

Authentic Organisational Culture Change

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Organisational culture change cannot be pushed down through an organisation but must be pulled up through leadership.

What do I mean by pull, as opposed to pushed? Organisational change will never be the response to an instruction. It only happens when leaders, through their actions and behaviours, create an enabling environment in which change occurs naturally.

To survive the shift from the 3rd Industrial Revolution to the 4th, not only technology but organisational culture will need to shift.

I asked ChatGPT to generate organisational values required for the 4th IR: after some refinement, this is what the machine itself identified as important:

1. Trust
2. Innovation and Adaptability
3. Ability to Embrace Digital Transformation: Data-Driven, and Cybersecurity
4. Customer-Centricity
5. Sustainability and Responsibility
6. Collaboration
7. Continuous Learning and Upskilling
8. Agility
9. Inclusivity, Diversity, and Transparency

These concepts are easy to grasp but not so easy to align organisations with.

I am concerned that we live under the misconception that as a leader, if I want to shift the culture of the organisation, what I need to do is conceptualize the change in terms of some broad statements like these and communicate it to the rest of the organisation, and then implement a series of control measures to ensure that this change takes place.

Having participated in many culture change initiatives, I really don't think that this approach has any reasonable chance of success. Of course, it's true that we want our leaders to envisage a future, but that act in itself will never lead to culture change.

As a consequence of working in the people and leadership side of organisations for 30 years, I am convinced that an organisation's culture is the shadow of its leaders' behaviour, and not the culture statements and corporate communication strategies. In other words, it can never be pushed down.

Culture change will occur when, starting with executive leadership, leaders begin to live out the culture in practice.

Pull.

Lasting authentic change will only happen when leaders genuinely change their behaviours, starting in the boardroom. When senior leaders truly demonstrate to their reports what the change looks like. When these leaders change the criteria for measuring success. When leaders allow the organisation to hold them accountable for how they embrace the change. When these leaders invest in their own development and reflect continuously.

Only when senior leaders themselves begin to reflect a new value set can they automatically begin to coach their direct reports on how to display the new value set in practice and show the organisation what the authentic change looks like. *When this happens and the next level of leadership begins to model their behaviour on the values and behaviours of their seniors, will a culture shift begin to happen.*



In this day and age, no one is inspired by flashy communication and bells and whistles. Our people can smell inauthenticity a mile away. How will our people respond to a push-style culture change? *They will do what it takes to survive.*

If we intend to make a real difference, we need to start by being particularly aware of the shadow our leadership casts, and authentically adjusting our behaviour first. As leaders change themselves, *they will pull the culture they envisage through the organisation.* This is a much harder process, but it is authentic and full of hope.

