

What do the Aztecs, the Titanic and teams have to do with culture?

While individual leaders cannot directly change culture, they can influence their own patch, their team, by creating a healthy climate that is more adaptive, supportive, aligned and ready to change.

The Aztec culture (born from tribal alliances across parts of South America), much like the Roman culture, was not built in a day. The Aztec culture was rich in spiritual beliefs, customs, monuments, architecture, ceremonies, intricate art, and writings that captured their observations of the cosmos. Like Rome, the lesser known tribal cultures also took many hundreds of years to evolve.

Similarly, the culture of an organisation takes time to grow. Culture is contained within the stories we tell about who we are, what we do and why we do it. Culture is revealed in the ways of working and in the stories that describe an organisation's customs (rituals and practices), myths/ legends (water cooler stories of iconic people and events) and conquests (what we have achieved in the world).

Culture is something that is experienced. It is the way we feel when we walk into an organisation.

The environment itself gives rise to the energy of an organisation. If there are only white walls and cubicles, it will not exude a feeling of fun or innovation. Culture talks to the values that are lived day to day. You see what is valued not by what is written on the wall, but in the hundreds of small ways people interact.

In some organisations, what we value looks like passive compliance because harmony over robust conversation; in other organisations, it looks like open competition because they value individual pursuits over working to help others; and in other organisations, it looks like authentic connection because they value people and relationships).

The stories, values and ways of working in an organisation do not happen overnight. They happen organically, over time, conversation by conversation, event by event. In

essence culture is created gradually over time.

Organisations the world over are calling for cultural change - and fast change. From the finance sector who are trying to address ethical conduct, to governments who are trying to become more adaptive and innovative.

When organisations need to change their culture, they are essentially trying to turn the Titanic. They think that this can happen quickly through top-down initiatives, restructures, new leadership and new processes. Culture, however, changes gradually, thrust by thrust by thrust, by changing one story at a time.

Instead of trying to change culture directly, there is an alternate route of change which is to influence climate.

Each leader is responsible for creating a team climate and each team has its own operating rhythm, its own hum and feel.

While individual leaders cannot directly change culture, they can influence their own patch, their team, by creating a healthy climate that is more adaptive, supportive, aligned and ready to change.

As each team starts to create an effective teaming climate, pockets of the organisation start to change. When pockets of the organisation change this starts to create a groundswell, or a tipping point, where a change in culture starts to be observable.

Just as the Aztec culture did not develop in a day, we cannot expect culture to change in a day. However, we can change culture one team at a time, and each leader can change their immediate climate. In this way, we can change culture team by team.