

# Corporate Culture – relationships, values and the promise of excellence

This article introduces the work of **The Cultureship Practice**.

Our mission is to bring together in practical and sustainable ways increased workplace performance and superior workplace fulfilment. We seek to provide organisations with the insights, skills and mechanisms to develop and embed great corporate culture.

We are not presenting this introduction as a dogmatic “to do” list – corporate culture is too subtle and too complex for glib approaches - but we do believe that we have the necessary experience across many corporate cultures to be able to offer useful general insights.

Nor is it self-promoting consultant-speak, typified by claims of miracle organisational development breakthroughs – but we do believe that powerful corporate cultural possibilities lie untapped within many organisations.

## *Higher Performance & Greater Fulfilment*

We seek to stimulate fresh ways about how you can better spot, consider and react to some of the major, ongoing challenges which face just about every organisation at some time.

Our intent is not to offer up an image which paints everything as bleakly as possible, simply so that we can set ourselves up as the source of all wisdom.

Our purpose is rather to alert organisations to the full potential of corporate culture as a key analytical tool and a framework for better practice. We also help remove individuals’ own particular barriers and stimulate more productive and fulfilling relationships throughout organisations.

*Cultureship* is our unique approach. Our organisational analysis and practical implementation work are based on a belief in the power of the underlying cycle of organisational excellence we identify as *Community, Contribution & Recognition*.

Just as Leadership is about understanding and developing leaders, so Cultureship is about understanding and developing corporate cultures.

Cultureship is the practice of researching an organisation's culture and seeking its development via Community, Contribution & Recognition (CCR). We believe, quite simply, that people need to feel part of a productive community, they must to be able to play a full and active role in supporting and building that community – and they should be acknowledged and rewarded in multiple ways.

### *Based on Goodness, aiming for Excellence*

We start from a recognition that there are great things going on within many organisations. There are also pockets of excellence frequently to be found within organisations which otherwise suffer generally from appalling corporate cultures. We think it is more useful to liberate goodness and excellence than it is to concentrate on producing typologies of badness and failure.

We couple what is always good within organisations with an explicit exploration of the higher values which can be embedded, enacted and enjoyed within individual organisations. This credo, as an everyday guide to corporate behaviour, is written-up into a consensual and detailed Cultureship Contract for each organisation.

By way of example, The Cultureship Practice's own Contract is built on Integrity, Hope, Reciprocity, Knowledge and Excellence. It is something against which we actively wish others to measure us – and it is also a yardstick against we measure ourselves.

In our client work, we develop detailed contexts and behavioural expectations around each bespoke set of higher values – these are not empty mission statements to be pinned up on corridor noticeboards, overlooked and ignored.

Furthermore, our work is closely guided by three central beliefs, based on our extensive work in organisations of many sizes and sectors.

- The first is that people, when they come together in a productive community, can achieve superb and sustainable results.
- The second is that it is almost inevitably the case that a bad place to work is a place of bad work, no matter what excuses or evasions are offered.
- The third is that corporate culture is not something which can be willed, imagined, bullied or manipulated into place; corporate culture, in the final analysis, is a matter of the heart - and it either feels right, or it feels very wrong.

And at a more general level is our commitment that corporate culture must always be explained and understood in relation to real workplaces and real organisational experiences.

To achieve this authentic connection, we focus our practice around stories, both to which everyone who works in organisations can relate generally and also ones specific to individual organisations.

One of the first things we do when we engage with organisations is to look at the preconceptions – the paradigms – through which their people view corporate culture. We capture the general assumptions and the narratives people tell to explain how their organisations operate.

We consider how these flows of corporate culture shape everyday relationships: we gain a sense of the pace, rhythm and shape of an organisation. We go on to build an understanding of how corporate culture carries through into the broader successes and failures of an organisation.

It is incredibly revealing to understand what people at all levels within an organisation are saying, what they are not saying - and also what they do not even think could be said.

The following statements – composite, but in our experience utterly typical - capture many of the recurrent core themes of corporate culture that are presented to us when we ask the question:

*“What kind of corporate culture do you have in this organisation?”*

**“I dunno – isn’t that just something senior managers and consultants talk about?”**

### *Corporate Culture as a Fad*

One of the most commonly overlooked factors in considering corporate culture is that there are frequently quite radically different cultures and cultural viewpoints in play, both in different sections of any organisation and within different grades of seniority. To overlook this messy reality is to begin any corporate culture initiative on very shaky foundations indeed.

The view expressed above is one we have frequently encountered amongst middle management and frontline staff.

By itself it is not necessarily too much of a problem. It could, however, be linked to Changemania, the syndrome we have identified whereby some leaders are forever grabbing out at the next, new organisational fad.

It might also be associated with poor communications within a company. Sometimes we find that middle and junior management and frontline staff tend to operate to a large extent as a self-regulating “organisation within an organisation”, substantially disconnected from their senior management and leadership.

Whatever the causes of this sense of disconnection from various top-down initiatives, a core shared idea across these kinds of comments is that corporate culture is a manufactured imposition.

This view fails to appreciate that the current lived reality of assumptions and expectations amongst this group of people *is* their corporate culture, not just some state of temporary cultural neutrality. It is important to remember there is no such thing as a “corporate culture vacuum”.

Whether everyday existence is lived out as just muddling along the corporate highway whilst dodging the deepest potholes, or actually doing quite well in patches despite unresolved structural and people issues, one of the biggest misconceptions around corporate culture is that there are “weak” cultures and “strong” cultures.

There is always a strong culture, whether its trajectory is set towards high achievement, or downwards at the mutual evasion of responsibility.

Our point is not to establish if there is a culture – we take it as fact that there is one. Our focus is whether it is acting as far as is possible in advancing corporate performance whilst respecting and fostering human needs, all of this coming together in an upwards spiral of excellence.

Sadly, in a lot of organisations the culture isn’t discussed in any way other than as a distant commitment on a website, e.g. “We foster an innovative culture”.

Managers hear “positive culture” pleas from the Board, employees hear of new “cultural synergy” training exercises and other buzzword-laden initiatives. All the while, the actual corporate culture/s continue all around the organisation.

And as for the people who say “I dunno”, it’s likely that they have felt disengaged from the organisational objectives for some time.

**“Well, I don’t know about anyone else because I keep myself to myself a lot of the time, although I suspect many others feel the same way. It’s easier just to keep your head down and get on – so there isn’t really a culture here.”**

### *Corporate Culture as Survival*

Isolation, fear and inertia might not feel like a recognisable culture – or certainly not a culture to be cherished. However, to the individuals concerned such a situation very much constitutes a corporate culture - and it is both very real and also unpleasant.

And despite a veneer of commitment and productivity, many people will be spending much more time obsessed with not making mistakes than in forging strong relationships and driving forward new and better ways of working.

We have encountered survivalist views such as these – more often than not in private – from all levels within organisations, right up to the top on occasions but usually stopping just below it.

**“There’s a lot of friction and a lot of ill-feeling and stress which I feel right in the middle of. What kind of a culture would you call that?”**

### *Corporate Culture as Conflict*

At The Cultureship Practice we believe that a substantial amount of the productive potential of many organisations is burnt up in friction and conflict. There is heat instead of light, noise instead of excitement.

The comment leading this section is typical of how many middle managers feel, caught between the edicts of leadership and the disgruntlement of the frontline.

There are two main processes at work here. The first is a lingering and still quite common assumption that the workplace inevitably has to be a place of bitter struggle.

Somehow and at some time a sea change took place between a widespread viewpoint of our labour as a natural part of life to support our homes, families, health and society and the widespread corporate characterisation of our labour as a win-at-costs grim struggle.

There is too much imagery of battlefields in business-speak, too many threats of crushing, breaking and smashing.

The implicit argument is that much of organisational life must revolve around conflict and that organisations themselves are inevitably places of conflict.

We simply reject these arguments as wrong. They are morally wrong in that they fail to recognise human needs, they are socially wrong in that they fail to recognise the sustainable productivity of community, and they are scientifically flawed in that they misunderstand the mainsprings of motivation.

Force and willpower are dubious motivators short-term and inherently unsustainable in the longer-term.

The Cultureship Practice drives all its research and implementation around what we call the Performance-Fulfilment Axis, focusing in on the drivers of Community, Contribution & Recognition (CCR).

These are not weak values – but neither are they values of misplaced posturing and machismo. They reject friction, conflict and hypocrisy in favour of smoother relationships, co-operation and integrity.

These are tribal values, strong and compelling. There is an invitation to come into the stockade and to be a significant part. But with these opportunities to be included and valued come strong responsibilities. The entry door to the stockade is also an exit for those who ultimately reject CCR.

So much for the general Organisational Conflict Paradigm. The second main dimension of conflict we frequently encounter arises within individual organisations from their specific internal processes and cultures.

Cultural misalignment of personnel (within layers of seniority, sections and departments and also between individuals), conflicting flows of communication, omissions and over-generalisations of missions and visions, the misidentification of the causes of friction and a moral failure to embrace culture as an asset all play their part.

A direct operational objective of Cultureship is the seeking out and smoothing away of these friction points. These are rubbing points within relationships and understandings which we identify as Cultural Hotspots.

In our experience, genuinely strong organisations don't do conflict – people within them are too busy getting on with each other and getting on with being productive. And enjoying the positive feedback and mutuality that spins the CCR cycle round again.

**“Culture? That’s a bit ‘New Age’, isn’t it? This is a business after all. I am here to make money and so is everyone else.”**

### *Corporate Culture as Weakness*

Even within organisations where overt conflict has been banished, there is still frequently a tendency to fight shy of anything that is seen to veer away from accepted business-speak.

And whilst the specific comment above is one that we would very often encounter, say, within professional practices, the underlying sentiments are implicit throughout swathes of both the public and private sectors.

The common language of organisational development, human resources and management training too frequently veers towards expressing all things with certainty, mathematical precision and a depersonalised, emotion-free dryness.

Again, the focus of The Cultureship Practice is not to threaten performance by overly concentrating on people. On the contrary, we enhance performance by clearly accepting that thinking and feeling people are the bedrock of superior productivity.

Superb working relationships and workplace results are achievable through working with and through the feelings of others. Superior Corporate Culture is not a luxury indulgence and it is certainly not a sign of weakness.

**“We seek to create a supportive and dynamic culture, which is flexible and responsive to change and which ensures a sustainable organisation for all stakeholders.”**

### *Corporate Culture as the Vision Statement alone*

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with many vision statements such as the one above. In fact, if the above aspiration was translated through into inspiration and onwards into execution, that would be unequivocally brilliant!

Problems occur when leaders create messages such as the one above for managers to recite parrot fashion and for frontline staff to stare at in blank astonishment. The daily lived reality continues unchanged in the face of such grand statements, with the only lasting result that authority and credibility has seeped a little further away.

Corporate culture, when it works well and recreates itself in ongoing organisational and human excellence, is a relatively simple and elemental force.

However, unpicking complex issues and unpacking accumulated corporate baggage requires much, much more focus than simply plucking some desirable cultural attributes out of the air and committing them to business plans and staff newsletters.

Hearts might be in the right place – but great corporate culture also requires calm and questioning heads.

**“Oh it’s really good! We have regular meetings, which are minuted and circulated, we all know what is going in the organisation, our processes make it a really efficient place to work and we’ve recently been awarded a customer service prize.”**

### *Corporate Culture as Process*

Again, taken at face value, all of the actions and processes above are good and quite probably reflect deserved credit on those responsible and involved. But therein lies the need to look further – culture is being described as *process*. Where are the people? What are their expectations, assumptions and habits? How is their personal and group CCR connecting with corporate objectives.

The perfectly planned meetings and their painstaking writing-up could just as easily be pacing stultifying mediocrity as sparking engaged excellence.

However, what is shining through in this particular statement is enthusiasm. It comes back to our core mission time and again, which is to blow on sparks wherever we find them.

**“In my team we all actually get on pretty well and we all seem to enjoy working hard together to get things done. I can’t really speak for other departments or the rest of the organisation.”**

### *Corporate Culture as Compartmentalised Individuals*

There is a great deal of talk about “joined-up” working and “silo mentalities” both across the public sector and also within many larger private sector companies.

Both of these sectors also frequently encounter fresh challenges to their organisational shapes and responsiveness due to their continual redesigns, amalgamations, mergers and acquisitions.

Size and disruption are agents of cultural disruption. It may be, as reflected in the statement above, that groups of people might enjoy significant CCR within their local working environments. However, this is to sell short the latent potential of more inclusive and superior corporate cultures.

Personal experience, however satisfying on a group level, lacks the vital, broader social context. This extra dimension might well further enhance personal fulfilment - but it will almost certainly take corporate objectives such as innovation and productivity to new levels.

And this also leads us into the ongoing tension regarding active corporate culture intervention. On the one hand there are frequently strong potential rewards to be pursued. On the other are the attractions of a more laissez-fair attitude towards a considerable degree of complexity, variance, physical separateness and corporate isolation.

Clumsy and misguided intervention may well backfire, creating wholesale disengagement, leaving the organisation worse off than if it had done little or nothing.



Multiple and ineffective initiatives will undoubtedly leave many personnel across all levels of seniority both disenchanted and increasingly disengaged.

However, with strong pressure for higher productivity, leaner and more focused working practices, continual innovation and the demands of performance management, corporate culture is almost inevitably the focus of attention at some time in most organisations.

This is why The Cultureship Practice seeks a thorough understanding of each and every organisation before seeking any active cultural work. One-size-fits-all interventions can easily work themselves out in practice as one-size-fits-nobody.

Bringing people together clumsily can easily drive them further apart and back into themselves.

But bringing them together well in Community, Contribution & Recognition can work wonders. There is everything to play for in helping people to step forwards from the limitations of their individual compartments. Once again, though, it is the enthusiasm of individuals which must be the starting point, not a sense of generic failure.

CCR is a set of higher values, built around integrity, which is a quality admired by most but felt to be personally attainable by few. However, we believe that great corporate culture centres on *doing the right thing well* and that this mindset is achievable throughout organisations.

There is no fundamental reason why reciprocity and goodness need not be the norm.

**“There’s a great culture. We have setbacks, obviously, but we feel we can talk about things openly. It feels like there’s something really together, involving and rewarding going on.”**

### *Corporate Culture as Community, Contribution & Recognition*

Breaking through to higher levels of productive and rewarding corporate culture often rests on having the permission and safety to discuss concerns, shortages, failings and problems.

We frequently encounter organisations that have meetings about this and that, reporting for just about everything, reviews of reviews and a whole slew of quality and personnel standards.

And yet people still bite their lips, seethe in frustration and feel that they exist in an alternative reality to the received orthodoxy of rationalism and performance-managed productivity.

In this call for constructive openness, we are very clear that we are advocating neither a whinge culture, nor a blame culture.

Again, it goes back to the notion of tribal values. Groups who fail to face their challenges, honestly and in a spirit of co-operation, cannot hope to flourish. This is the underlying story of many once great civilisations which simply withered away off the face of the Earth.

Today, many formerly great organisations continue on their own sorry slides into oblivion.

In referring back to the opening comment of this final cultural tale, great cultures are actually the easiest to spot. They feel great – and great achievements are seen within them.