

You Don't need a Culture Change Programme

IS IT JUST ME?

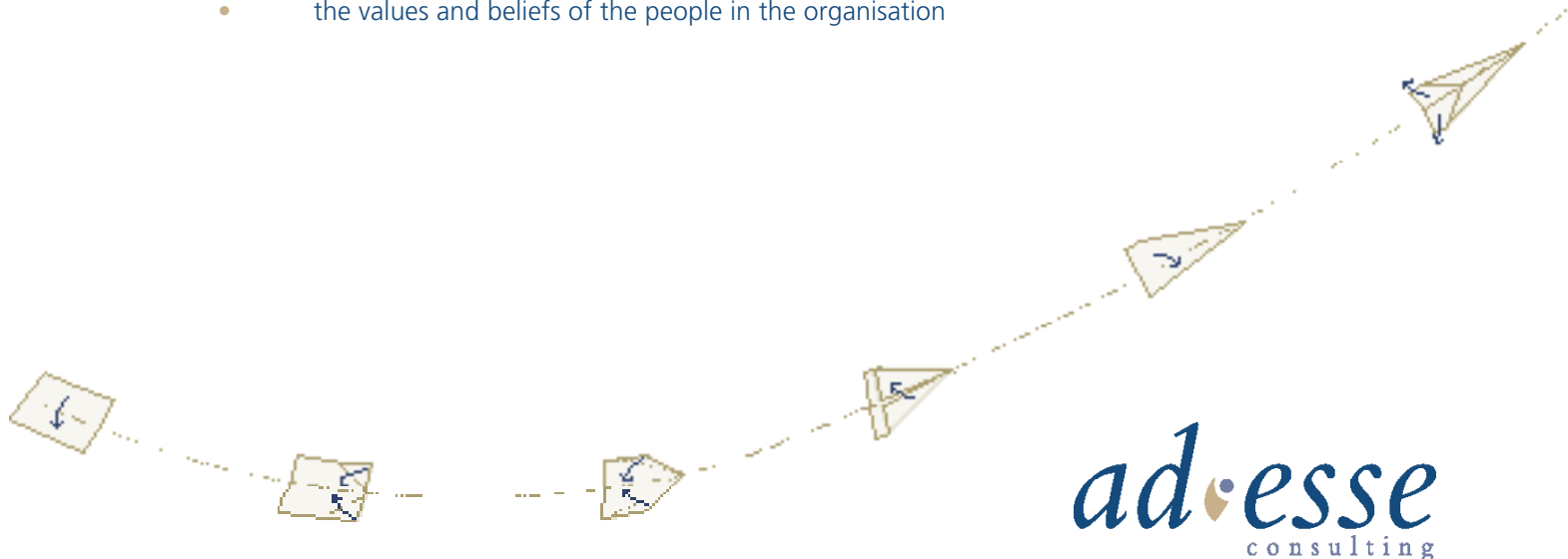
How many times have we heard politicians, commentators and senior managers say things like “**what we need to do is change the culture**” in response to the latest announcement of poor performance, or some blunder that has made it into the headlines. It's usually closely followed (or preceded) by the equally common “**we will conduct a review**”. In this article, I want to comment on some of the “culture change stuff” and the difficulty of trying to implement a “Culture Change Programme”.

I read an article earlier this year which said that in numerous surveys of businesses, “achieving the right culture” was one of the key issues. It went on to describe the key steps required to plan and implement a Culture Change Programme.

Is it just me, or is that completely missing the point? Surely, the thing that organisations need to do, almost universally, is to improve their performance continuously. To do that, all sorts of changes in processes, systems, capabilities and behaviours may be required, but it seems a bit of wishful thinking that a Culture Change Programme is going to be the answer.

For one thing, culture is an outcome, not a process. Culture is often described as “**the way we do things round here**”. In other words, it is what you get as a result of factors such as:

- organisational structure
- leadership behaviours
- processes and systems
- measurement and performance management
- communications
- knowledge and skills
- the values and beliefs of the people in the organisation



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CULTURE IS AN OUTCOME

So, if culture is an outcome and you think your organisation needs a different culture, that's fair enough. But, and it's a big but, you have to ask the question "why do you want to change it?". What is it about today's performance that the current culture is affecting (presumably adversely)?

If you can't identify what performance improvements are required and how they will be measured, how will you know that any Culture Change Programme has made any difference at all?

What you don't need to do is rush off and:

- carry out a Culture Audit to find out what today's culture is
- run lots of focus groups to get people talking about how the culture is now and how it needs to change
- implement a communications programme to tell everyone about the latest initiative that the senior management team has dreamt up
- set up lots of departmental improvement teams to work on whatever they think is most important to change the culture

WHAT YOU DO NEED TO DO...

We work with clients to take them from possibilities to actuality. Nobody has to "do Culture Change" (or Six Sigma, or Investors in People), or whatever the latest initiative is called. We do all have to align our organisations' efforts to achieve **outcomes** that meet, or exceed, the needs and expectations of our **Customers** and **External Stakeholders**.

And, if you are not currently achieving the levels of performance your stakeholders want, it's almost certain that the actions you will have to take to improve performance will result in a change of culture.

For example, if you need to speed up your responsiveness to customers, you will have to work on your processes, many of which will be cross-functional, and consequently you will have to reduce hierarchical structures and bureaucracy and increase team-working. Much of this is likely to happen through well-facilitated process improvement projects that focus on the improvement to be achieved and the way the team works together, to do this.

As another example, if you need to reduce costs and increase value for money, once again you will need to re-design processes, increase staff knowledge and capabilities to work flexibly and reduce the burden of excess management approval and sign-off layers. Leadership by example, such as trusting people to do the right thing and encouraging a focus on what adds value, will be essential.

We use the Ad Esse Model to explain the "big picture" and show how an organisation must start by understanding the needs of its stakeholders and customers as a basis for deciding its vision and objectives (it's actually a two-way process). Strategies then give you the pathways to achieve the objectives; they tell you "how", not "what". All of an organisation's performance outcomes are a result of its capabilities (knowledge, skills, systems and technologies) and the way its processes are designed, operated and managed. Note that there is as much emphasis on "capability" as there is on "processes".



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We use the model with our clients to help them think through what outcomes they want to achieve and how they could achieve them. This might be applied at an organisational level to achieve service delivery improvements, or culture change.

At an "initiative" level, the model can be equally helpful. **What are the pressures on you to achieve Culture Change? What are your specific objectives for the initiative and what options do you have for implementation?** These will help define the processes and capabilities you will need for implementation. Performance management drives the initiative and performance measurement tells you if you are achieving your desired outcomes. Identifying, and managing the right measures is important if you want to reinforce the behaviours that you want your new culture to adopt.

THINK FIRST

So, before you decide that you need a Culture Change Programme, ask yourself what performance improvement your organisation actually needs. Then, design a programme to achieve that. Undoubtedly, if you get it right, you'll get the culture change you thought you were looking for in the first place.

What might such a programme look like? Well, on the assumption that it must improve performance and leave the capability to sustain further improvements, it's clearly not going to be:

- short-term
- mandated by senior managers and delivered by the staff beneath them
- a glitzy communications exercise

It is likely to include the following:

Key improvement process stages	Possible improvement process components
<p>Pressure for change</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some form of diagnosis to quantify the gap between current and desired performance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Customer data collection (hard and soft data on requirements and satisfaction) Process data collection (errors, waste, delays, non-value) Stakeholder data collection (for key groups such as staff, partners, suppliers, regulators – this is where the surveys, focus groups and workshops can be really useful)
<p>Vision for change</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Objective setting by senior managers to determine what must be achieved, by when. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Senior management workshops to set priorities and direction, based on the data gathered Appointment of senior managers as “owners” of the agreed priorities Engagement of all other managers Initial communication of objectives and approach to all staff (face-to-face and led by senior managers)
<p>Capacity for change</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing the organisational capability to “do improvement”. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appointing and training improvement project teams to address the priority issues Developing in-house Facilitation and Coaching skills to embed improvement skills and behaviours Building in-house subject matter experts and improvement toolkits Establishing an improvement planning and review mechanism Coaching and developing all managers to perform their leadership and ownership role and lead by example
<p>Actionable first steps</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing and implementing a short-term plan to get focussed improvement underway. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cross-functional and cross-hierarchy improvement teams to solve the priority problems identified by senior managers (within 3-6 months) A performance measurement system to track the agreed priorities and report progress (quantitatively) against objectives Developing improvement skills among those involved in early team activities Establish local (within Dept.) improvement priorities and teams
<p>Reinforcement and review</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement a means of recognising what has been achieved, reinforcing it and driving further, sustainable, improvements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication of plans and progress Integration of improvement into business planning and performance management Re-aligning reward and recognition systems with improvement objectives Performance management of individuals against personal improvement objectives Re-measure customers and other stakeholders (using hard and soft data collection approaches)

This isn't meant to be an exhaustive list and, clearly, it's not a definitive implementation programme. Each organisation will have different objectives and priorities that should influence what needs to be done, in what order.

Some of the factors in this approach that are likely to result in desired culture changes are:

- it is actively led by senior managers
- it is focussed on achieving real improvements, required by the organisation and its stakeholders
- it starts at the top, but involves staff at all levels, particularly in cross-functional teams
- it measures progress and holds people accountable for it
- it is not a one-off "initiative"; it aims to develop sustainable performance improvement



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