

Building Cultures for Sustainability

Carolyn Taylor

CAROLYN TAYLOR provides support to leaders engaged in actively managing their culture. She is the author of [Walking the Talk: Building a Culture for Success](#) and can be contacted at www.walkingthetalk.com.

AS SUSTAINABILITY BECOMES AN IMPORTANT OBJECTIVE for many, leaders in organisations are considering how they can change their own behaviour and influence that of their colleagues. In this endeavour they inevitably discover that there are forces in the culture which draw inspired leaders back into the organization's status quo.

Culture accelerates change by influencing the mass thinking, and thus behaviour, and leaders must build cultures that suit their goals.

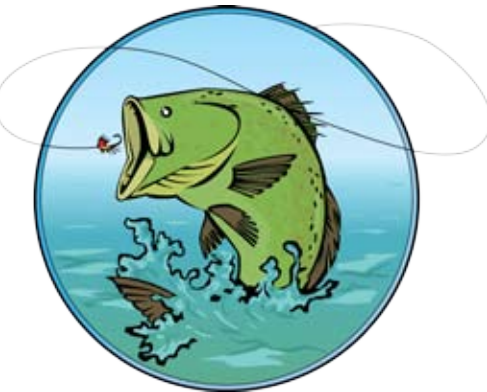
Many organisations know the value of culture change in pursuit of their objectives. An organisation which seeks to become a global presence, for example, may cultivate a one-team culture. A company planning organic growth needs a customer-centric culture. Sustainability is exactly like any other strategic goal. So, *what kind of culture supports the sustainability strategy, and how is that culture developed?* This article focuses on these two questions.

We see sustainability is essential to the planet, to constructive relationships, and to the well-being of ourselves and our companies. So our goal is a culture where, to fit in, people need to behave in a sustainable manner. In the same way that an organisation plans to develop a culture to support the achievement of strategic goals, it can plan to develop a culture that supports sustainable practice.

Individual actions and efforts become much more powerful when they exist within a coordinated plan to change culture. Behaviour change by some individuals is not enough to build a new culture although it is an important

Individual leadership development needs to be supported by culture change. Many people, wishing to fit in, read the signals about how to behave, and adapt their behaviour accordingly. Some who steadfastly hold to a different vision or values ultimately leave or are ejected.

Attempting to change individual leadership behaviour, without a corresponding effort to change the culture within which they operate, is a slow and often unsuccessful process.



WHAT KIND OF CULTURE SUPPORTS THE SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY, AND HOW IS THAT CULTURE DEVELOPED?

part of the process. Progress and future initiative are both accelerated by working within a framework of cultural development.



Culture is the result of the messages people receive about how to behave in order to fit in. When enough of those messages change, people adapt their behaviour. Look, for example, at the change that has occurred in relation to driving while drunk. When I was growing up, my circle of friends drank and drove with hardly a second thought. Today, designated drivers are the norm, and it is not cool to drive when drunk. Consequently, driving mortality statistics have dropped considerably. This is a great example of how a change in values leads to changes in behaviour, and those changes in behaviour lead to changed outcomes. The culture-change effort around driving while drunk is recognized as one of the most successful planned initiatives to change behaviour.

Culture change occurs when messages change, and these messages come from three sources:

From Behaviours. Particularly of those we admire, or see as role models or tribal leaders. When admired companies or powerful nations make changes to their behaviour, other companies and nations follow suit. When individuals who are well loved take action, they set trends. Bob Geldof and Bono have power because they are stars; the U.S. started listening when Al Gore made his movie.

From Symbols. Decisions which have meaning, such as who gets promoted and what get priority in meeting agendas. A client of mine is investing in improved video confer-

encing facilities and training in operating as a virtual team because they have calculated the carbon footprint of physically bringing their top executives together in one place. He was the first chairman I know who knows this figure by heart – a powerful symbol.

From Systems. Rewards, punishments, taxes, refunds – in general, whatever are measured – systemically influences the culture. Which companies are measuring their carbon footprint? How much importance is this metric given relative to others? How is long-term company success and balanced with short-term performance in the remuneration system?

Whether at the level of a nation, an organisation or a community group, we can systematically review behaviours, symbols and systems to ensure they communicate what is really valued. These changes speak loudly.

But what will cause leaders to change behaviours, symbols and systems? A useful way to understand this is the model of BE-DO-HAVE. A change in outcome occurs when people behave in different ways, and behaviour changes when there is a change in beliefs, mindsets, values, and perceptions about how things are and what is important. We HAVE a particular outcome because of what we DO, and what we DO follows from who we are at the BE level.



[CLICK IMAGE TO WATCH VIDEO](#)

Unstoppable. This video shows culture change in action. One man dances at a concert alone for a while, and then is joined by a second. The critical change occurs with the behaviour of a third guy – he is the one who normalizes the behaviour so that many more feel able to adopt it.

The messages (behaviours, symbols and systems) are all DO activities. What about the BE level? You need a critical mass people with the new perspective to lead a culture change. Once the culture starts to shift, others will follow without necessarily having that BE-level mindset.

The exciting thing about changing a culture is that you don't need everyone. Culture shifts at a tipping point, and that point is lower than you might think, McKinsey has suggested it's around 30%. There is a percentage of people who will never change, and it is easy to focus attention on this group. Our most effective strategy is to concentrate on the group of people who are closest to a sustainable mindset already because these are the ones who will make the difference.

What mindsets, at the BE level, are required to build a culture of sustainability? Let me suggest three:

1. A broader perspective of the greater good and the longer term. Encourage people who have the cognitive ability to see themselves within a broader context. Those who operate this way work for the future as well as the present, for others as well as themselves, for sustainability as well as profit.
2. Generosity. This emerging mindset is critical for customer focus, people development, high-performing global teams and sustainability. The web for example flourishes through people's willingness to share content with others. People who are generous will take the time to work out how they can contribute to sustainability and also be successful themselves. They are willing to give, and they have found that they receive many benefits in return.
3. Courage, the willingness to make values-based decisions. Many decisions are made because they meet a short-term need, or because they will please someone else, or because they will avoid conflict. An individual's courage is really tested only when there is an easy way out. Individuals who are values driven are courageous because their values often cause them to act against the current accepted norm.



Pioneers of sustainable culture building need these three characteristics at the BE-level. Find others who are inclined towards these mindsets and give them "air cover," support and encouragement. Forget about those who operate most rigidly and narrowly at the BE level.

Put those who are inclining that way in contact with those who are taking the desired actions. Research by Leann Lipps Birchat the University of Illinois found that the best way to get children to eat vegetables is to seat them at tables with children who like vegetables – more effective than parental threats and or promises of rewards.

THE EXCITING THING ABOUT CHANGING A CULTURE IS THAT YOU DON'T NEED EVERYONE.

We all want to fit in. By normalising the behaviours which lead to sustainability, as the third guy did in the video, we make it possible for the mass of people to join in. By changing the behaviours, symbols and systems, we send messages about what is really important. It is the 'walk' – not the 'talk' – that people are watching to work out what behaviour is required of them to fit in. Whether at the personal, organisational or national level, a tipping point is reached and the culture changes quickly when sustainable behaviours become cool. ✨