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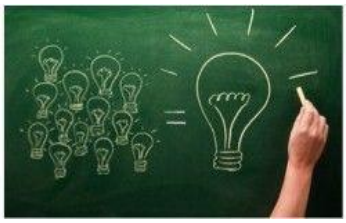

The Stories We Tell: Creating and Nurturing Your Organization's Culture & DNA

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I gratefully acknowledge the influence of Dr. Edgar Schein on my understanding of organizational culture and cultural DNA.

Recently, several of my clients have become extremely interested in exploring what they call their "corporate DNA." At first I resisted, because I was concerned that this metaphor implied that they were incapable of changing. But for the most part, this model is being used to explore the unique identity of an organization -- the historical strengths that are admired, and should be preserved and transmitted to future generations.

Most every kid who has the luxury of getting an education learns the basics of DNA. DNA is what causes a giraffe to have a long neck, kangaroos to have pouches, and porcupines to have quills instead of fur. Tadpoles turn into frogs, not butterflies, because of their DNA. And a lot of behavior has its roots in an organism's DNA. Birds have wings, but dogs don't, therefore dogs don't fly. Snakes, lacking both legs and wings, resort to crawling. But what is the meaning of the DNA of an organization?

If you look up "corporate DNA" on *Wikipedia* you'll be redirected to an article on "organizational culture." Here's how organizational culture and cultural DNA are related.

Organizational culture is "the way we are" today, including the laundry list of do's and don'ts that the old-timers share with newbies on their first day of work. It's "the way we do things around here," even if we've forgotten why we're doing them. It's the collection of observable patterns in an organization at the present time. People naturally assume that these patterns will continue into the future. And they probably will, unless the organization experiences a deep, sometimes radical, change. Organizational culture is made visible through behaviors, and behavior is driven by assumptions, beliefs, and patterned thinking, in addition to the conscious choices that we make to perpetuate that culture. As my mentor, Dr. Edgar Schein, has taught me, organizational culture has both an internal side—how we get along, how we do things—and an external side—what we do to survive and grow, including our strategy and tactics. Culture infuses both the internal and external through the deeper assumptions of who we are, our identity, and our sense of our brand based on our history.

Organizational DNA is a property of the culture, and is the historical basis of why we behave this way - the genetic code at the root of these behaviors. Like the DNA of birds and snakes, it influences whether our organization will fly or crawl. Although we can change our behaviors radically, our DNA establishes some boundaries. A dog that's been abused might bark aggressively or bite humans, but it won't start eating worms, tweeting, or building a nest out of twigs!

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Culture as Internal Brand. One useful way to think about organizational culture is as your internal brand. A brand is a promise. Most companies carefully consider what their brand communicates externally, but what is the brand promise that your company makes to your employees? In the same way that customers have expectations based on brand image, your organizational culture creates expectations in your employees. I strongly believe that an authentic external brand must be based on an organizational culture with which it is aligned.

DNA Isn't Destiny. As a scientist, I worry that DNA as a metaphor for corporate identity isn't technically accurate. People frequently talk about their organization's DNA as if it can't, or shouldn't, be changed. Some executives proudly speak of their corporate history as if their future is determined primarily by their past. So before we embrace this metaphor, there are a few things we should know about DNA.

1. DNA in nature isn't forever fixed, nor does it unalterably determine what happens in the life of an organism. Mutations occur naturally, scientists intentionally create genetic modifications, and reproductive processes combine genes in ways that create new and sometimes surprising results, like the baby "Zonkey" in this picture. (See more fascinating hybrids here.) Similarly, organizations that grow through mergers and acquisitions must integrate the combined DNA of previously distinct entities.

2. Most genetic code isn't expressed. For example, over 98% of human genetic material is so-called "non-coding DNA." This DNA isn't junk! It's important to regulating and protecting the genome, but it doesn't directly dictate our development as human beings. A parallel in organizations is the importance of focusing on stories and examples that bring us together around our shared purpose, and selectively forget what doesn't contribute to a better future.
3. Environmental factors like temperature and light can impact gene expression. For example, Thomas Hunt Morgan's *Experimental Zoology* reports that genetically identical caterpillars exposed to different colors of light during their chrysalis stage developed dramatic differences in wing color. Likewise, organizations are subject to external influences, and some (but not most) do find ways to break free of their historical roots, rather than continue unproductive trends, and therefore avoid becoming extinct.
4. Here is yet more evidence that we are not slaves to our DNA: "Lipton believes the old paradigm of "genetic determinism" is being replaced with the idea that genes respond to information – both external environments and cognitive (internal) environments." Gene expression is impacted by the context in which they exist.

In spite of my scientific misgivings, I've found that exploring the DNA of an organization can be an extremely effective way to create a shared sense of identity among even globally diverse, dispersed teams. Groups with a clear understanding of their shared core identity, and the kinds of behaviors

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that naturally spring from this understanding, form more cohesive teams. Individual behaviors tend to naturally align with this team identity, without the need for direction, rules, and oversight.

If you want to discover your organization's cultural DNA and use it to unite your team, for cryin' out loud don't rush over to your PR department to pick up a stack of those glossy brochures containing the company history and poignant stories of the founders. I know managers who have hundreds of these tree-killers stashed in their office. Giving them out provokes cynicism, and pretty much guarantees they'll go straight into the recycling bin.

Here are three powerful and engaging exercises that I've found to be much more effective than handing out brochures. It's all about stories. (People remember stories, as Chip and Dan Heath explained in *Made to Stick*.) If you want a message to change the results you're getting in your team it must be Heard, Understood, Remembered, and Acted upon (HURrAh!), so I strongly recommend using stories as the basis of your DNA discussions. But those stories must be shared and discussed, not just read in a pamphlet. A story-based "DNA expedition" will generate increased loyalty to your company, and inspire behavior that aligns with shared values discovered during your cultural DNA session.

The Founders and Key Moments in Your History. The first stories to explore are those of the people who founded your organization. Their stories often inspire admiration because of their courageous risk-taking, determination, or staunch commitment to something beyond making a profit. Here are a few of my favorite examples:

- Suntory - In 1899 Shinjiro Torii opened a wine shop in Osaka, Japan, and then proceeded to make a popular port wine domestically. Later Suntory was the first to distill whiskey in Japan. Of course, many people believed that it was impossible to make a great whiskey in Japan, but his "Yatte Minahare!" spirit (roughly translated, "Go For It!") prevailed.
- Kuraray - Magosaburo Ohara founded this company in 1926, and his son Soichiro Ohara has continued the legacy of "contributing to the world and individual well-being through actions that others are unable to produce." This would be just a slogan on a website if it weren't for my personal experience working with Kuraray for the past eight years. I find myself quoting Mr. Ohara's advice to teams locked in an unproductive pattern of "death by consensus": He famously said "If we wait until everyone agrees, it's too late! We must take action when only two or three executives agree." Indeed!
- Yamaha - In 1887 Torakusu Yamaha built his first reed organ and hand-carried it over the mountains to the music university in Tokyo where it was flatly rejected due to its poor tuning. Undaunted, he created an improved version, and carried it once again on this torturous journey. This organ became the foundation of the Yamaha music business.
- Hewlett-Packard - The friendship forged by Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard in 1934 was the basis of a legendary company. I was fortunate enough to work there for 10 years while Bill and Dave were still a palpable presence in the form of *The HP Way*. As an idealistic young person who believed the stories in those glossy brochures, I felt it was my personal responsibility to live up to the legacy that these two gentlemen had created. This resulted in an annual chastisement in my performance reviews: "Kimberly has unrealistically high expectations for herself and others." Yup! Ya got that right! But it was Bill and Dave's high expectations that I felt I was living up to, not my own.

In addition to studying the adventures of the founders, review significant internal and external stories that punctuate the company's history. Tales of expansion, new product launches, and other

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successes are valuable, but so are stories of perseverance during difficult times, as well as how people behaved when facing overwhelming challenges and setbacks.

EXERCISE #1 - "Explore Your Past"

- Prepare in advance by having each person read relevant stories from your organization's past. In addition, ask people to think of stories from their own work experience that demonstrate your cultural DNA at it's very best.
- Sitting in a circle, have each person share a story that had the most positive impact on them, and explain why it impacted them.
- Writing BIG on sticky notes, have everyone in the group jot down a keyword or two that capture the "essence" of the company's identity from each story.
- Place these sticky notes on flipcharts in the center of the circle as shown in this picture.

- Next, create a collage by combining these words with pictures that capture this essence in a way that words alone cannot describe. Ask participants to bring magazines and other pictures that express the cultural DNA, or use a set of pictures like CCL's Visual Explorer Cards.
- Doing this activity silently is particularly useful for teams where people don't share mastery of a common language.
- Play some music in the background to set the mood!

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Piece these collages together to create a patchwork quilt that vividly conveys your cultural DNA. Don't you dare just throw them away when the exercise is over! Preserve and share them widely.

If the collage activity is just too "arts and craftsy" for your people, try this variation:

- Gather in small teams around white boards, and together silently draw a picture that captures the essence of these stories. Then have each team present their team drawing without preparation. What essential qualities and characteristics of your organization's culture were demonstrated through their drawings and presentations? Encourage the entire group to discuss the key qualities of your culture that was demonstrated by each team's interpretation.

Here are guidelines for useful discussions to follow the above exercises:

- Discuss what will survive into the far future. What will still be "core" 50 years from now? Determine which of these qualities and characteristics should be passed on to future generations and preserved for the long-term future of your organization.
- Brainstorm how these core cultural elements serve as guiding principles in your business today. What stories from your own experience align with these principles? What other situations are you facing that could benefit from the values and behaviors modeled in these stories? How can we demonstrate the very best of our collective past through our own behaviors in the present?

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Sharing and discussing these stories as a team can produce powerful insights about what is admired and valued in your organization, and influences people to behave similarly.

Who We Are NOT! In general, people seem to find it easier to think from a negative perspective, and the next exercise directly appeals to that tendency. This is a fabulously fun exercise, and one that even engineers enjoy. Ideally you should do it right after the first exercise.

EXERCISE #2 - "This Will Never Happen Here!"

- Break into teams of 3 or 4 people.
- Gather at flip charts and brainstorm the following categories:
    - Products that you will NEVER make.
    - Services that your will NEVER offer.
    - News headlines you will NEVER see about your organization.
    - Advertising slogans that you will NEVER use.
    - Famous people you will NEVER feature in advertising about your organization.
    - Behavior and language you will NEVER witness at work.

You can also add other categories for this brainstorm that are relevant to your business. One of my clients, famous for adventurous outdoor sports equipment, had a terrific time with this one. Rest assured, they are *never* going to make "senior diapers," their slogan won't *ever* be "You're in good hands," and Lady Gaga will *never* get an offer to promote their extreme sports products.

You can take this exercise one step further by reversing each of these "NEVERS" to discover who you are, your values, your strategies, and what your organization values most.

Remember the Future. Dreamers and scenario planners have been using this technique for years. Jump into the future and vividly imagine a possibility, and then explore what that scenario implies about the behavior and choices required today to bring that future into existence. This exercise will set the stage for you and your team to be "Cultural DNA Ambassadors," spreading the best of your identity to everyone who comes into contact with you.

EXERCISE #3 - "Imagining Your Future"

- Imagine it's 50 years from now, and you have long since retired. What will be your legacy? What stories do you hope people in your organization will tell about you and your team?
- Self-organize into small groups, and create “stories from the future”. For example, you might imagine that your company is celebrating the 50-year anniversary of the launch of your amazing product or service. Or perhaps 100 newly hired employees are crammed into a room to watch a video about how your team tackled and overcame seemingly impossible challenges. What do you hope they will be saying as they discuss your historical stories?
- Present your stories as a “news report from the future”, complete with roving reporters, satellite links to remote locations, and interviews of some of your now-retired team members. Don't skimp on the drama! Set up a news desk, get some pretend microphones (a rubber chicken works great for this), and ham it up! Imagining the future is the first step to creating it!

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Just reading about this exercise doesn't even come close to the experience of living it. Don't underestimate the creativity of your team! I've done this exercise with all kinds of people in all kinds of jobs, from executives to engineers, and everyone -- including the stodgiest curmudgeons -- totally loves it.

Your Future Cultural DNA is In Your Hands. For better or worse, today's workplace behaviors will become tomorrow's organizational history. As a leader, you are automatically a “Cultural DNA Ambassador”. Don't just slap a purpose-vision-mission-values propaganda poster on the wall! Hanging a big sign over the doghouse door that reads "You are a cat" won't suddenly make your golden retriever meow, hunt mice, or go crazy for catnip.

And don't allow yourself be trapped by your organization’s past! You might have been born with straight black hair, but you can dye it platinum blond and get a perm if you like. Finally, take advantage of the power of selective forgetting.

"Happiness? That's nothing more than health and a poor memory." —Albert Schweitzer

At one Wiefling family reunion my brother read a heart-warming poem about what it meant to be a Wiefling. Honestly, I didn't remember our childhood being all that much fun. But he was extremely skillful in choosing which stories to tell and which to leave out. As rough and tumble as our family is, everyone had tears in their eyes by the time he finished. (And I definitely prefer his version over the one that I remember!) Our organization’s cultural DNA is a doorway, not a prison. The stories we tell influence our beliefs, our thinking, and ultimately our behaviors. Don't go the way of companies like Enron! Create a shared story that you will be proud to hear told 50 years from now.

- Kimberly

Kimberly Wiefling lives and works in Silicon Valley, California, USA. She has been called a force of nature – the good kind! She creates inspiring workplaces by helping “groups of people” rapidly become “true teams” so that they can achieve what would be impossible for any individual acting alone. And she helps these teams accelerate their progress by applying common sense principles proven effective globally in the real business world. She is the author of Scrappy Project Management, published in Japanese, and the executive editor of the whole series of five "Scrappy Guides." Kimberly works with globalizing businesses, traveling extensively in the US, Europe and Asia.

Are you determined to transform your organizational culture into a competitive advantage?

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