

theStorytellers®

CULTURE CHANGE

How to transform your culture during a crisis

Inspire. Accelerate. Transform.

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01.

The importance of adaptability

Culture change is the outcome of transformation.

01. The importance of adaptability

In fact, interacting as a group or a 'tribe' is a fundamental need we have for our sense of wellbeing, to help us make sense of the world and to hear the voices of others - we recently explored the importance of such corporate gatherings which allow for this: [click here to read more.](#)

The crisis has amplified the gap between cultures which are able to adapt, innovate, react with agility, be ethical and put their people first and others which aren't. Companies which had already adapted to change or were adapting - which were digital, global and able to work remotely – were better prepared to absorb the shockwaves of the pandemic. The importance of having an adaptable culture has been highlighted by research, which has shown that organisations that are aligned, strong and have cultures which take control of change earn 15% more in annual revenue than those which aren't adaptable.¹

Improving or even maintaining culture is no easy feat. In a recent study reported by the World Economic Forum, 15% of people taking part said that their workplace culture had deteriorated since the start of the pandemic.² The crisis has revealed the vulnerabilities of organisations, and how culture can often act as a roadblock when coping with an external challenge - in particular, a pandemic which threatens all aspects of an organisation. And these external shockwaves aren't going anywhere soon - the jury is still out on how the world will be affected by Brexit and the recent US Election.

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02.

The opportunity

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The past year has unearthed opportunities and now is the time to work on any exposed weaknesses - transform your culture into something robust, agile and, most importantly, enduring.

It is likely your organisation has already shown amazing agility, focus and collaboration when faced with the uncertainty of the pandemic. This strength can be harnessed and built upon to create a more resilient culture for the future.

‘Don’t let the pandemic get in the way of your culture thriving and transforming.’

During the pandemic, senior leaders have come to us frequently with questions over how to maintain and build on their existing culture. A major bank wanted everyone to participate in a one-way direction during the pandemic, without leaving anyone behind.

We co-created a story with them which called on every individual in the organisation to step up and own the change. In order to embed this cultural shift into the organisation for the long term, we set up a leadership community to keep building momentum behind the story, transformation and the new behaviours the business wanted to inspire. The community was there for members to share small stories of innovation and success coming out of the organisation. These stories helped to communicate and highlight examples of the culture continuing to thrive during challenging times of crisis.

Don’t let the pandemic get in the way of your culture thriving and transforming. We have identified five drivers for culture change. Following these can help an organisation forge a culture that enables people to respond to seismic changes, be agile, perform better and have a united stance. Culture needs to be seen as an enabler - an enabler for the successful delivery of strategy and vision, and to show a point of difference which will create competitive advantage.

03.

The five drivers of culture change

1

NARRATIVE

Having a clear narrative underpinning organisational change provides the context for change, and guides people through the journey on which the business needs to go. Consider the government's slogan: 'Stay home. Save the NHS. Save Lives'. Harnessing the power of three, they gave a clear route to success in beating COVID-19. Further, an emotive story acts as a catalyst for change: the story of Greta Thunberg missing school to strike against climate change has fuelled global movements worldwide.



2

IDENTITY

The recent US election showed the importance of having a strong identity running across the entirety of a campaign. Politicians certainly know the value of a memorable visual brand: the Biden-Harris logo made the case for unity amid the chaotic and deep divisions of the election as their names were stacked on top of each other. By incorporating traditional Americana typeface they also suggested they weren't doing anything too radical or groundbreaking, but speaking to America as a whole. And this is exactly what Biden is calling for: unity after four long years of division. We are tribal animals and we search for things that bind us together: a strong campaign identity gives people something to rally behind and something to believe in.



3

LEADERSHIP

In order for any change to be sustained, it needs to be role modelled by leaders across an organisation. But we know that simply articulating the narrative through speeches and traditional presentations isn't enough - it needs to be quietly demonstrated every day by leaders. This is where a purpose story comes in, as it provides a framework which guides business decisions, investments and actions. By asking the 'why we exist' question, purpose gives leaders something around which to frame change, and gives people the emotional motivation to transform in pursuit of something bigger than just their day jobs.



4

CONNECTION AND EMPOWERMENT

In order to create a movement of change within your organisation, people need to feel connected to what the journey means to them. This means that people need to feel empowered by the wider narrative, connecting to it with the head and the heart. One way of stimulating empowerment is by spotlighting on small stories of individual success.

One such story is of two operators who worked on the box line at a large packaging business. For this client, we created OWNIT!, a company-wide programme of strategy engagement and operational improvement. In order to connect people to the wider narrative, stories of individual experiences were shared via a Champions' network. For years, boxes had been fed into a machine lengthways. But two women saw a way to boost efficiency. By standing the boxes upright, twice as many could be fed through the machine, transforming productivity.

This simple story made clear the role each team member can play. It showed how every individual can be part of, and connect to, the broader narrative of raising standards. Defect levels at the Bristol plant reduced by 73% in three months. Higher standards ultimately led to the acquisition of global customers such as Amazon, as well as a 460% increase in share price.



5

KEEPING THE CHANGE ALIVE

Small stories keep wider company narratives alive and thriving, and they are one way of achieving a sustained culture change. Be sure to spread stories - such as the women turning boxes on the factory floor - in order to build momentum behind a movement of change. We see these stories fuelling movements every day, from the US election, to #MeToo, Black Lives Matter and the Climate Change movement. In David Attenborough's latest hit Netflix documentary, he uses the story of his own life to explore our vast planet, show humanity's impact on nature and express his desire to protect it for future generations. Why does Attenborough use his own story? Because as humans we use stories to make sense out of the chaos. We hold onto small stories which are focused on individuals to make sense of change and find our place in it.



04.

How to transform culture: 'making the boat go faster'

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04. How to transform culture: 'making the boat go faster'

Now is an opportune moment to introduce new behaviours and adapt the way things are being done. At The Storytellers, we recently challenged our own assumptions and culture by asking ourselves the question: 'Will it make the boat go faster?'

This comes from a book by Ben Hunt-Davis who won an Olympic Gold medal for rowing at Sydney in 2000. Hunt-Davis reveals his own strategies for winning gold and his journey to getting there. The most powerful story is about how the team set themselves the goal of winning the final by rowing 2,000 metres in five minutes 18 seconds or faster.³

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They knew that in order to achieve this, everything they did would have to make their boat go faster.

This is how we think about the things we do everyday at The Storytellers - whether it is a project, a plan, a list or a meeting, we ask: will it make our boat go faster? If it doesn't, then it won't help us achieve our goal.

You can create a cultural revolution by asking simple questions and setting out a common goal. Driving this goal is a story which acts as a motivational catalyst. In a previous article, [which you can read here](#), we discussed how at the heart of great movements of change we find an emotionally compelling narrative that creates a rallying cry for change. What do #MeToo, Extinction Rebellion, Black Lives Matter and even David Attenborough's documentary all have in common? A strong, compelling and emotional story of change at their heart which defines the collective journey. People then can align behind a powerful narrative, setting the context for change.

So once you have considered why culture change matters, it is then time to consider how you can implement it.



05.

Creating sustainable change through stories

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And by sharing small stories of endeavour and achievement across different teams, you can invoke collaboration across differences and bring people together from all areas of a business. As our systemic approach becomes embedded within an organisation, these stories become the currency of change. Use these small stories to feed your wider business narrative to keep it alive and, ultimately, to shift behaviours in your organisation and deliver long-lasting, sustainable change. Make your narrative a reality.

It's also important to keep people reconnected to your change narrative. For example, we have worked with a leading health insurance provider for a number of years. Beyond co-creating its story, more recently during the pandemic we've worked hard to ensure it stays alive through roadshows and events connecting people back to it. This company's engagement scores are now in the top 10 per cent of companies in the UK, and it's experienced a clear and long-lasting shift in its culture.

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We are The Storytellers – the home of story-driven change.

Who we are

We exist to move more people to do great things through the power and influence of storytelling. In doing so, we help leaders inspire their people to transform and accelerate business performance.

We help leaders navigate their teams through periods of change and uncertainty with purpose and agility, to rapidly build stable, resilient, connected organisations, accelerate change and transform business performance.

Our unique approach enables leaders to motivate and bring people with them through complex journeys of change as galvanised, engaged and aligned teams, where each and every person understands the journey the business is on, and the personal contribution they can make to success.

Our integrated storytelling programmes are seamlessly delivered by an agile, interdisciplinary team of experts in narrative and narrative-driven events, leadership development, learning solutions and world class, award-winning creative campaigns.

We have over 17 years' experience, working with over 180 major organisations in more than 30 countries to deliver strategy, purpose and values engagement, culture change, business transformation, brand cultures, post-merger integration, operational improvement and service excellence.

The significant and measurable difference we've made to their performance means that today we're proud to say that over 65% of our business comes from existing clients or referrals.

Get in touch

Visit us at thestorytellers.com to read up on our latest insights.

We are here to offer advice and a range of inspiring case studies, so please get in touch if you'd like to know more. We are happy to explore your change challenge with you and discuss how we can help.

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