



## Culture Change: Lessons Learned

By Tom Kaney

*Managing Partner, McKnight-Kaney*

Over the course of my career I have facilitated or led several major merger integrations and large-scale corporate culture change initiatives. In the earlier days, there was not much research, established best practices nor shared learning about how one actually conducts or facilitates culture change whether brought about by a major event such as a merger or because an organization becomes deliberate in setting about to change its business and organizational culture.

Despite well publicized research and case studies in culture change, there are still very few clear 'roadmaps' for culture change that a leader or change agent can follow. It is more a matter of trial and error and learning from experience along the course of a complex change effort that a practitioner accumulates learning about what works and what doesn't.

Below is a summary of learnings harvested from my 20-plus years of experience in culture change and change management.

- DON'T try to change "culture" directly: it's too big and invisible.  
DO change purposes, strategy, structure, accountabilities, people, behaviors, work methods and communications processes - i.e. the structures and processes by which work gets done.
- DON'T assume that restructuring is the main task.  
DO be aware that restructuring is only the beginning. How it is managed and what follows it is more important in shaping culture.
- DON'T start with exhortations, big conferences, slogans, or indoctrination by the senior executives.  
DO work the executive team around their values and how their values and vision and behaviors link to the new business strategy. Senior executives must work on their behavior if they expect behavior of others to change. Ongoing, personal feedback is key. The audio must sync with the video.
- DON'T try to change everyone or everything.  
DO seek out and develop a core group of committed champions and support them as missionaries for change; cultivate a cadre of "change agents." Operate on principles of "critical mass" - 20 per cent committed can align 80 percent who are not.
- DON'T tolerate "saboteurs"—i.e. those who undermine the new way.  
DO get "saboteurs" out visibly and early, particularly those who don't live the values even though they may produce results.

- DON'T focus on behaviors alone.  
DO focus on critical success factors and key results that increase performance, and tie behaviors into those.
- DON'T assume that the way things were done in the past were wrong.  
DO honor past practices, people and traditions.
- DON'T believe that change takes a long time.  
DO appreciate time delay, but with a sense of urgency. Change does take time but it is what we do today - now! that produces lasting change in the future. "A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step." The first steps must be big, bold and swift. Holding a vision that change takes a long time will be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Expect change to occur soon and do the things today that will ensure that it does.
- DON'T expect change to evolve naturally, on its own. DO steer change. Build in multiple feedback and measurement processes to gauge and guide change efforts and progress. What gets measured is what gets done.
- DON'T expect the change strategy to unfold in a clear, clean, deliberate, linear manner. DO accept that change is more like an experiment than a plan -there is no "critical path" or "one best way"— frequent pitfalls and reversals will be encountered; frequent setbacks and failures must be expected and tolerated. It is an ambiguous and convoluted process.
- DON'T give up.  
DO have the courage to persist and stay true to stated values and purpose, especially during tough times. Acknowledge that chaos often precedes coherence.  
DO everything possible to identify and celebrate people and activities which already represent the new way and hold them up as examples (catch people doing the right things).
- DON'T expect that vision, strategy, and new behaviors will produce change. DO align all systems— e.g., communications, rewards, planning, recruitment, development, etc.-with the new strategy and values.  
DO actively remove hurdles and build support systems.
- DON'T tell the troops what to do.  
DO ask them what can be done to improve. Employees' ingenuity can be astounding.
- DON'T expect old ways or old work to go away on their own. DO help people to find ways to get rid of unnecessary methods, policies, procedures, and practices through structured, deliberate approaches.  
DO systematically search out and eliminate unnecessary layers and 'red tape'.  
DO recognize, reward, and celebrate 'good tries' as well as good results.
- DON'T focus change efforts only on lofty ideals, grand visions or strategies promulgated by upper management.  
DO focus change efforts on frontline activities where the real work of the company gets done—i.e., the "shop floor." Employees are most loyal to themselves and their work, not visions and strategies. Appeal to their loyalty. Besides, they are the real experts who know what needs improvement and how to improve.
- DON'T just tell people what's expected.

DO support their learning new ways through training and other supports. An extensive commitment to training is not optional, it is essential Continuous Learning is the wellspring for Continuous Improvement.