

“Excellence is an art won by training and habituation. We do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have those because we have acted rightly. We are what we repeatedly do.

Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.”

- Aristotle, Philosopher

The Maine Center for Career Preparation is a private, non-profit committed to improving the economic prospects of Maine citizens by improving the linkages between education and workforce development.

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Sweeping Cultural Change

By Tom Broussard

Cultural change is a hot topic these days and is usually mentioned in the first five minutes of any management retreat. Why is that?

Because many of the problems organizations face are thought to ride on cultural bedrock. To get at the problem, you have to get at its cultural underpinning.

The cultural underpinning is really the shared consciousness of the organization or community. That consciousness will only change when a critical mass of individuals senses a change in the environment in a similar way.

Essentially the group reacts to something felt by everyone to some degree. It also has a time dimension to it that cannot be orchestrated. Cultural change certainly marches to its own tune and is nowhere more evident than in the corporate world.



Many corporate mergers and acquisitions fail precisely because their cultures could not be blended at all, nevermind on command.

Integrating the cultures of two companies brought together by a business deal is not a simple matter of combining balance sheets. The culture of each new partner does not reside in the business plan, the organizational charts or the financial statements. The culture resides within an intricate system of values—some explicit, many more implicit—held collectively by its employees.

Companies can't "create" culture the same way they create value in the business world. We build bridges, cars and airplanes but we cannot purposefully build a new culture or direct that one be built.

Consequently, cultural change is not something that can be shaped directly. It cannot be touched. It cannot be "scheduled." It cannot be directed to move from here to there.

Policies directed at outcomes that do not address the *environment* (or culture) within which these actions occur will likely fail.

The sport of curling provides a useful analogy regarding the physics of cultural change.

In curling, a forty-four pound stone is shoved (it would be hard to say that it is *thrown*) to the other end of the ice. Once it has been launched there is no way to alter its direction except by what is called, *sweeping*.

Sweepers (what the people doing the sweeping are called) use brooms to sweep

the ice along the path of the stone with sufficient force so as to melt the ice (however slightly) and "draw" the stone in the direction of this newly melted sheen of ice.



It is illegal to touch the stone in any way so the only way to influence the path of the stone is to sweep. The harder one sweeps, the more the ice melts and the slicker the swept area becomes in relation to the surrounding environment. In this way, the stone is then "pulled" in the direction of the smoother ice.

When cultural change does occur, it is not in response to a push, but a pull.

In an analogous way, culture cannot be "touched" directly. That is not to say that culture can't change over time or that it cannot be influenced. But when

cultural change does occur, it is not in response to a push, but a pull.

Therefore policies directing that *such and such* happen, without considering the gravitational pull of culture risk failure. They are trying to lay a hand on the cultural stone rather than influence what lies in its path.

Policies with the expressed goal of *changing the culture* must be directed at changing the environment and manner in which the environment is perceived. Sensing this change in the environment, the culture adapts, moves, changes.

When culture changes, it does so because it *wants* to. Yet even the individuals involved may not notice that things are changing. In

much the same way as the stone, they may simply be *drawn* that way.

It is never as easy as that nor is it a sport, but whoever said sweeping cultural change would be easy?

