BEING TRANSFORMATIVE: HOW HEARTS, MINDS AND SOULS ALL MATTER

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Abstract

This essay develops the reasons for looking at the more subjective side of culture based on the need for better conversations and develops a more organic, complicated and detailed description of culture based in “articulated” answers to basic human questions. Based on this it presents an account of cultural transformation based in active collaborative dis- and re-articulation of co-residing human rationalities. The analysis supports active direct participation by diverse stakeholders since we know of no other way to get the creativity, commitment, compliance and situated customizations necessary for safety culture innovations. It ends with a presentation of the vision-align-invent-act-adjust cycle as a way to facilitate sustainable change.

1. INTRODUCTION

Much has been written on “safety culture” over the years in the operation of atomic energy facilities and now the “pre-operational phase.” For the past several weeks I have pouring through thousands of pages of impressive, incredibly detailed and instructive documents produced both by IAEA and others on safety culture. [1,2,3,4] The amount of literature and advice is staggering. Important progress is being made.

Rather than review this, my concern here is add a dimension to further reduce the likelihood of man-made and man-contributed near misses and disasters. Certainly culture is to be blamed at times, changing culture is difficult, and many organizations do not have a lot of culture change expertise. I am not a safety expert but a culture change expert. Working across industries and countries I have found that challenges of change are often the same. Based on these comparisons, I believe that much has been done to improve the behavioral side of safety culture. But more is needed on what might be considered the subjective side of culture, those parts dealing with trust and the complexities of being human.

Let us take Kiyoshi Kurokawa’s conclusion on the Fukushima Nuclear Accident: “What must be admitted – very painfully – is that this was a disaster ‘Made in Japan.’ Its fundamental causes are to be found in the ingrained conventions of Japanese culture: our reflexive obedience; our reluctance to question authority; our devotion to ‘sticking with the program’; our groupism; and our insularity. Had other Japanese been in the shoes of those who bear responsibility for this accident, the result may well have been the same.” [5]

As bold as this is, the Independent Investigation Commission report, like most others finally argues for mostly doing more of the same, only better: better monitoring and enforcement, clearer information exchange, stronger laws, quicker response to up-to-date practices, more consolidated chain of command. All too often we call for more of the same only better, but still offer little on addressing culture change itself. I want to add a more nuanced human face to cultural change though discussing managing hearts, minds and souls. Managing these is better thought in a collaborative conversational model rather than in interventionist presentational models.
Culture is a term often used in regard to safety since policies, instructions and behavior management alone do not seem sufficient to reach desired safety outcomes. But we continue to meet regarding “safety culture” because we have not yet reached the full potential of cultural management. At least part of the reason for this, I believe, arises from the rather mechanical way many have thought and talked about culture. A culture of how to talk about culture exists. Many of the discussions have treated culture as a “thing” that people have that can be changed. Managerial actions from this perspective are often ineffective, short-term and produce resistance to change.

Here I will first develop the reason for a look at more subjective side of culture based on the need for better conversations and develop a more organic, complicated and detailed description of culture. I will show why active collaborative interaction across organizations and organizational levels is essential to building and inculcating safety culture. I will then detail why change is so often resisted, temporary and ineffective. And finally I will sketch how to implement sustainable change. I will not spend much time with precise (and often academic) definitions of “safety culture,” rather I will focus on what using such a term is to help us achieve.

None of this is intended to minimize the importance of traditional forms of control in enhancing safety in the forms of guidelines, supervision, inspections, etc. But we need to do more than this. As is clear in a recent IAEA report: “The nuclear industry critically depends on people following rules, standards, processes and procedures. Equally important, however, is the development of thinking, engaged employees such that blind adherence to procedures does not give rise to weaknesses in the ability to recognize and respond to unusual circumstances.” [3]

Managing safety culture is to extend safety producing decisions and practices deeper into the everyday design and construction processes. Reports from several industries and military and fire-fighting indicate the endless presence of the “fog of war” and the difficulty of rationalizing complex situated choices. A balance is always important between a knowledge-based command and control structure and an intuitive street wisdom. Safety is based on both and knowing when each matters. Clearly each of these will play out differently in different cultures; we will not have a single approach. [6] But we can build some understanding of process of change even if the products are different in different places.

“Safety culture” as a concept helps us go beyond supervision, rules and norms. Managing the hearts, minds, and souls and not just behavior is critical. Safety culture could well be considered to be: “The things that you do spontaneously for the health and well being of others when no one is watching.” And, further, this deeper cultural sense impacts the rational and explicit procedures and guidelines both in content and as interpreted in practice.

2. THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE

Managing hearts, minds, and souls—the subjective side of culture—has always been considered important. The role of leadership, and what I will develop as collaborative practice, in managing culture has been a key part of it. Examples are numerous. In Eastern cultures this was well presented early on by Lao-tza in The Way of Life:

_A leader is best_
_When people barely know that he exists,_
Not so good when people obey and acclaim him,  
Worst when they despise him.  
Fail to honor people,  
They fail to honor you;  
But of a good leader, who talks little,  
When his work is done, his aim fulfilled,  
They will all say, "We did this ourselves."

The Western world’s concern with managing culture can be traced to a funeral oration by Pericles in 431 BCE. Pericles, often recognized as the father of the Athenian’s Golden age, was attempting to inspire unity in his people in their battle with Sparta. The speech effectively displayed the three central elements of establishing a strong operant culture: determine what makes the organization what it is, what it wants, and eloquently communicate that to the organizational members. A process we now call identification. But the actual practice of this is difficult especially in the diversity work situations of today.

For some time scholars and managers have tried to get a handle on the elusive subjective side of work life. Whether the concern has been with “spirit,” “climate,” “meaning of work,” or “quality of work life,” the core issues have been the same. Human beings are more than rational creatures. They are not animated machines. How employees personally feel, think and see has a significant impact on the character and quality of their work, their relation to management, and their response to innovation and change.

3. CULTURAL CHANGE

We are together today to discuss cultural change. The concern is not foremost with what “safety culture” is but how to accomplish internalization of particular ways of thinking, feeling, and prioritizing actions, especially when indigenous national, organizational and community “cultures” are less than supportive. Rather than an abstract definition, I think “safety culture” can best be thought in personal terms as, "An attention to detail in decisions and work fostered by mindfulness that my actions and choices could harm my loved ones and the loved ones of others.” An ultimately successful internalization means having all stakeholders say: “We did it ourselves.”

3.1 Conceptions of what needs changing

Allow me to stay with the Fukushima case for a moment. The independent commission report moves from an indictment of “national culture” to the difficulties of the TEPCO corporate culture: “Across the board, the Commission found ignorance and arrogance unforgivable for anyone or any organization that deals with nuclear power. We found a disregard for global trends and a disregard for public safety. We found a habit of adherence to conditions based on conventional procedures and prior practices, with a priority on avoiding risk to the organization. We found an organization-driven mindset that prioritized benefits to the organization at the expense of the public.” (p. 21) And as it goes on: “TEPCO must undergo fundamental corporate changes, including strengthening its governance, working towards building an organizational culture which prioritizes safety, changing its stance on information disclosure, and establishing a system which prioritizes the site.” (p. 22)

The question of “How to achieve national and corporate cultural changes?” is paired with the question, “Why has meaningful changes not already occurred?” Why has integrating broad
societal and corporate goals with safety goals been so difficult to achieve? And, importantly here, “What is the nature of useful conversations about this?”

2.2 The origins of bad conversations

Looking at “accidents” across sites and industries some conclusions stand out. I will conceptualize these as bad conversations, conversations that have built into their structure the seeds of inaction.

Origins of bad conversation 1: Safety is often conceptualized as supplementary or competitive with other goals including economic ones hence the talk focuses on compromise and trade-off rather than mutually beneficial integration.

Origins of bad conversation 2: Explaining events as based on “culture” leads to faulty attributions and a kind of pacification and action frustration based on both an exaggeration of the problem (this is too big to deal with) and a trivialization of it (it’s just culture).

Origins of bad conversation 3: Culture is discussed in psychological terms as socialization and deep values and beliefs, hence the only change processes available tend to create resistance and tend to overlook the way culture is integrated and works.

Origins of bad conversation 4: Culture change is discussed as something you do to people, hence the core concern is with getting buy-in and getting people to give up bad behavior.

In contrast here “safety culture” is considered to be an integral part of a high performance organization; culture is treated as term that helps us pay attention to complex human choice making rather than an explanation of them; what has been called culture is best described as a systemic set of connections; and lasting cultural evolution and transformation is a respectful collaborative accomplishment.

4. THE CULTURAL SYSTEM

Culture is not a thing, a force, nor a power. It is a word we use to help us pay attention to a relatively stable set of relations in a complex system. In perhaps an overly simple way, we can say each cultural system is an answer to six basic human questions. How should I feel? Who am I? What are the social rules? What are the facts? What is good, right and beautiful? What is just? The particular answers help each individual attend to certain features of the world and not others, think through things in a particular way, and choose actions. These are shared as a way to justify and sense-make.

One of the reason many cultural interventions fail is that they focus on the question of facts and believe that all would work better if people were more fact-based rational. The forms of rationality based in answers to the other questions are disregarded, diminished or even considered problematic. This cannot work because these are equally real and important. Whether liked or not they remain part of every choice.

4.1 The articulation of rationalities

Further, the answers to these six questions do not exist as isolated rationalities. They are “articulated” with each other and their stabilities come with the redundancy of these articulations. Allow me a moment to develop this concept of “articulation.” Articulation is a
process of expressing two independent entities together. In a mathematical analogy, articulation changes an orthogonal relationship into an oblique one.

Imagine a child who conjoins “good,” “fast,” and “red” in relation to toy trains. If this child is given a yellow one, the disappointment come not just from the color but because it is not perceived as “good” and “fast.” The affect toward getting a yellow train arises from issues of speed and goodness not just color. For the child to change the affect, he or she would have to first “disarticulate” these three qualities and then rearticulate them with yellow. This can be difficult because color, speed and goodness can also be articulated with gender, community standing, propriety and so forth. Others and experience can contest the articulation, but without understanding the connections that are at stake for the child, we can not understand the defensiveness, resistance, or mere passive acquiesce nor the child using arguments of “exceptionalism” or confirmation biases to hold on to the old articulation. These qualities are present in every aspect of the pre-operational phase.

4.2 The complexity of change as rearticulation

Change is a complex process. Allow me to work through an example closer to safety culture. Where I live in Colorado, snowboarding is very popular but can be fairly dangerous. Wearing helmets is an important way to prevent head injuries, but snowboarders tended to avoid wearing them. Knowledge-based safety campaigns have not been very effective and, in fact, may have lead to less usage.

This makes sense if we think of the set of articulations of a snowboard community. “Danger gives me a rush and pleasure.” “Snowboarders are free and independent and violate social rules.” “Snowboarders are different.” “Helmets are worn by skiers, parents and older people.” “You can only be young for a while.” Snowboarders changed to wearing helmets only as the community developed outrageous and even offensive fabric covers for helmets. We could say that they made helmets “cool” or changed cultures, but explanations like this do not get us much. Understanding the set of rearticulations where nothing is lost in the other rationalities gets us much further in understanding how changes like this occur.

Obviously, rearticulating “safety culture” with company performance or even “safety culture” with concepts related to issue like masculinity and justice in a particular community can be complex. But such a concept, I believe, helps us to start attending to the right things. The concept shows why and how multiple rationalities have to be considered; it helps identify the sites of resistance in the way that changes in one rationality challenges others; and it gives specifics to concepts like “leveraging” aspects of existing cultures.

What we might call the learned capacities (their mindfulness) and incapacities (their ignorance) of communities to attend to some things and not others does not take a long unlearning and re-learning process rather it take a generative transformation. Core to this is membership and identification with different communities and the possibility of integrative and supportive co-articulations rather than competitive ones. These most often require active participation and creativity, qualities that are often lacking in cultural intervention processes.

4.3 The importance of collaboration in change

Understanding the complex system of articulations highlights why and how sustainable change only occurs with the active collaboration of the groups changing. Frequently when change is brought from the outside the consequences to other rationalities is not considered,
other forms of human rationality are belittled, and/or these hinged relations remain invisible and cannot be brought to respectful discussion and openly explored. The acceptable of the rationalities that are being threatened through respecting an existing articulation is the beginning of inventing rearticulations that are neither compromises nor losses of key aspect of people and their communities.

Legitimacy and internalization comes from involvement in creation. High-performance organizations require a culture of participation where management functions differently and decisions and responsibility are diffused in the organization. [7] Wider participation in creating a culture of participation may seem obvious but is often not the case. Management direction alone of cultural change or of participation and empowerment rarely succeeds.

4.4 Moving the conversation forward

Let me bring this into the careful work IAEA has already done. Safety culture is defined as “The assembly of characteristics and attitudes in organizations and individuals which establishes that, as an overriding priority, protection and safety issues receive attention warranted by their significance” [2, p.14, italics in the original]. And culture is defined as “a dynamic concept that encompasses everything that happens in an organization. It affects what people do, what they think and how they make sense of events and information—it is a collective understanding of reality” (p. 14). These conceptions direct the intervention strategies and to some extent set up the tension between “safety culture” and presumed deficient national and organization cultural characteristics. “Safety culture enhancement requires sustained effort that should focus on leveraging strengths within the existing culture and changing aspect that inhibit safety rather than attempting to change the basic fabric of the culture…” [2, p.2]

The view I have been developing keeps the holistic intent but takes away the causal power of culture and focuses on the internal dynamics of the impact. This view argues that culture can not be understood outside of the concrete aspects of life and answers to life questions which differ greatly across regions. The detail of this cannot be reduced to national culture. And, safety cannot be transformed through knowledge rationality without evoking the sense of risk and loss in other aspects of life because other configurations are articulated with it.

Individuals can easily feel that their identity, understandings of the way the world works, and justice are challenged in even very smart revisions to monitoring and general building practices. And, individuals will often protect their identity at physical costs to themselves and others. Thus, articulatory relations must be taken seriously and reformation must be inclusive and holistic. This does not say that work practices, etc., cannot be changed, simply that the change must be worked out in articulatory relationships rather than added on or treated as one aspect.

Such an understanding moves away from a model of outside intervention to a concrete and detailed understanding of interactional designs and processes take can help overcome closure to new relational configurations as industrial needs and risks change and work openly with people and companies in specific contexts to rearticulate things like identities, emotions, and institutions in ways that are true to self-determination within the new context. This, I believe, can greatly enrich IAEA model of open spaces.

5.0 ON HERDING CATS: THE COLLABORATIVE VISION, ALIGN, INVENT, ACT, ADJUST CYCLE
Most often cultural management is attempted because of experienced limits to managing effectively in any other way. One way to think of managing culture is through the metaphor of “herding cats.” Management in professionalized workplaces is often characterized as trying to herding cats. The popularity of the “herding cats” metaphor in professional workplaces arises from the frustration of directing professionals’ behavior because of their independence and the difficulty of surveillance of their work, characteristics shared with the pre-operational phase.

I grew up on a dairy farm and the metaphoric characterization never made much sense to me. Cats not hard to herd, just have milk. Cats are only hard to herd if you treat them like sheep and cows. Cats may walk by themselves, but they all quickly independently choose to walk in the same direction following the pail of milk. Culture is like the milk, it pulls people into the future rather than pushes them. When we think of it as a co-constructed enablement rather than a given constraint we begin to lead more effectively.

Here at the end, I want to briefly sketch an interaction design for “cat herding.” This provides a way for multiple stakeholders with different goals and cultural formations to produce integrated and coordinated, what I called, articulations to advance safety as a part of achieving other objectives. A full interaction design helps us decide who should be part of which conversations when and helps us stay out of bad conversations for the sake of better ones.

If we are to better manage the human side of culture and include much more direct collaborative participation of all stakeholders from policy makers and contractors to communities and workers, we need powerful designs for successful conversations, otherwise we simply have more meetings. The IAEA has catalogued many design approaches. I want to move away from these as methods and techniques and highlight the purpose they are to serve. I will briefly present a simplified form modeled on those of Conversant. [8] I propose a vision, align, invent, act, adjust cycle as one way to think about how to have better conversations.

5.1 Vision

Many meetings start with a focus on problems, in fact many are called because of perceived problems. But discussions focused on problems tend to not get very far. Many reasons exist for this and most have been carefully described by people working with Appreciative Inquiry. Collaborative interaction aims at outcome talk rather than problem talk. Every statement of a problem has a hidden positive shadow. This shadow is the hopes, dreams and desires that are not being fulfilled. These are the group’s visions, the outcomes sought that are hidden by the talk of about problems. Groups develop in the direction of the questions they address. Many explanations and blame create threat and defensiveness. Embracing people’s hopes and dreams opens spaces for integrative rearticulations. We begin by asking where people want to go. Almost all successful models focus on the achievement of safety rather than the prevention of accidents. [8]

5.2 Align

Aligning visions into concrete choices of action requires accepting that people not only have purposes that must be accepted and made explicit but they also carry in concerns about and understandings of their specific circumstances. Focusing on the articulations helps us
understand these relations. Accepting a new circumstance, policy or procedure has consequences across dimensions of human experience. For example, we might reasonable ask in any change context not just what dos this circumstance ask you to do, but what does it ask you to be. No deep cultural change is possible without accounting for feelings, beauty and justice. Aligning these is not the job of the individual in their private spaces, it is the job of us all in public spaces.

5.3 Invent

Focusing on joint invention starts for a recognition that the best idea and course of action is not carried into the room but arises there. Not recognizing this often leads cultural change to be manipulation rather than invention and greatly reduces legitimacy, commitment and compliance. Invention puts creativity as the most central issue in safety discussions. The goal is develop a desirable (that it is accepted and seen as beneficial by all stakeholders), feasible (it could actually be put in place), and viable (that is it sustainable over time) path forward that rearticulates across rationalities. Good invention requires getting multiple forms of expertise in the room and respecting them. Individuals at the point of production often have low status but have understandings than cannot easily be represented by others. Good design enables all expertise to be consequential.

5.4 Act

Action is often seen as a choice put into play by leaders. I believe that it is more useful to see action as distributed and put into play by many actors. Sometimes this is treated “empowerment.” But I think such a word glosses much. Empowerment without commitment, understand the whole, and good information is shallow. One of the forces that lead Total Quality Management to enact changes in production processes in Japan in the 50s and 60s was the ability to wed information sharing, individual responsibility, and collective identification.

5.5 Adjust

Continuous improvement requires that actions are open to constant open assessment without fear. This includes revisiting the purposes and desired outcomes that put it in place, identifying what has worked well and what not, determining the actionable lessons, and deciding what will be done differently. In each of these is an opportunity to show how safety is integrated into the process of planning and work.

REFERENCES


