

## Reflection 7: Culture and Systems.

Part two in a series on culture.



Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing 'patterns of change' rather than static 'snapshots.'

Peter Senge

In the previous reflection, the concept of culture was introduced in broad strokes. We touched on aspects such as the struggle in defining personality and the confusion between culture and climate.

Einstein is credited with saying that "true knowledge comes with a deep understanding of a topic and its inner workings". The reality is that it can quickly become confusing if one attempts to understand the relationships between concepts from different disciplines. At times, it even seems impossible to make sense of the different perspectives. There is the quote, attributed to King Solomon from around the 4th century B.C.E., that "there is no new thing under the sun". (Ecclesiastes 1:9 KJV). When reflecting on the origin of business ideas it becomes clear that many of the principles were formulated hundreds of years ago. There are for example a number of similarities between principles in chemistry and physics, so-called laws of nature, and certain business concepts.

Before considering culture and its possible links with ideas from other subjects, it is important to develop a basic framework to assist in creating an overall and integrated understanding.

The animal that could best illustrate, or be "the face" of, culture is probably an octopus. Consider the complexity of multiple tentacles, three hearts, nine brains and a chameleon-like ability to change colour. Add to this the flexibility that allows it to mould itself into almost any shape. Attempting to understand an octopus from the perspective of its complex parts becomes an almost impossible task. Similarly, culture is a complex concept with multiple dimensions, drivers and 'tentacles' that affect and influence almost all aspects of business functioning. At times, the cultural tentacles are so well camouflaged and almost invisible, that it requires extensive scrutiny to identify. Just like with the octopus, trying to understand the detail of culture is almost impossible if you do not first understand its "octopus-ness".

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Jan and Lyn bring together more than 70 years of experience. They share a passion for helping people, teams and organisations optimise their potential.

Although they work together at times, they each have their own unique strengths and consult individually under their own names.

Lyn supports organisations and individuals to bring social wellbeing and change through advocacy, mentoring, training and communication, while Jan works primarily to enhance understanding and support improvement through development/training and systems thinking.

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Perhaps the only other organism that could explain culture as well is a virus. However, the negative connotations – such as that a virus causes illness – make us reluctant to use this analogy. Culture is never a disease; this despite the fact that research has shown that culture may reduce and even inhibit organisation performance.

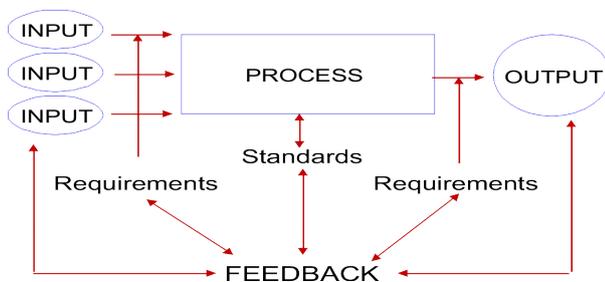
It is important to understand and manage one’s personal paradigms and biases when studying culture. The first - and often most difficult - bias is to understand and accept that culture is never wrong. At worst, a culture may be inappropriate (for a time or place) or in conflict with another culture. However, in itself, culture is never wrong. The more culture is studied, the clearer it becomes that every aspect of a culture is rooted in a successful solution to a problem the group experienced at some stage.

The reference to a group brings us to a second principle of culture. Just as culture is never right or wrong, culture is never for the benefit of a few. Culture is always for the benefit, protection or advancement of the group. If only a section or part of a community (e.g. men) or organisation (e.g. management) benefit, it is not culture and is at best be a tradition.

It might be pertinent at this stage to mention the seemingly simple definition by Deal and Kennedy (1989) of culture as “the way we do things”. This seems to be an accurate perspective when considering culture, but does not help in creating a deeper understanding. Nor does it bring us closer to objectively measuring or managing culture in any way.

To build a framework for understanding culture it might be helpful to step back to review the concepts of processes, systems, and chaos.

**PROCESS**



At face value, the process model of work appears extremely basic and simplistic. It could, however, be described as one of the most powerful models for understanding and improving organisation functioning. This model features in many areas ranging from costing, strategy, production and customer care to total quality management.

In the most basic terms, the model says that you need things (inputs) which you do something with (process) so that you get something (outputs). It seems simply to be a visual representation of a recipe with the ingredients, the method and the result.

Apply this model to something as basic as serving coffee in a restaurant and it quickly develops another layer of interpretation. The process of making coffee cannot be finalised until the type of coffee the customer orders is determined. The model now indicates that the process depends on the end or output side of the equation. The type of coffee stipulates the process, which in turn stipulates the materials or inputs required. The model even clarifies the motivational statement of always starting/working with the end in mind.

The next level involves identifying and defining the standards (standard operating procedures) and requirements of the output, the process and each individual input. Finally, the model indicates the need for setting up controls and feedback system to monitor adherence to standards.

When we think further about the model we realise that there are more aspects to consider, with the first question being how narrowly we view the process. Consider for instance boiling water for the coffee or obtaining materials: Where is the restaurant located, do they have electricity or running water, what resources are available? Perhaps the process of making a fire or collecting water become separate processes which needs to be done before the coffee making process can start. Basic processes such as making coffee seldom exist or operate in isolation.

The model becomes even more complex when we consider each type of coffee on offer. Each process may have different inputs – machines, materials, skills etc. Ultimately, the processes keep on interlinking and ultimately expands to include all the factors required in running the restaurant. In this way, a restaurateur can consider making coffee as a process or running the total restaurant as a process. The key is whether one approaches the issue at hand analytically (convergent thinking) or holistically (divergent thinking).

Sometimes people use the terms processes and systems interchangeably. At other times, processes are joined to become systems and systems are joined together to form larger systems. In order to better understand culture, it is important to touch on the concepts of systems and systems thinking.

## **SYSTEMS**

Aristotle is credited with saying that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. More recently, the Austrian biologist - Von Bertalanffy (1902 – 1972) known as one of the founders of general systems theory - described a system as *an entity, or grouping of parts, that maintains its existence through the mutual interaction of those parts*. Looking at these it seems as if the whole is greater, not as a result only of the parts, but as a result of their mutual interactions and relationships. This begins to explain the distinction between a process, as discussed earlier, and a system.

A number of studies have described the inputs and outputs or effects of culture. In order to understand culture, one needs to understand how culture is formed. Culture can be seen as a system, and therefore the challenge in understanding culture is to understand the mutual interaction of, and relationships between, the parts. Looking at the coffee example again it is clear that although it seems easy to describe the process, the pleasurable result does not lie only in the process of adding water to coffee. The result comes from the combination of many other factors such as the type of bean, the amount of rainfall in the area, the roasting and so on, until the final preparation process.

Some people see culture as a linear process similar to the simple explanation of making coffee. Culture is however rather similar to the coffee “system” where multiple factors affect each other and eventually the whole becomes bigger than the parts. Culture will over time even become bigger than the influence that the leadership of an organisation or community has on that culture.

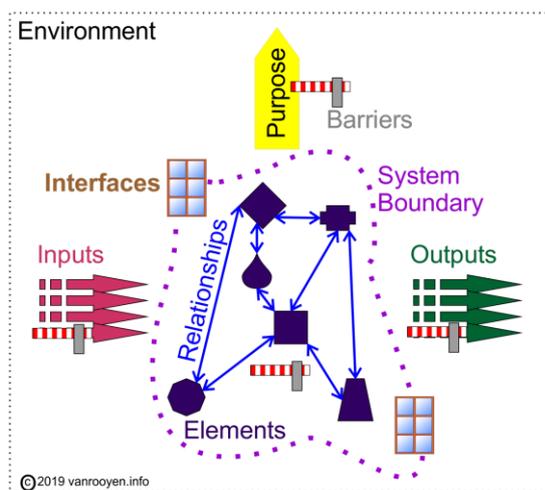
When trying to understand systems, the question “how long is a piece of string” comes to mind. The standard answer is “it is as long as you need it to be”, and that is where systems become complex.

Ackoff, the organizational theorist (1919 – 2009), identified four broad types of systems, based on the ability of either the parts or the whole to “think”. He describes third level system or social systems, such as the human body, as systems where the parts cannot think but the whole can. His fourth level or ecological system is one where the parts can think, but the whole does not. This would make culture an ecological system comprising of “thinking” individuals.

Boulding, (an English-born interdisciplinary philosopher 1910 – 1993) postulated nine different levels of increasingly complex systems. These levels are based on awareness, interpretation and ability to influence. A social system – such as culture - is at level eight, with only transcendental systems being more complex.

### SOME CRITERIA FOR SYSTEMS

Over time, systems thinkers have agreed on a number of criteria for a system. Some key criteria are set out in the following diagram and can briefly be summarised as follows.



- 1 A system is a grouping of items in a formal structure or arbitrary “collection” of present and interrelated elements with a shared purpose.
- 2 The system must have some purpose and results (outputs). If we consider global warming, perhaps the purpose is to bring balance to the atmosphere and one output or result is strange weather patterns.
- 3 The system must have a describable and self-manageable boundary (dotted line in the diagram) or aspect binding the elements together. This line may include an entity such as an organisation or it may be “arbitrary” and “drawn” around a research concept.

- 4 There must be some degree of interdependence within and between the system and its environment.
- 5 For its continued health, the system must be able to make adjustments based on feedback from inside or outside the boundary.
- 6 In practice, systems seek stability or homeostasis.

Based on these aspects, a cultural system is – in simplistic terms - a definable process made up of “thinking” elements which interact to attain an identifiable purpose. The problem with such a system is that the thinking elements also function independently and are involved in processes of their own. Elements also affect each other in varying and often non-linear ways.

To understand culture it is important to use systems thinking. However, as Ackoff said, we must expand our perspectives because with systems thinking, “Understanding proceeds from the whole to its parts, not from the parts to the whole as knowledge does”.

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