

## Cultures, Sub-cultures, and Cultural Islands

***How to avoid culture being something that happens to you, and instead purposefully establish the cultural features you need for success in your organisational situation***

### **Why does culture matter?**

Countries, regions, organisations, professions, and age groups or generations all have identifiable cultures, as do all groupings of people with something in common. These cultures are distinct from each other to varying degrees, both between these broad categories and between instances of each category.

What happens in organisations is substantially determined by the culture of the organisation. This can go unnoticed by the participants if the culture is uniform throughout – often the case in relatively young organisations. More commonly, especially in more mature and larger organisations, sub-cultures develop with rather different features in, for example, operations and sales. The cultural tension that arises at the interfaces can be debilitating for the organisation, unless effective, wise leadership mitigates its effects.

A more extreme form of cultural conflict can arise when more fully distinct groupings are brought together or attempt to work together in organisational contexts. Examples of this are everywhere. Various specific ones are: Two businesses collaborating, the formal establishment of a joint venture, the transition of a technology from initial research through to product delivery and customer adoption, engineering and production departments introducing a new product, technology developers working with customers, academic staff and graduate students researching together in a university, and functional specialists meeting in a senior leadership team.

Almost without exception, the participants in these situations endure the difficulties that arise without really understanding why they are happening or even realising that they are caused by cultural mismatches. Without this awareness and insight, unfortunately, they have little or no chance of mitigating them systematically. As Joshua Cooper Ramo wrote: “If you are not seeing things properly, you have no hope of any sort of breakthrough.”<sup>1</sup>

It does not have to be this way!

We can become clear-sighted about cultural interaction.

Even with some understanding though, it can be hard for ordinary participants in these situations to initiate any improvement because they don’t have enough authority. Moreover, many of the people they need to influence will be in a different subculture and, therefore, inherently resistant to changing their point of view. Realistically, wholesale improvement can only be led from the top; from those in positions of authority and influence – or at least, it’s easier that way. Leaving teams to sort things out for themselves might work, but it’s slow and unreliable and there tend to be breakages along the way, especially when substantial cultural mismatches are present.

For a better solution, first we need to understand more fully and in a structured way what we refer to as culture...

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua Cooper Ramo, “The Age of the Unthinkable”, Little, Brown, London, 2009

## What is culture?

Edgar Schein<sup>2</sup> provides the following definition in the context of organisations:-

“The culture of a group can be defined as the accumulated shared learning of that group as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, feel and behave in relation to these problems. This accumulated learning is a pattern of beliefs, values, and behavioural norms that come to be taken for granted as basic assumptions and eventually drop out of awareness.”

One of the original authorities on culture in an anthropological sense, Edward T Hall, writing in 1959<sup>3</sup>, wrote: “Culture hides much more than it reveals, and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants. Years of study have convinced me that the real job is not to understand foreign culture but to understand our own.”

Hall also wrote: “Most of our difficulties stem from our own ignorance” and “the job of achieving understanding and insight into mental processes of others is much more difficult and the situation more serious than most of us care to admit”.

## Why is understanding culture so difficult?

The central and most crucial answer is that when we “do” what we – or more likely, others observing us – refer to as our “culture”, we “do” it unconsciously. As Ed Schein says, culture has dropped “out of awareness”. We act out of a “world-view” or “mental model” (there are various more-or-less equivalent words and phrases for this) that is almost entirely held unconsciously. Both the model, comprising a set of beliefs and values and a sense of identity, and many of our decisions based on it, exist or occur outside conscious awareness. This relates closely to what Nobel Prize-winning psychologist and economist, Daniel Kahneman refers to as “System 1” processing, meaning “fast, instinctive and emotional”, in contrast to “System 2”, which is “slower, more deliberative, and more logical”.<sup>4</sup> The unconscious nature of culture is also what Edward Hall is pointing at when he says: “The real job is not to understand foreign culture but to understand our own.”

These unconscious beliefs are also called “tacit assumptions” – assumptions on which we act or decide, probably without realising at all and definitely without making them explicit to others involved.

Generally, tacit assumptions are beliefs that were, at one time, held tentatively but were then found to be valid or at least useful in our experience, and they gradually became part of our unconscious “programming” – an aspect of our unconscious competences. Note that whether the assumptions were objectively correct or not isn’t the criterion that was applied. Rather, the test was whether we found we achieved the outcomes we hoped for or expected when we acted out of the assumption, most of the time. In other words, was the assumption a useful generalisation about the world we inhabited? Did it work for us? If so, it became part of our near-permanent, unconscious programming and forgotten about as far as the conscious mind was concerned, which moved on to freshly pressing matters.

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<sup>2</sup> Edgar Schein, “Organizational Culture and Leadership”, 5th Edition, Wiley, New Jersey, 2017

<sup>3</sup> Edward Hall, “The Silent Language”, Anchor Books, New York, 1981

<sup>4</sup> From Daniel Kahneman, “Thinking, Fast and Slow”, Penguin, 2012. The semantically neutral labels “System 1” and “System 2” are unfortunately an impediment to using Kahneman’s model directly as a practical tool in organisations. It is a challenge to remember which “System” is which.

This continual “programming” process is vital to human functioning and much of the time works very well for us. The difficulty comes when tacit assumptions made a long time ago, optimally then, no longer serve us well when circumstances change.

A very significant consequence of our mental models, worldviews, or tacit assumptions being held unconsciously is that when they are questioned or challenged, either explicitly by other people or implicitly by circumstances, we find it very uncomfortable because something doesn’t feel right but we don’t really know what or why – because the dissonance arises in the unconscious. Typically, we say things like “it’s just not me” or “I’m not comfortable with this.” We think of our “gut feel” as a kind of true north, but it isn’t. It’s just a signal that there is a mismatch between our conscious thought process and our unconscious mind. Change our unconscious programming and we’ll change our “gut feel”.<sup>5</sup> Before that happens, the dramas of cultural collisions are fuelled by the combined energies of these unconscious dissonances.

### **The significance of unconscious competences**

The following learning cycle may be familiar:

1. At first, we don’t know we don’t know something. (We are unconsciously incompetent.)
2. Then something unexpected happens and we realise we don’t know something we could perhaps benefit from knowing. (We become consciously incompetent.)
3. Possibly, we learn the new knowledge or skill and can achieve the desired result if we have access to some supports – notes, for example. (We become consciously competent.)
4. Finally, if we practise the skill or rehearse the knowledge often enough, we change our unconscious programming and we become unconsciously competent. (We can do the thing without thinking – for most people, many aspects of driving a car, for example.)

This cycle may well be familiar. The following implications may not be:-

1. The things we are most effective at, we do unconsciously.
2. We’re not that aware we’re doing these effective things, nor any longer how we do them.
3. If asked how we achieve the result, we’re not fully able to describe the complete unconscious process and associated states.
4. Just because we can successfully, unconsciously deliver a competence doesn’t necessarily mean it’s the best choice for us. Just because we can do something, doesn’t mean it’s the right thing to do. Long-standing competences that may have served us well may no longer benefit us when circumstances evolve perhaps permanently, or at least in a sustained change of context.

Culture can be thought of as the sum of unconscious competences – certainly the hard-to-see part of culture Hall is pointing at. Culture change in organisations, therefore, involves changing unconscious competences. Such change is possible but challenging and a whole other subject.

Not only are unconscious competences, well, unconscious, but they are powerful – much stronger than our conscious processes of thinking. This is why, as Peter Drucker famously put it: “Culture eats

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<sup>5</sup> The commonplace use of the phrase “gut feel” is not so strange because the gut is the organ of the body with the most nerve connections after the brain. See, for example, Giulia Enders, “Gut”, Scribe Publications, London, 2017

strategy for breakfast.”<sup>6</sup> Unconscious competences are the domain of our inner animal, primate nature – what some would call our “inner chimp”. Think of a chimpanzee and you would have a picture of strength, I would suggest. If you imagine disagreeing or even fighting with a chimp, you have a reasonable representation of trying to overcome unconscious programming.

## A model of culture

Ed Schein provides a model of culture with three layers:-

### 1. Artefacts

- a. Visible and feel-able structures and processes (architecture, dress code, org charts, organisational policies and processes etc.)
- b. Observable behaviour

### 2. Espoused Beliefs and Values (see also Chris Argyris’s “Espoused Theories” – How we say we do things round here)

- a. Ideals, goals, espoused values, aspirations
- b. Ideologies (coherent, communicated systems of beliefs and values)
- c. Conscious rationalisations and inferences

### 3. Basic Underlying (tacit) Assumptions (see also Chris Argyris’s “Theories in Use” – How we really do things round here)

- a. Unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs and true values (that actually determine choices made)

The first layer is visible to anyone who looks carefully. The second layer is explicit for participants in a particular culture but not necessarily others (non-members). The third layer is implicit for all and frequently unnoticed by its own participants. Paradoxically, outsiders to that culture and in a position to observe may be better placed to infer the underlying assumptions that are in operation.

Any particular instance of culture can be labelled with an identity statement e.g. “industry”, “university”, “Scottish”, “British”, “American”, “engineering”, “sales”, “production”; or, in the case of an individual person, their name, in which case, we might then be referring to their personality. Culture is to organisations more or less as personality is to a person.

## A model of individuals

Modelling an individual person i.e. understanding who they are and what makes them tick, draws on a different body of work and other sources to organisational culture. One is Gregory Bateson, like Edward Hall, an anthropologist, among many other things. In Bateson’s line of thinking, articulated also by Robert Dilts, “modelling” an individual involves a “neurological levels” structure as follows, in descending order of significance:-

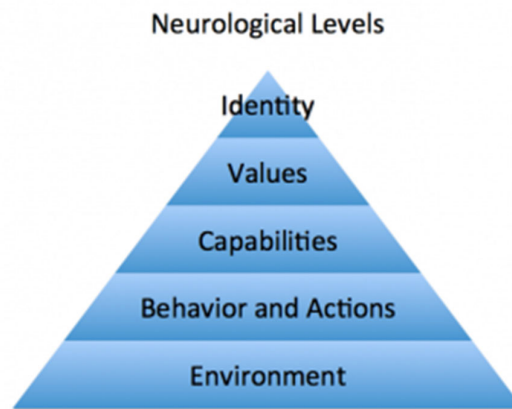
1. Identity (their sense of **who** they are that guides everything else)
2. Values and beliefs (what they hold as important, guiding their choices, and what they believe to be true about the world i.e. **why**)
3. Skills and capabilities (**how** they achieve what they achieve)
4. Behaviour (**what** they do, that we can observe)

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<sup>6</sup> This quote was made prominent by and is routinely attributed to Peter Drucker though it’s possible he was recycling a prior expression that fitted his view. The expression does not mean strategy is not important – it is – rather, culture is a more powerful force than strategy and has the potential to nullify any strategic thinking.

5. Environment (the **where**, **when**, and **with whom** of what they do)

This hierarchy is commonly represented in a diagram like the following...



With particularly successful or “well-adjusted” people, we can often sense a strong alignment between each of these levels. Each level is consistent with every other level.

In general, causing a change at one level will result in a dissonance that stimulates change at other levels.

Some might add “purpose” at the very top of the diagram. The appropriateness of that depends on whether we regard sense of identity as a precursor to purpose or whether a purpose exists for which we seek to discover an appropriate role. Once a person is employed in an organisation, purpose may not be something he or she is completely free to determine.

Note that this model does not directly make reference to conscious and unconscious aspects. In reality, much of what defines a person resides in their unconscious competences. They may not be consciously aware what they are doing or being nor exactly how they’re doing it or being it, so we need to be detectives of a kind and acute observers if we wish to discern the person’s make-up. If we just ask them to tell us how they have succeeded, they will inadvertently miss important bits out, without which, emulating them won’t produce the same results.

The neurological levels model can, in fact, also be applied well enough to organisations. Mismatches between one part of an organisation and another can be mapped with multiple instances of this structure.

This Bateson/Dilts model is essentially the Schein model inverted, particularly if beliefs are noted on the values level and skills on the capabilities level, as they often are.

We should note the Bateson/Dilts model is also used to explore different facets or “parts” of a single individual. For example, a person may be both a “mother” and a “chief executive”, at the identity level. Each of these roles may relate to different sets of values and so forth. The journey of life may result in a reconciliation and integration of these parts, or it may not. This is analogous to organisational cultures or sub-cultures interacting.

Coaching processes exist that can be used to effect an integration of conflicting parts in an individual. Generally, these result in a new sense of identity that integrates the constituent parts and typically serves the person more successfully than either of the two antecedent parts. This process is an aspect of gestalt therapy, originally developed by Fritz Perls.

## Espoused theories and theories in use

Chris Argyris<sup>7,8</sup> provided a critical contribution to the understanding of organisations when he highlighted the distinction between “espoused theories” (how we say we do things round here) and “theories in use” (how we really do things round here). Much trouble in organisations occurs when people expect behaviour in accordance with espoused theories but instead experience actions arising from theories in use. One simple example is organisations claiming to value teamwork but rewarding individual performance. Commonly, moreover, the theories in use become undiscussable because of the embarrassment involved.

Seeing clearly this distinction between espoused theories and theories in use makes a huge difference to making sense of what is happening in organisations.

When cultures meet, it is the undiscussable, conflicting theories in use that cause much of the trouble.

## Aligning the models

The three models (Schein, Bateson/Dilts, and Argyris) are three ways of looking at more or less the same thing, as follows:-

Ed Schein	Bateson/Dilts	Chris Argyris
<b>1. Artefacts</b> a. Visible and feel-able structures and processes (architecture, dress code, org charts, organisational policies and processes etc.) b. Observable behaviour	Environment, behaviour, documented capabilities	
<b>2. Espoused Beliefs and Values</b> a. Ideals, goals, espoused values, aspirations b. Ideologies (coherent, communicated systems of beliefs and values) c. Conscious rationalisations and inferences	Consciously expressed capabilities, values and beliefs, identity	Espoused Theories
<b>3. Basic Underlying (tacit) Assumptions</b> a. Unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs and true values (that actually determine choices made)	Unconscious (and usually unexpressed) capabilities, values and beliefs, sense of identity	Theories in Use

<sup>7</sup> Chris Argyris, “Teaching Smart People How to Learn”, Reprinted from Harvard Business Review (May 1991), Boston, 2008

<sup>8</sup> Chris Argyris, “Knowledge for Action: A Guide to Overcoming Barriers to Organisational Change”, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1993

## When cultures meet

When different cultures come into contact with each other, members of each cultural group can observe the artefacts of the other culture. They can see the manifestation of the other culture in physical objects, written documents, things said, and observable behaviour. One familiar experience of this occurs on visiting a foreign country, or even, to a lesser degree, a different city or region of the same country. The contrasts are generally sufficient for the individuals concerned to realise something is different, and to modify their behaviour a little out of caution. Something similar happens when different sub-cultures interact in organisations.

One consequence of the caution is to be more discreet about espoused beliefs and values, which, therefore, become less apparent to others.

When pressure or desire to achieve results of one kind and other builds, these cultural mismatches begin to make their presence felt.

Most participants in these situations have little or no meta-knowledge about what is going on and what is causing difficulty, so the common response is to attempt to assert their (unconscious) culture or sub-culture on the other party. They say things like “In the real world...” (truly meaning only in their map of the world). In effect, they attempt to drag the other side over to their worldview, and, of course, the other side does the same, so the result is a kind of tug of war or collision. Without intervention, this struggle has the potential to continue indefinitely, because its underlying causes are tacit, unconscious assumptions.

As Amy Edmondson (of whose work more at Appendix A) notes: “Some of the most important taken-for-granted assumptions relate to timeframes, work, priorities, and values. Only by exposing and exploring these assumptions can people from different cultures overcome the barriers they impose to work together effectively. This, of course, creates a crucial role for leadership.”<sup>9</sup>

Resolution requires deliberate design and construction of a new “cultural island” suited to the needs of the specific situation in which representatives of the cultures or sub-cultures are required or wish to work together (for a purpose). Some exploration of the antecedent cultures, including the tacit elements, may be helpful in doing this. As Ed Schein put it in an interview: “Leaders will have to create cultural islands where people from different occupational and national cultures can suspend some of the rules and talk to each other more directly, for example, about how they view trust, how they view authority, or how they deal with bosses that make mistakes. If leaders can’t create those kinds of cultural islands, they won’t be able to create teams that can actually work.”<sup>10</sup>

Peter Senge, an authority on systems thinking and organisational learning, speaks of “suspending assumptions”, by which is meant making one’s assumptions visible to all parties for consideration.<sup>11</sup>

Developing a cultural island<sup>12</sup> with desirable and effective features requires a deliberate, generative process that creates an optimal culture for the specific context or purpose, displacing the collisions or

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<sup>9</sup> Amy Edmondson (Harvard), “Extreme Teaming, Lessons in Complex, Cross-Sector Leadership”, Emerald Publishing, Bingley, 2017

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Ed Schein by Karl Moore “MIT’s Ed Schein on Why Corporate Culture Is No Longer the Relevant Topic and What Is”, Forbes (on-line), 29 November 2011

<sup>11</sup> Peter Senge, “The Fifth Discipline”, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Random House, London, 2006 (and other related books and material)

<sup>12</sup> Edgar Schein generally uses the term “cultural island” to indicate a distinct and desirable cultural entity. However, experience shows that the term is often assumed by those unfamiliar with Schein’s work to be a label for a problematic cultural enclave or pocket. Care is required in choice and definition of terms to avoid misunderstanding.

tugs of war that otherwise occur repeatedly between the antecedent cultures or subcultures. This is analogous to parts integration in a single individual.

A tabular format can be used to map the two (or more) antecedent cultures or sub-cultures and design the desired optimal, integrated, purpose-specific culture that is to be established. A suitable form is included at Appendix B.

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30 March 2021, amended 20 June 2021

## Appendix A: Extreme Teaming

Amy Edmondson<sup>13</sup> provides a summary “functional leadership model”, which is another prescription leading to cultural islands, although she does not use that term. The model is based on an analysis of effective practice and pairs the interpersonal and technical dimensions of leadership context on the one hand with motivational and facilitative action on the other, thereby highlighting four key functions, all of which are required...

### Model of Leadership for “Extreme Teaming” i.e. where diversity is significant

	<b>INTERPERSONAL</b> Focused on Emotions and Relationships	<b>TECHNICAL</b> Focused on Knowledge and Skills
<b>MOTIVATE</b> Funnel Energy	Build an Engaging Vision	Empower Agile Execution
<b>FACILITATE</b> Remove Barriers	Cultivate Psychological Safety	Develop Shared Mental Models

### Leadership Function 1: Building an Engaging Vision

<b>Practices</b>	<b>Definitions</b>
Making Values Explicit	To emphasise a set of ideals, principles, and beliefs that resonate with the larger view of why the newly formed team should aim to accomplish the work that brought them together in the first place.
Articulating a Challenging Target	To highlight the “unique” nature of the project through a challenging target that serves to clarify the project’s constraints and the process to reach the project’s goal.

### Leadership Function 2: Cultivate Psychological Safety

<b>Practices</b>	<b>Definitions</b>
Displaying Authentic Care	To pay close attention to the project participants’ viewpoints and difficulties, and provide feedback and support to deal with them.
Framing Cross-Boundary Work as a Resource	To acknowledge that project participants’ different perspectives are a boon to be leveraged, not a difficulty to be managed.

<sup>13</sup> Amy Edmondson (Harvard), “Extreme Teaming, Lessons in Complex, Cross-Sector Leadership”, Emerald Publishing, Bingley, 2017

### Leadership Function 3: Develop Shared Mental Models

Practices	Definitions
Diagnosing Interfaces for Knowledge-Sharing	To identify interfaces at which a project requires attention to facilitate discussion and co-ordination across boundaries.
Leveraging Boundary Objects <sup>14</sup>	To manage objects strategically, in ways that enable the transfer, translation, and transformation of knowledge across boundaries.

### Leadership Function 4: Empower Agile Execution

Practices	Definitions
Providing Room to Manoeuvre	To afford project participants the “space,” both physical and intellectual, to explore and make progress on the project.
Enabling Expert Decision Clusters	To delegate decision-making authority over certain non-modular tasks to the project participants with adequate expertise.

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<sup>14</sup> “Boundary objects” are diagrams, drawings, prototypes, models etc. “representations that are sufficiently stable to circulate and be recognised across boundaries, yet flexible enough to adapt to the various interpretations or interests.”

### Design of a “Cultural Island”

Dimension	Antecedent Culture A	Antecedent Culture B	Cultural Island
<b>1. Artefacts</b>			
a) Visible and feel-able structures and processes (environment, architecture, dress code, org charts, organisational policies and processes etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
b) Observable behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>
<b>2. Espoused Beliefs and Values</b> (see also Chris Argyris’s “Espoused Theories” – How we say we do things round here)			
a) Ideals, goals, values and beliefs, aspirations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>
b) Coherent, communicated systems of beliefs and values (ideologies)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
c) Conscious rationalisations and inferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>
<b>3. Basic Underlying (tacit) Assumptions</b> (see also Chris Argyris’s “Theories in Use” – How we really do things round here)			
a) Unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs and values (that actually determine choices made)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>