

Forget culture, change behaviour

How do you change something as ingrained as a company's culture? Start with the underlying behaviours and change may come faster than you think, says **Dr Leandro Herrero**

Margaret Thatcher once declared: "There's no such thing as society. There are only individual men and women, and there are families." You wouldn't expect anything less from the Iron Lady sitting on the right-hand side of the right political arena, where individualism is king and collectivism is bad for your health. Whether the former UK prime minister really believed what she was saying to the letter or was just using it as a strong point in defence of her Tory ideology of individualism, I don't know. But the world heard her and responded with varying degrees of horror, or admiration.

My temptation to steal the line is strong. So here it is: forget culture, there are only behaviours. These can be accepted or unaccepted, expected or unexpected, sanctioned or not. There are established ways of doing things, ways of talking, ways of thinking and ways of grouping people. There are also visible windows to the world such as logos, colours, objects, symbols and other paraphernalia, usually referred to as 'artefacts' by culture scholars. But, above all, there are people – individuals, those in pairs, trios, groups, teams, networks and any other multiples who do, and don't do, particular things. This is as visual as I can get about how people behave in a particular environment. And this is culture.

Actually, I don't agree with Thatcher. I do believe there is such a thing as society, and that this collective entity matters. But I would agree that 'society' as a concept, important as it may be, has little operational value in the workplace. To put it bluntly, I can't work with 'society', but I do know a lot about 'the individual men and women' and the little groups called 'families'. People, institutions and governments give money to, and take money away from, individuals and create laws to

protect or punish them. In doing so, they frame and shape 'the society thing'. But all this is done because of the individual or their groupings. The shape of 'society', whatever that is, depends on all those things that we do, or don't do, as individuals and in our natural (family/domestic) or artificial (company/institution/work) groupings.

Thatcher's point was that society can only be described in terms of its components. My copycat point is that although culture can be described in many terms, most of them serve as artefacts, while many others are labels without any degree of reliability. In plain English, labels such as entrepreneurial culture, mature culture, culture of fear, or high-trust culture have almost no significance until you describe what you mean. These labels represent different things to you and me. And as soon as you start seriously describing labels and articulating what you mean by them, you are bound to describe what people do, or don't do, what they are allowed to do or aren't, which behaviours are established and which are non-negotiable, the ones that will take you places and those that will lead you nowhere. Ultimately, you will be talking about behaviours.

The only parameters that are really workable are the behaviours of individuals or groupings that exist within a culture. I can hear you saying, "Wait a minute, this sounds a bit like a reductionist approach. What about norms, beliefs, attitudes, values, hopes, expectations and emotions?" Of course culture also has norms, many of them tacit. But norms are mirrors of behaviours. Yes, I agree that people within cultures also have

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attitudes, beliefs, values, hopes, expectations, emotions and all that. The problem is that, if you push me, I would describe all of these things as pretty intangible, compared with what I see people doing, or not doing, in other words, their behaviours.

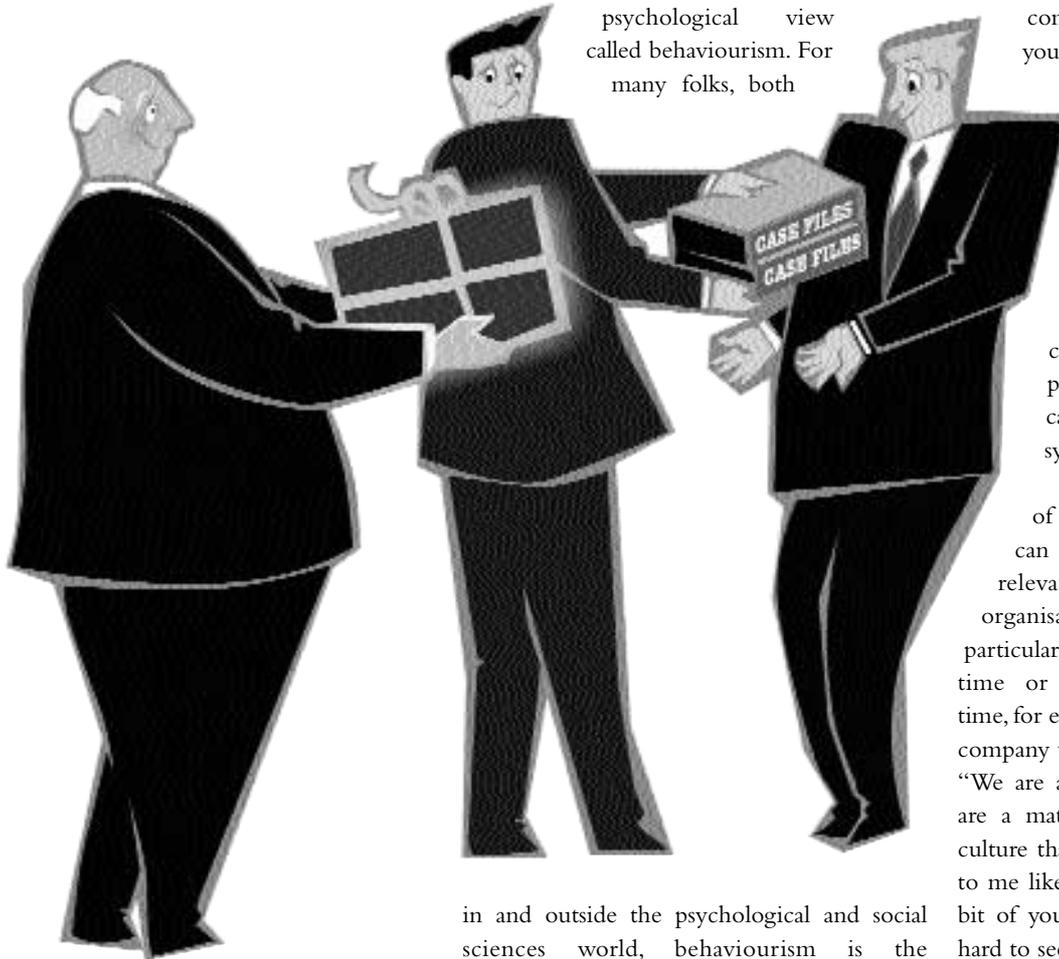
I am stretching the argument on purpose here and taking a pretty fundamentalist psychological view called behaviourism. For many folks, both

Yes, sometimes there are explanations, but rarely are they at the behavioural level. What is it that people have to do, or not do, to be called 'honest'? What behaviours qualify as acceptable or unacceptable under 'integrity'? What does 'trust' mean?

Behaviours are actionable, while values are not. Behaviours alone, with no reference to values, are like bits of information on a computer that only make sense when you put them together. Values alone, with no reference to behaviours, are naked labels open to interpretation. Culture defined by values alone is nice, but not actionable. Culture defined in terms of behaviours may lack the glamour of grandiose mission statements, but it provides clear frameworks and boundaries for people, with the advantage that you can always refer back to a value system.

If you have followed so far, and sort of agree, the next question is: "How can we change a culture?" This is very relevant at many points in the organisational lifecycle, but it becomes particularly prominent at M&A time, crisis time or soul-searching-lousy-productivity time, for example. I once heard a client, whose company was about to undergo a merger, say: "We are an entrepreneurial culture and you are a mature culture. We need to create a culture that has the best of both." It sounded to me like a cooking recipe. A bit of mine, a bit of yours, now here is the soufflé. It was hard to see how it was going to work because what the CEO described as entrepreneurial, I would have called disorganised, close to chaotic. And the company culture he referred to as mature was, in reality, dinosaurian. The marriage of chaos and dinosaurs does not necessarily breed gazelles. But what can you do with these terms? Not much, other than create beautiful press releases.

If you really want to change a culture, work on the underlying behaviours. Start by assessing the behavioural fabric of the organisation. Ask what the common behaviours are that have become 'part of the furniture', or that have become 'the culture' even. And question whether they are enablers or blockers of what you are trying to achieve. There are tools and methods to assess this. Then you need to assess what reinforcement mechanisms you have in place 'in your culture'. What is it that you are rewarding or



in and outside the psychological and social sciences world, behaviourism is the 'Thatcherism of psychology' and, as in politics, not everybody's cup of tea. We could spend hours discussing this within the social sciences arena and that would be great. But, as a business practitioner, I need concrete parameters to work with.

Many of the reasons people take a rather cynical approach to mission statements and declarations of values is because they are full of non-operational concepts, all apparently designed to

make them impossible to disagree with. If your value statement lists qualities such as integrity, honesty, creativity, trust, proactivity and customer focus, you are at the top of the bell curve. The real question is what all this means.

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punishing? What behaviour is encouraged and what is discouraged? Who gets promoted for doing what and who gets fired for doing what? This part of the exercise, again with the right tools and methods, will tell you more about 'your culture' than any other evaluation initiative. Then you will be in a position to apply good behavioural management practice and define a set of new (or old) behaviours that you want to establish, and apply a set of new (or old) reinforcements to sustain them.

Only behaviours that get reinforced will stay, and any others will fade away. If a behaviour is there, it is because it's being reinforced, whether you're aware of that or not. There are tricks, methods and some counter-intuitive initiatives that you may have to learn, but these are not the point here. It is absolutely possible to 'change a culture' within a matter of weeks provided you work at a behavioural level. It will take months or years otherwise.

Reinforcements are not the same as rewards. A reward is something that I have declared as being one. I could give you five pounds, dollars or euros as a reward for something you have done. If you were expecting two, or you feel five is appropriate, it is likely to be a reward and a reinforcement of your behaviour. If you were expecting five hundred, the five pounds is an insult and not a reward or reinforcement. Even if you are OK with five, you may still have preferred a pat on the back as opposed to money so the opportunity to use a greater, and cheaper, reinforcement has been missed. Here is the trick: ask. In a recent analysis with a client, a company sales force was split 48% vs 52% over whether they wanted monetary or non-monetary rewards. It was a shock for management because they had never asked.

A typical case of necessary culture change is in sales forces that were created with a strong individualistic ethos. You may have originally hired people who could sell ice to Eskimos and for years rewarded them with big bonuses for their individual sales performances. But you have now discovered that the Darwinian system of survival of the fittest, that had worked in the past, is no longer suitable in a new environment where collaboration and information-sharing between people is key to your strategy. Where sales forces, and territories, are combined or amalgamated for cost savings, reps now need the 'guy next door' to work with them. In cultural terms, you have a great individualistic culture and you want to change it to a collaborative one and still meet

your targets.

Cultural discussions will take you to painful territories. You are better off forgetting about culture and concentrating instead on behavioural change. What is it that the rep and district manager now have to do differently and how are you going to reward the new behaviours? Since there was perhaps no habit of collaboration, you may need to start with a bit of social-engineering and create initiatives that require by definition, and in their own merit, people talking and sharing data with others. These behaviours need to be rewarded. Individualistic non-sharing doesn't get any rewards any more.

These kinds of processes are extremely powerful. Contrary to popular belief, the way people behave can be changed very quickly. It's a psychological nonsense to believe otherwise. Yet surprisingly, many people in business believe it is difficult or impossible.

This is in total contradiction with daily life in the social and political arena where behaviours can shift on an hourly basis. If you're in doubt, consider how quickly the Spanish population turned against the then conservative government, when it blamed last year's Madrid train bombings on the Basque separatist group ETA, even though the police had information that Muslim fundamentalists were responsible.

Sustaining new behaviours is a bit trickier but, in general, behavioural change is powerful and actionable. Cultural change with no reference, inclusion or focus on behaviours is wishful thinking and rainmaking all in one.

Talking about hard-core pornography in 1964, US Supreme Justice Potter Stewart said: "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced... but I know it when I see it."

I also know a culture when I see it, but what I see is people doing things and behaving in their own ways. Cultural change really is about behavioural change.

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