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The Culture Imperative

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Since the critically acclaimed management scholar, Peter Drucker made the very popular statement about “culture eating strategy for breakfast”, organizational leaders, managers and scholars have paid increasingly more attention to the issue of organizational culture and its impact on organizational success.

The point that Drucker was making, which I wholly subscribe to is simple - that even with the best plans, projects and ideas, organizations can only be as successful as the way its people think, act and make choices. If their culture cannot support and drive these ideas, projects and plans that are collectively referred to as “strategy”, then that strategy is doomed for failure.

My experience with working in, leading, supporting and nurturing a number of organizations across various sectors suggests that indeed culture eats strategy for breakfast, and that if there is any one thing that leaders should never neglect - it is the awesome power of culture.

So, why is culture, so important, I will like you to reflect on at least four reasons why I believe it is, as follows: 1) Culture is immutable - it cannot be easily copied; 2) Culture determines results; 3) Your culture is your real BRAND; and 4) Successful organizations are often puritan. Let us explore each of them, one after the other.



Whereas organizations can copy the products, processes and even poach the people from their competitors in this increasingly competitive business environment, they CANNOT copy the culture. The culture of a successful organization is about the unique way that organization and its people think, act, make decisions and implement ideas and solutions. The ideas and solutions themselves can be easily copied and transferred, but the unique way that they were created, deployed and sustained (the culture) cannot.

This is why you may poach someone from a competitor, believing that the person will hit the ground running with the ideas and products that he has brought, but it doesn't exactly work out as planned. One person or even a few people poached from one organization with templates for products and processes does not guarantee success. The unique style of management and leadership and other cultural nuances that cannot be so easily copied and transferred is what actually makes the difference.

For example, I recently realized that in spite of my best efforts over the years to expose and train my colleagues in some of the technical areas of our work as corporate educators including exposing them to all of the knowledge and expertise that I had garnered as the founder, I had never been able to truly "transfer" those skills, because of the "cultural" gap that existed.

In the last one year, we have tried to focus more on "culture" by articulating in clearer terms what has actually driven our modest success in the last ten years. Was it a certain education or exposure, or certain research and studies, or certain networks and relationships? Not at all, if we have achieved any success as a firm it is because of certain behaviours that need to be established in the organizational DNA. We came up with a mnemonic that helps us remember this winning culture, and we have been working each day to ingrain it into our organization - it's called HAIL - **H**ungry | **A**mbitious | **I**nnovative | **L**eader. With these ingredients we have started charting a new course for our firm - and I must say the early results are quite promising - I will keep my fingers crossed though.

Culture determines results, and the Values-Based Leadership model shows us that there is a relationship between the beliefs that you have and the results that you achieve. Societies like Nigeria for example pride themselves for being deeply religious, but the quality and quantity of our results show otherwise. If we are to really achieve sustainable success, there must be



congruence between what we espouse as our beliefs and values and the choices and actions that we take each day that ultimately lead to results.

If you therefore have certain results in your organization that you want to improve, just go back to address the underlying BELIEFS (The truth about yourselves); VALUES (The things you are prepared to die for); ATTITUDES (The basis for your thinking and choices); BEHAVIOURS (The things you do) and you can change your results.

Some people try to change their results by focusing only on behaviours and actions that they copy from others, without changing their underlying beliefs, values and attitudes. This may create some short-term successes in the direction of what you want that will collapse in the long-term because of the absence of the right structure (Beliefs and Values) to sustain that success. Or in most cases it will lead to some quantifiable results (high profits), whose quality will be questionable (corruption).

Rosabeth Moss Kanter wrote an amazing piece on Nigeria's effort at re-branding itself in the early 2000s in a short piece in Harvard Business Review where she linked this second reason with the third: Culture defines your brand - the perception that the customers and prospects have of you.

She described Nigeria's attempt at investing in advertising campaigns to attract investors without dealing with the more fundamental "cultural issues" as "slapping on lipstick on a bulldog". According to her you shouldn't do this for two reasons - firstly, it is very difficult to actually wrestle a bulldog to get the lipstick on him in the first place, and secondly, even when you do, it doesn't change the nature of the beast.

If you do not deal with the deeper issues of what your employees believe, what they value and how they think, your investments in branding and advertising will only lead to higher expectations from your customers and prospects that will inevitably be dashed when they actually interact with your employees and your products/services, leading you to more investments in branding that eventually deplete your resources without improving the results.

Rather than focus on the lip stick treatment, pay attention to the re-wiring the bulldog (as Nigeria seriously needs to do to its people) or in the case of an



organization, getting rid of the bulldog altogether - which leads me to the final point.

The most successful organizations are PURITAN - organizations who really make a difference throughout the course of history are those that are firstly very selective about who they let in through the door in the first place, and very firm and critical of those that they allow to remain.

While many people applaud the high level of employee engagement in places like Microsoft, Facebook, GE, Google, Netflix, and the old Investment Banking & Trust Company (IBTC), a leading investment bank in Nigeria in the early 2000s, what they do not see is that most of these organizations are highly PURITAN - they are not tolerant of behaviour and attitudes that are not aligned with their culture.

They invest a lot in defining the “Company Way” and they use it aggressively in recruitment, promotions, career decisions and training so much that their employees look like clones of their senior leaders and founders. They understand that by building the right culture and way of life they can replicate and scale their success. If the best organizations are PURITAN, then culture no doubt is what drives their success.

So, if you are really looking to alter the course of your organization do not be quick to jump at copying new ideas and products from market leaders; poaching employees from your competitors; investing in more advertizing and branding or banking on your existing employees who may not be living your culture and team to take you to the promise land. Beyond all of these, you must focus on what is most important - defining the culture that will take you to the promised land and insisting on it every day in all the decisions and choices that you make.

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