



# Culture building

## An introductory guide

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# INTRODUCTION

How to improve the culture of an organisation is something that occupies the thoughts of many professionals, including occupational safety and health (OSH) practitioners. For some, it is a natural next step in the evolution of their management approach. For others, it is an altogether more desperate attempt to fix a stubborn obstacle that is preventing progress.

Where ever it is that the journey begins and whatever the original motivation, '*culture change*' remains for many a vague and elusive goal.

The aim of this publication is to support those who wish to improve the culture of their organisation by providing a fresh perspective into what culture is and how it can be influenced following a systematic and solution-building approach.

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# ONE

## “The Culture Stupid”

What does the word ‘*culture*’ mean to you? Can you define it?

It seems a strange question perhaps, but to understand the reason for asking it, try this ... the next time a colleague or client uses the word ‘*culture*’ or the phrase ‘*culture change*’, ask them what they mean by it. Ask them a probing question like “*what does that mean precisely?*” or “*what culture do you want to have?*” and see what happens. Often, they hesitate. Sometimes, they are unable to provide any kind of answer at all. We use these phrases assuming that we all share the same understanding about what they mean. But do we?

Increasingly in recent years, *‘the way we do things around here’*, has become the preferred definition used to describe the culture of an organisation. Do you subscribe to this definition?

It has a lot to recommend it. It is simple and concise and there is something quite unifying about it ... it appeals to a sense of togetherness that we like to feel about our lives and our work. But what does this definition tell us about culture and is this definition helpful when considering culture with a view to *‘culture change’*?

Firstly, *‘the way we do things around here’* suggests that there is a way of doing things that we all agree with and support. It suggests that an organisation’s culture is something uniform and consistent, a defining characteristic perhaps. Do you think an organisation’s culture is as constant as this implies?

Try this ... put this document aside and think about how you would describe the culture in Victorian England. Take some time to think about this. What would you say?

Many would say something like ... Victorians were ruled by a detailed code of manners and etiquette, that they were straight-laced and prudish. They would say that Victorians prized propriety and reputation and that the lives of Victorian children were very formal and often lacked outward expressions of affection.

Whilst this may have been true, increasingly so perhaps over the course of Queen Victoria's reign, particularly of the middle class that grew exponentially during the period, it was never universally true of course. It was just true enough, often enough that it came to define the Victorian era.

Cultures vary. They vary from country to country and from region to region, even in a country as small as England. In an organisation, whatever the size, culture can vary from site to site and from team to team. And it might even be true to say that the culture of a particular team can vary from time to time.



I have had the good fortune of working with a number of great companies, several of them household names at home and globally. Some of these famous brands have had television programmes made about them, or they have produced fabulously inspiring promotional films, in which employees speak about how fantastic their company is to work for and how proud they are that they do. I get a lump in my throat when I see these films and I am reminded of how proud I am to have been associated with them too.

And yet, even as I watch these films feeling as choked as I do, I am aware that, at times, these same organisations can be extremely dysfunctional and the experience of working with them can be exasperating to say the least. And some of the people I see in these films, who are talking so eloquently about how fantastic the organisation is, I know spend a considerable amount of their time at work frustrated and as negative as it is possible to be.

Of course I am not suggesting for a moment that these people are being anything less than absolutely genuine; they do love the organisation and hold it in the very highest esteem. The simple fact is, that organisations can be both things at once, heaven and hell, exhilarating and frustrating in equal measure. And culture can be far more complicated and nuanced than some definitions would have us believe.

So, to define culture as if it were something uniform and constant (or that it could be), is neither accurate, nor is it particularly helpful when it comes to deciding how to improve culture.

A prevailing wind in a particular place is a wind from the direction that is predominant or most usual. Occasionally however, the wind blows from another direction.

We believe that culture describes the prevailing personality or character, the feelings and beliefs of a group of people. As such, when thinking about influencing culture and achieving the culture you aspire to have for your organisation, the goal should be to have the culture that you want, more present in more groups of people for more of the time.

And here is a thought we can return to later ... you probably have the culture you want already, but it might not be present enough, often enough for it to be defining.



Secondly, *‘the way we do things around here’* is often understood to be referring to the things we do, meaning the practices we have and the procedures we follow, which is contrary to how most people naturally think about culture.

Try this ... ask people how they would describe the culture in their organisation. Most would say something like, *“it’s a supportive culture,”* or *“it’s a collaborative culture,”* or *“it’s very authoritarian.”* In giving answers like these, people are not thinking of the things people in that culture do, they are thinking about the way people are and what they see as the predominant characteristics of the environment in which they work.



This might seem like semantics because clearly, if we say, “*it’s a very supportive culture*”, what we mean is that people are very supportive towards each other. If we say, “*it’s a collaborative culture*,” what we mean is that people behave collaboratively.

This is highly relevant however, because our understanding of the definition we accept, influences the decisions we make. And if our understanding is that it alludes only to the things we do, then at the outset we are focused on practices and procedures when in actual fact, what we instinctively feel about culture is that it is to do with the way things are and the way we are, our character, our basic assumptions, our principles and values.<sup>1</sup>

This is demonstrated by the fact that often, when an organisation decides it needs to improve its culture, it will subscribe to a new way of doing things. A behavioural safety programme for example, is one such initiative organisations often consider thinking it will have a positive influence on its culture. Behaviour-based safety involves a process where employees observe the behaviour of their colleagues with a view to understanding and addressing the factors that drive unsafe behaviour.

But ask yourself this ... do you think that implementing a behaviour-based approach, will make the culture right? Or do you think that having the right culture is an important pre-requisite for a successful behavioural safety implementation?

Many will think the latter is true. Many people will reflect that if an organisation is going to ask its employees to observe their colleagues' behaviour, it had better be sure that the culture of the organisation can withstand such a practice and make it work. Of course, many behavioural safety implementations do not work.

James Carville was campaign strategist for Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign against the incumbent president, George H. W. Bush. In March 1991, days after the ground invasion of Iraq, Bush polled a 90% popularity rating, so Clinton had his work cut out, you might say. To keep Clinton's campaign on message, James Carville hung a sign in Bill Clinton's campaign headquarters that read: *The Economy Stupid*. Although the sign was intended for an internal audience of campaign workers, the phrase became a *de facto* slogan for Clinton's election campaign and by August 1992, 64% of polled Americans disapproved of Bush's performance.<sup>2</sup>

The point is this ... behavioural safety campaigns, Kaizen initiatives and 5S programmes may have much to recommend them, but if it is the culture of the organisation you want to improve, it is the culture you have to improve, and the culture is about the way we are.



## TWO

# The Miracle Question

### How do cultures develop?

For as long as humans have walked the earth, groups have formed as a result of what they share ... common needs, common beliefs, a common understanding. People see themselves as belonging together and societies and communities form accordingly.

In organisations, all things are created twice, whether by design or by default.<sup>3</sup> This is equally true of the culture of the organisation.

If, as many entrepreneurs are, we are present at the beginning and in a position to influence, we can create the culture we want for our new organisation, first mentally and then in reality.

Most of us however, and certainly most OSH practitioners, have to deal with the culture that we have. For most of us, a culture has evolved in our organisation, not through the creative imagination of an entrepreneur or the conscious design of a leadership team, but by default. For most of us, the prevailing culture we have is a result of the experiences (good and bad), the attitudes (positive and negative), the aspirations, indifferences, the values and behaviours of the people who are present in the organisation ... and occasionally, of people who are long gone.

But still the culture has to be created twice ... before we can begin the process of building our improved culture in reality, it has to be imagined, we have to create it mentally.

We have to decide what we want.



## Deciding the culture you want

In many, if not most organisations, the standard approach for dealing with a problem is to gather information about the problem. Some organisations use diagnostic techniques, such as fault-tree analysis or 5-Why's analysis, to study the problem and identify causes that can be addressed through remedial actions and thereby, a solution to the problem is found.

But ask yourself this ... what is your experience of deploying a technique like 5-Why's analysis? What happens?

Is it not true that it takes you backwards from an event or an experience, towards the root cause or causes of the problem? Is it not true that as you trace your way further backwards and deeper into the problem, and as the '*causal tree*' slowly develops, the overall picture becomes more intricate and complex? And is it not also true that some of the paths down which you are led are difficult and uncomfortable, associated as they are with decision-making, judgments, accountability and blame?

Is this not your experience of what happens?



Clearly such techniques have great merit and are perfectly suited to some problems, but when the problem you are trying to solve is your culture, is this what you want? When what you are seeking to improve is the prevailing personality, the feelings, thoughts and assumptions of your people, do you want to go backwards and become so deeply embroiled in all that is currently wrong? Or, if you could avoid that, if you could circumvent the obvious sensitivities and risks that doing that would involve, would you not choose another approach?

Insoo Kim Berg was a Korean-born American psychotherapist who was a pioneer of a solution-focused approach to therapy; an approach which ultimately came to have an influence in the fields of consulting, supervision and coaching. As the name suggests, the solution-focused approach focuses not on problem solving, but instead on solution-building, which may sound like a play on words but is in fact a profoundly different model entirely.<sup>4</sup>

Albert Einstein said *“No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it”*. The solution-focused approach dispenses with gathering information about the problem altogether, and instead seeks to learn as much as possible about the solution. And the easiest way to do this is to imagine that the problem has been solved, and that the solution already exists in its place.

This change in perspective can be achieved through The Miracle Question.

*“Suppose a miracle occurs tonight while you are sleeping. When you wake in the morning, all of the problems with your culture as it is today, will be gone. You won’t realise the miracle has occurred immediately of course, probably not until you arrive at work, but what would be the first clue do you think that a miracle has happened? And then what? What would be different? What would you see? What would be happening?”*

*“Well, I’d probably first notice a difference in my team. It could be that one or two of them would be in earlier than normal, chirpier perhaps.”*

*“And then what?”*

*“They’d be more enthusiastic maybe. Eager to discuss their work.”*

*“What else?”*

*“They’d probably want to discuss the problems they had, and offer their own ideas about how to deal with them. They’d be keen to go and try out solutions and report back. There’d be a greater degree of ownership.”*

*“What else?”*

*“There’d be a different atmosphere in the factory, more positive, people focused and more engaged with their work.”*

*“What else?”*

*“We’d feel more teamy ... like we’re all in it together, with different roles perhaps but all working toward the same objective. People would be more supportive of each other, wanting to help each other resolve problems ... like you would with a member of your family. There’d be a greater sense of community.”*

*“What else?”*

*“Definitely more respectful. Everyone would feel valued for the role they have to perform. And we’d be consulted and feel that our opinions and ideas mattered too.”*

And on ... and on.

Clearly, these answers have been provided for illustration purposes, and it would be reasonable to expect that the answers might vary from workplace to workplace and from one person to another within the same workplace. The work of Insoo Kim Berg however, suggests otherwise. Firstly, she found that there is little connection between the problem and the solution. When you ask a person about a problem, you receive one description, but when you ask about the solution, and only the solution, the description you receive is entirely different and mostly unrelated to any problem. And more than that, the description of the solution is very similar from one person to another.

Avoiding a detailed examination of the current state of affairs allows a solution to be imagined in a way which is unencumbered by our current experiences, and when we are free to imagine in this way, it seems we all want a similar outcome in the end. Unsurprisingly, how we are treated, the value we perceive in our work and our relationships with those around us, particularly our immediate leaders, are just some of the things that matter to all of us.

And the conversations we have, how we engage and communicate with each other, are also important.

The Miracle Question can be used in almost any context. We work with a large client supporting a significant project aimed at improving their management of health and safety.

The organisation provided health and safety training to managers and supervisors using a very popular branded programme. In recent years, this programme has become so popular it is a de-facto standard across industry. However, the efficacy of the programme had been called in to question and so the organisation utilised the Miracle Question to define the type of training it wanted. In this instance, the question was framed like this,

*“Suppose a miracle occurs tonight while you are sleeping. When you wake in the morning, you will have the perfect health and safety training for your organisation. What would that look like? What would it involve? How would it be delivered?”*

The description that emerged was of an entirely different course. Managers and supervisors said they wanted something that was participative, concise and highly-relevant. It needed to be empowering, they said, they wanted to leave the course feeling capable, not challenged, and they wanted to be able to take the training into their departments and engage with their teams, to test things out ... during the training.

So this was the training we designed for them.



## THREE

### The green shoots of renewal

When we talk about the solution, and only the solution, we imagine a culture in which our work has meaning and our contribution is valued. We emphasise the importance of dialogue and consultation and imagine ourselves as a community in which our relationships are productive and collaborative and the conversations we have are positive and respectful.

No amount of management system will give you this.



BS ISO 45001:2018 outlines the requirements of a management system for occupational safety and health. Its stated objectives are to help an organisation manage health and safety risks, improve its health and safety performance and fulfil its legal obligations. Top management is required to develop a culture that supports these intended outcomes, but interestingly such a culture is not itself an intended outcome of the system.<sup>5</sup>

The culture you want will not be provided by improving your management system, by extending its reach or making it more robust. If you want to improve your culture, an entirely different approach is required. If you want to improve your culture, you have to build it, not from scratch but upon the foundations of what is good already, what is working.

By asking the Miracle Question we learn what good looks like in whatever context we choose to apply the question. And as it turns out, what good looks like is often very similar from one person to the next which means that achieving a consensus that everyone feels they have contributed to and can feel invested in, is a reasonable expectation.

But that is only the beginning.

When everyone knows what good looks like, the chance that we can recognise examples of ‘good’ however small and have already experienced it however fleetingly, are significantly increased because the fact is, rarely are all things always all bad.

*“When or where are these things that you describe even a little bit present already?”*

*“Well my team is hardly ever like that ... I’ve never really been able to get them engaged like that at all. But Paddy’s team ... I’ve noticed they are more energised and proactive, some of the time at least. I don’t know how he does it!”*

In the solution-building world, Paddy’s team being more energised and proactive, even for short periods of time, is a dormant resource, an indication that we already have the culture we want, but it is not present enough, often enough for it to be defining. Dormant resources are the green shoots of renewal, the foundations upon which the ultimate goal, our improved culture, is built.

Building a better culture is an incremental process of small steps forward, each step being the realisation of a small goal.

My young son saw Tom Daley diving at the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro in 2016 and in that moment his dream of being an Olympic diver was born. Just this last weekend he competed in his first diving tournament and mum and I were delighted, firstly that he enjoyed the experience so much, but also that he achieved a very credible 18<sup>th</sup> position in a field of 25 divers. He has his sights set on a top 10 finish next time out but much as we admire his courage and determination, the simple fact is he will not score higher until he learns to point his toes. Right now, developing muscle memory through constant repetitive diving, one dive after another, until he no longer has to consciously think about his '*lazy*' toes is the priority, alongside other such similar tiny goals all of which will accumulate and combine over the coming years to make a world class diver and ultimately ... Olympic Gold.

In the solution-building approach, we have a very limited sense of what we are trying to achieve. Ultimately the goal is a better culture, but having a better culture is dependent on achieving many much smaller goals.

Right now, in our example, what is standing between us and the culture we want, is not the fact that our team is not as engaged and energised as Paddy's team sometimes is, but the fact that we do not know how Paddy does it ... but we can find out.

*“What’s going on here that allows this to exist, when it does? What are the conditions that have allowed this to take root?”*

*“The team has defined it’s purpose very clearly and each member of the team has a clear job role that is aligned to the team’s purpose.”*

*“What else?”*

*Paddy ensures that the members of the team have the resources to fulfil their role and he continually reviews their performance with reference to the team’s objectives.”*

*“What else?”*

*Paddy provides the support they need and he trusts them implicitly. He doesn’t micro-manage, he leaves them to get on with it. He trusts them to let him know when something significant changes and when it does, they stop and the whole team considers the implications.”*

Learning what Paddy has done to allow the culture that we want to exist, allows us then to consider what we need to do to have the same for ourselves.

*“What do we have to do to get this for ourselves?”*

This is Culture Building. We are not problem solving. We are not pre-occupied dissecting our own team, troubling ourselves with all that is currently wrong. We have found an example of what we agree we want, and we are exploring what it is that allows it to exist so that we can take steps to have it also.

But it does not end with Paddy’s team. By asking the Miracle Question, we learn what good looks like. And from our shared understanding of what good looks like, we can build a detailed picture, a Culture Statement, comprising all the characteristics of the culture we want. And for each characteristic we can explore where and when and in what circumstances, these things already exist, even for a short time, even a little bit, and we can discover what allows them to exist and what is needed to help them take root and flourish elsewhere.

And by doing these things, we can breathe life into our green shoots so that gradually, they extend further throughout the organisation and gradually, the culture we want is build.



## FOUR

### The earthworms of culture change

Earthworms are valuable. Their digestive system breaks down organic matter, like leaves and grass, and the castings they leave behind are rich in nutrients that plants can use. Their tunnels help with irrigation and drainage but also provide favourable conditions for root development. In short, earthworms enrich the growing environment so that plants can thrive.

Coaches are the earthworms of culture change.



## **What is it about coaching that makes it so vital to the culture change journey?**

Coaching is based largely on the premise that telling people what to do through instructions and advice has a limited success rate at best. Research shows for example, that when medical practitioners give much needed lifestyle advice, fewer than 10 per cent of patients act on it.<sup>6</sup> When however, we come to our own conclusions about what to do, things are very different; we feel empowered and confident and we assume a greater responsibility for seeing things through.

Whatever the objective is, a coach will deploy their skills to help people access their own personal resources ... their knowledge, their experience, their understanding of what is happening and what is possible ... with a view to supporting them to make their own, better decisions about how to move forward.

And one of the most important skills a coach has to deploy, is an ability to be person-centred.

Being person-centred is a lot to do with where you focus your curiosity and it is a choice. Some will be surprised by this, thinking “*we’re curious about whatever it is we’re curious about, aren’t we?*” as if curiosity is driven by some innate disposition. In fact, we focus our curiosity according to what we choose to be interested in at any particular moment in time.

Often when discussing a problem, people assume that it is their role to help solve the problem and so their default line of questioning is focused on gathering the information they need to find the solution themselves. Coaches however, see that an important part of their role is to collaborate with others to find the best possible solution that everyone can buy in to.

Coaches are person-centred which means that they follow a line of questioning that taps into the knowledge and understanding their colleagues already have about what is going on and what is required to move forward. Sometimes the coach has relevant knowledge and experience to share, which means that coaching can be both supportive and developmental, but often they do not and yet, through person-centred questioning, they can still support their colleagues and help them to make progress.

Having the skill to ask person-centred questions is one of the attributes coaches have that help facilitate the culture building process. But there are others too.

Coaches are also active listeners and we all know from our own personal experience the profound effect that being listened to properly can have, partly because it is such a rare event that we are.<sup>7</sup> A coaches' listening is driven, not by the need to further their own agenda, but with a view to understanding and to being supportive by helping people to access their own personal resources that can help them overcome obstacles and perform better. Coaches believe they can help by helping others to help themselves.

Coaches empathise with the experiences people have and the situations they inhabit, and they understand the importance this empathy has in developing rapport.

And coaches are solution-focused which is an approach that avoids dissecting problems and being pre-occupied with all of the reasons why things are not the way we would prefer them to be and, as a consequence of this, is an altogether more positive experience.

It is this combination of skills and attributes that make coaches collaborative partners in the workplace, helping their colleagues to explore options, solve problems, achieve goals, learn and develop.<sup>8</sup> It is these abilities that make coaches the earthworms of culture change, without which finding those dormant resources and breathing life into them would be all the more difficult.



## FIVE

### Creating the movement

It is said that leaders get the culture they '*behave*', but cultures are rarely changed by a single person or event. Important though Queen Victoria's example was, Victorian culture developed as it did not because of this alone, but because of other powerful forces at work not least of which the influence on society of a more evangelical brand of Christianity.

Creating the movement that is required to change a culture requires several steps.

## Step one – Invest in your coaching capacity

Coaching is not new but the way it is used in organisations is evolving. Increasingly, organisations aspire to have a culture in which managers and others are able to have live, in the moment, collaborative conversations as a means of solving problems and driving performance.<sup>9</sup>

High-performing teams are consultative and collaborative ... people feel valued when they are consulted and feel that their contribution is important ... and high-performing organisations not only say they regard their people as their most important and most valuable resource as many organisations do, they invest in the skills that are required to access those resources.

Coaches are able to tap into the knowledge and experience people have, and the understanding they have of what is happening and what can be achieved; resources that can either remain dormant or be mined for the benefit of the individual and the organisation.

Invest in your coaching capacity. Build your team. Train them, but do not just train them. Support them to develop their skills through coaching-the-coach initiatives and lead them ... they are an influential force in the culture change journey.

## Step two – Talk to your people

When we describe the culture we want for our organisation, we emphasise the importance of dialogue ... so talk to your people ... talk to all of them.

Discuss work with your colleagues in an open and collaborative spirit, with a view to tapping into the personal resources they have ... their knowledge of how things work when they do work, their experiences and their understanding of what is happening and what is possible ... resources that would otherwise remain dormant.<sup>10</sup>

We want to feel like a team. We want to feel like a community and that we are all in it together. The culture is us and how we are with each other and so it is our discussions and conversations that drive the culture. Do we need consultants to run focus groups to engage with our people about culture? Do we need software to conduct a culture climate survey?

People are resourceful, so talk to them ... talk to all of them.



## Step three – Ask the Miracle Question

Define what culture you want by asking the Miracle Question.

*“Suppose a miracle occurs tonight while you are sleeping. When you wake in the morning, all of the problems with your culture as it is today, will be gone. You won’t realise the miracle has occurred immediately of course, probably not until you arrive at work, but what would be the first clue do you think that a miracle has happened? And then what? What would be different? What would you see? What would be happening?”*

Ask everyone and record what they say. Create a Culture Statement using the words that your people have used so they can see that they have contributed.

Share the Culture Statement ... it is an expression of the experience your team aspires to have at work.

## Step four – Breathe life into your green shoots

Find your green shoots of renewal, the examples of the culture you want already existing, however small, however fleeting.

*“When or where are these things that you describe even a little bit present already?”*

Explore what it is that enables them to exist.

*“What’s going on here that allows this to exist, when it does? What are the conditions that have allowed this to take root?”*

Work out what is needed for them to exist and thrive elsewhere.

*“What do we have to do to extend this beyond where it currently is?”*

## Step five – Live the culture you want

You do not get the culture you want by living a different culture. It is our discussions and conversations that drive the culture and so we, the leaders and the change agents, have to be the difference we want to see.

The culture is us and how we are with each other.

We have to live the culture we say we want.



*“Culture eats strategy for breakfast”*  
Peter Drucker

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