When Everything Changes, Change Everything

I recently heard that phrase from a colleague. Turns out it's the name of a self-help book designed to guide individuals through a personal crisis, but it's also the perfect way for organisations to think about Covid-19.

There has never been a better time to think about changing your team or organisational culture.

For years I've heard leaders bemoan the fact that they don't have a 'burning platform', a catalyst that will motivate and energise their people and focus them on making the changes they need to make. We didn't ask for Covid-19, but there's no denying that alongside the horror of a pandemic, it also offers us a significant moment of reflection.

Most organisations are already well advanced in the process of re-thinking their strategy in some form. Whether it's who they target, what they offer or how they get it to market, they're checking to make sure their unique combination of 'who, what, how' still makes sense as we work towards establishing a Covid-safe world. And, more than ever, they're also asking why. What is the meaning behind our work. What contribution do we make to the world beyond making money. All this reflection is as essential for organisational performance as it is for our collective sanity.

What some have forgotten is that a new strategy without the culture to execute it successfully is just a piece of paper. One that will be paid lip-service, but almost certainly ignored when the really hard decisions come along. Strategy and culture are two parts of one thing. They are always changing and must constantly reinforce each other in an endless infinity loop.

Culture is the rules of belonging

Your organisation and your team already has a set of rules that dictate what earns or loses belonging in the group – those are the rules of belonging.

The rules of belonging are based on the behaviours that increase a person's status and acceptance in a particular group at a particular time. So the rules hide in the interpretation of behaviour, not in the behaviour itself. Looking for them is a bit like looking at The Matrix, if you don't know there's something to see, you won't see anything – but as soon as you know, you see rules of belonging everywhere. You may have seen that cartoon with the two fish in a bowl; one asks the

other 'how's the water?' and the other says 'what's water?'. Culture is like that. When you're in it, it's hard to see, but it fundamentally impacts everything we do.

The new rules of belonging may support and accelerate our new strategies or may hinder and delay them. The only way to know is to be deliberate about it. To identify the behaviours we need more of and less of and put in place clear actions to ensure they shift in the right direction. This happens most effectively through explicit, specific conversations with our people about what worked in the old world that will and won't work in the new. Then putting in place new rituals and building new tribes who embrace and reinforce what the new good looks like around here; our new rules of belonging.

Your culture is changing right now

Our sense of belonging has been fundamentally disrupted and it's less clear right now what the rules of belonging are. They're changing. They're unfrozen. The only thing we can be certain of is that they will refreeze again, and it may be sooner than we think.

That means your culture is changing anyway. Right now. Whether you're actively managing it or not. It will happen by accident or it will happen deliberately.

Let's seize the rare opportunity to make it deliberate.

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