsylvania State University with a focus on Sociology and a science degree in Organizational Leadership, and is published in the field of sociology. AJ is an inductive analyst; public figure; researcher/writer; aviator; a certified advanced operational diver; professional instructor, trainer, mentor, and adviser; snowboarder; motorcycle rider; world traveler; he enjoys long distance endurance events, and much more.