



ODEA E-BOOK SERIES

**DON'T
CLIMB
THAT
POLE!**

EXPLORING THE PUSH-PULL OF CULTURE

JOHN M. GRECO

Copyright © 2020 John M. Greco

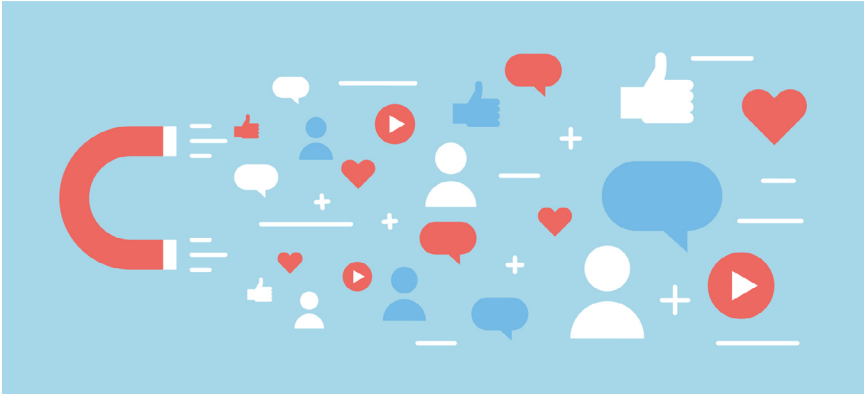
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Book Design by HMDpublishing

CONTENTS

Introduction.....	5
Making Breakfast	7
7 Corporate Tenets... and a Witch Hunt	9
Never Again	11
Run!.....	13
Don't Climb That Pole!.....	15
Management by Walking Around... In a Loop	19
Rabbit Chase Maslow's Hammer	23
Gremlins of Culture.....	27
People - Service - Profit.....	31
My Starfish Reminder	35
Closing Thoughts	37

INTRODUCTION



Have you felt the push-pull of organizational culture?

The force of culture is sometimes subtle; other times, palpable. It's influence on people and companies is undeniable. Over time and through change it can lift as well as constrain performance; it can support business growth in one organizational phase and be a strong headwind to organizational performance in the next.

Over my career I've felt the cultural push-pull. My OD master's work and subsequent mid-career pivot into the field of organization development unlocked the push-pull for me; while still experiencing its force, I no longer felt buffeted by it. I began learning how to more *productively respond* to it as well as *diagnose* it...

In 2012 I started blogging my perspective on johnponders.com.

In these eleven curated posts I share my cultural stories, observations, and insights. Some draw from my personal workplace experiences (*Making Breakfast, 7 Corporate Tenets...*

DON'T CLIMB THAT POLE!

and a Witch Hunt, Never Again, People-Service-Profit). A couple were provoked by my OD masters work (Don't Climb That Pole!, Management by Walking Around... In a Loop) and several others germinated from my OD consultations (Run!, Rabbit Chase, Gremlins of Culture, Maslow's Hammer, My Starfish Reminder).

A distinct characteristic of my blogging was that it was *generative*; it really provoked my thinking and, judging from the blog post comments, my readers thinking as well —

I find these stories fascinating from the perspective that a lot of company cultures not only condone this type of activity but encourage it from their management.

So John – does that mean an organization can develop a culture that values and drives the behaviors of continuously orienting itself to customers and the market? A culture of adaptation?

* * * * *

The push and pull of culture is very real.

A strong strategically-aligned culture can help individuals, teams, and organizations perform and realize their exceptional potential.

But there is no steady state, at least not for long. Consumers increase their service expectations; the marketplace gets increasingly competitive; and organizations rightly respond with impressively revamped strategic plans. The new strategy may hinge on operations leveling-up its customer service; or R&D cycling-up its innovation and product development; or the organization getting tighter, more efficient, faster. That once strong, strategically-aligned culture needs to shift with intention; most certainly no easy task! If it doesn't, that impressively revamped strategy, instead of being well-executed and delivering results, will be eaten alive...

Our exploration starts with... making breakfast?

MAKING BREAKFAST

Originally published April 18, 2013



*"Culture eats strategy for breakfast."
- Peter Drucker*

The strategy was elegant. Complex. Exciting.

And it was articulated repeatedly, with visuals; with discussion.

Those in the organization that were responsible for innovating within the strategy and for marketing the solution and for selling the service, they needed to fully get the strategy.

They needed to fully understand. And, to be honest, I didn't.

DON'T CLIMB THAT POLE!

But here's what I *did* understand --- the strategy required specific organizational knowledge, competencies, and behaviors to effectively execute and deliver the results as envisioned.

And the organization didn't have those.

So with every presentation of the strategy, I was conflicted. Despite being consistently motivated by the possibility, I was increasingly concerned about the *capability*. I was imagining how things would play out.

The culture was going to eat that strategy for breakfast.

Growth plans and business models cannot be sustainably effective without an enabling and supportive culture.

* * * * *

Drucker's *culture eats strategy for breakfast* is a clarion call to leaders of organizations everywhere.

You better pay serious attention to building your culture in sync with your strategy.

Growth plans and business models cannot be sustainably effective without an enabling and supportive culture.

The performance envisioned--- in sales, in growth, in profitability --- will never be realized.

What makes this incredibly difficult, I think, is that leaders must expend considerable energy and effort on both external and internal priorities, simultaneously. External on the market, customer needs, competitor weaknesses. Internally, on structure, process, culture, talent.

And each priority --- the external, and the internal --- have an associated level of difficulty that, well, gives pause. Each, individually, is challenging; together, daunting.

But when leaders accept the twin challenge, and make building their culture as much a priority as crafting their strategy, good things will happen.

If they intensely focus only on crafting that compelling strategy, they will in fact only be making culture's breakfast.

7 CORPORATE TENETS... AND A WITCH HUNT

Originally published March 19, 2012



We were 100 strong, spending an afternoon out of the corporate office in a department meeting reviewing progress and plans.

At one point rather early on the VP introduced an exercise. Joe asked each of us to write down on a piece of paper as many of the 7 corporate tenets that we could remember. He challenged us --- “How many of you in the room can name all seven?” The department admins collected our responses, and the meeting transitioned to the next agenda topic.

As you might gather, during the meeting the responses were compiled. He closed the meeting with the results. I honestly don’t remember if anyone got all seven; I probably don’t re-

DON'T CLIMB THAT POLE!

member due to what he chose to focus on instead ... It went something like this:

"I am ashamed and angry at the responses I received from this team..." He went on... well, I'll let you imagine how he went on.

It seems one of us wrote down the seven deadly sins --- wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and gluttony --- and somebody else simply wrote "greed" seven times!

After the meeting is when it got *really* interesting...

The meeting was on a Thursday. On Friday, a murmur began to circulate through the office. Joe had directed the admins to examine the handwriting on the two inappropriate responses to determine the authors!

This was a culture defining moment if ever there was one, and not in a good way.

I was appalled! (no, not because I was an author ... *c'mon!*).

I immediately began spinning on the implications. First, it was likely that one or both would lose their jobs. Second, the rest of us would be threatened. Third, the chances of any kind of open, double-loop dialogue in the near future were slim and none.

This was a culture defining moment if ever there was one, and not in a good way.

Friday, before leaving the office, I left Joe a "buck slip" on his desk (remember those?) with only one handwritten comment --- "please do not act on your search; consider the wider implications."

I was called to his office Monday morning before my second sip of coffee. I tried to productively reason with him...

I submitted my resignation some 30 days later, leaving of my own volition (I was already well into a job search).

Culture matters. A lot, I think.

I viscerally remember the culture there, the way things were done. I remember the witch hunt.

I don't remember the 7 corporate tenets.

NEVER AGAIN

Originally published May 10, 2012



It was a regional management conference; probably around 400 strong, with managers and sales people from facilities all across the Midwest.

As these meetings go, it was pretty standard. A few of the executives took the stage one after another to speak to the year-in-review and the upcoming initiatives from each of their functional areas.

Day two was to feature our individual regional meetings.

I almost didn't make it to day two.

At the end of day one the agenda called for an executive Q&A. People with mics were roaming the audience, and one after another, we asked our executives various questions. I had a question, but I needed to summon up the courage... and then

DON'T CLIMB THAT POLE!

I heard “time for one more question” and I went for it, getting the attention of one of the mic runners ...

“Why, after spending tens of millions of dollars to build state-of-the-art, high technology hubs, do we only offer minimum wage to staff them, all but ensuring persistent understaffing and persistent underutilization of the facility?”

I knew as soon as I gave the mic back that I had made a serious error.

The executives looked at each other for an extremely uncomfortable few seconds. One of them even looked off stage as if seeking some guidance from staff. I think the VP of Engineering eventually responded. I have no recollection of what he said.

Because my question was the last question, the session ended on that note. Not good. What happened next was not good either ...

My boss, the regional manager, made a bee line to me as everyone was dispersing. He motioned for me to join him at the side of the room, and, once there, he let me know in no uncertain terms that that was unacceptable. It's all a blur now; all I remember was totally losing my stomach

I think that this was an early lesson in culture

...

While I didn't have much of an appetite after that interaction, I did join my regional teammates for dinner. Some of them witnessed the post-question exchange. And while the conversation over dinner with them was reaffirming to me, it was little consolation.

As it turned out, it wasn't a fatal error. I survived.

I think that this was an early lesson in culture, before I appreciated the dynamics of culture as I do today. And I want to believe it was also an early lesson in “right, but not helpful” ... though, again, without an appreciation of that point until much later.

But, I must admit, the lasting lesson, the one seared into my management hide, was not to ask questions at management conferences.

Never again.

RUN!

Originally published April 19, 2012



Two men were walking through the woods when a large bear walked out into the clearing no more than 50 feet in front of them.

The first man dropped his backpack and dug out a pair of running shoes, then began to furiously attempt to lace them up as the bear slowly approached them.

The second man looked at the first, confused, and said, "What are you doing? Running shoes aren't going to help, you can't out run that bear."

"I don't need to. I just need to out run you."

DON'T CLIMB THAT POLE!

[Author unknown, but greatly appreciated! If you or anyone you know has a proprietary interest in this story please authenticate and I will be happy to credit, or remove, as appropriate.]

Ha!

Think of your co-workers, or your circle of friends. Would you take off and leave them for bear food? Would *they* take off and leave *you* for bear food?

In the organizations we work in, if we see this kind of behavior on an isolated, every now and then basis, we would likely be safe to attribute it to unbridled ambition, to competitive spirit run amuck.

But if we see this consistently, broader...

Have you ever worked in a culture where there were ever present threats, where there was a palpable feeling that to survive you needed to, well, look out for yourself at every turn? Every man for himself?

Embedded in these cultures we will find organizational policies and/or management practices that pit one associate against another.

Not exactly a culture, one would think, that drives cooperation, communication, collaboration... and not exactly a culture that we would predict would produce stellar results.

But here's something we *can* predict: embedded in these cultures we will find organizational policies and/or management practices that pit one associate against another ... we will find policies and/or practices that recognize and reward individual achievement without also recognizing and rewarding *teamwork* and *team* results ... and we will find organizational initiatives that at best only temporarily solve problems (because they only address symptoms) without real and substantial effort and action to fundamentally address the root causes of problems.

In other words, we will find the bear.

RUN!

DON'T CLIMB THAT POLE!

Originally published February 26, 2012



Four monkeys were put into a room. In the center of the room was a tall pole with a bunch of bananas suspended from the top.

One particularly hungry monkey eagerly scampered up the pole, intent on retrieving a banana. Just as he reached out to grasp the banana, he was hit with a torrent of cold water from an overhead shower. With a squeal, the monkey abandoned its quest and retreated down the pole.

Each monkey attempted, in turn, to secure a banana. Each received an equally chilly shower, and each scampered down without the prize. After repeated drenchings, the monkeys finally gave up on the bananas.

DON'T CLIMB THAT POLE!

With the primates thus conditioned, one of the original four was removed from the experiment and a new monkey added. No sooner had this new, innocent monkey started up the pole his companions reached up and yanked the surprised creature back down. After a few such aborted attempts, but without ever having received the cold shower, the new monkey stopped trying to get the bananas. He got the message: don't climb that pole!

One by one, each of the original monkeys was replaced. Each new monkey learned the same lesson: don't climb that pole; none even got so far as a cold shower. Despite not experiencing the cold shower, and therefore not understanding precisely why pole climbing was discouraged, they all respected the well-established precedent.

Even after the shower was removed, no monkey ventured up the pole ...

[Author unknown, but greatly appreciated! If you or anyone you know has a proprietary interest in this story please authenticate and I will be happy to credit, or remove, as appropriate.]

When we speak of a company 's culture, what do we mean? To me culture refers to the values, norms, and patterns of behavior that groups of people adopt and/or develop as they work. Or, more simply: "the way we do things around here."

Where does culture come from? I try and keep it simple: culture comes from what we learn and understand as being "normal" and/or important ...

A more elaborate exploration would talk about the influence of the leader(s), how the values, biases, and preferences of influential leaders get translated into company or departmental policies and management practices, and how eventually they

Culture is a curious thing.

DON'T CLIMB THAT POLE!

become commonplace in the fabric of the interactions of all employees.

We, like our monkey friends, become conditioned. *Don't climb that pole!* we learn, when we see what happens to those that do ... Then we teach *don't climb that pole!* to the newcomers we welcome into the organization, telling the story of what happened to our ambitious coworker Moe when he climbed that pole *it was like a cold shower stopped him right in his tracks!* ... We learn that we don't need to climb the pole; we are growing sales and driving profits *without* climbing the pole; it over time becomes an afterthought, except of course to orient the new talent; and there comes a time when a newbie asks "*Why don't we climb the pole?*" and we're all kind of stumped "*dunno; it's just the way we do things around here!*"

Culture is a curious thing; early on, it develops into a strong positive force, uniting people in the pursuit of common goals with normalized behaviors. Frequently, however, this strength morphs into a weakness — changes in policies, processes, and practices become necessary as leaders push for increased results *C'mon, people, we really need to climb that pole to make our revenue and profit goals this year!* but the culture pushes back *don't climb that pole!* insisting on preserving the current way of doing things "*Geez, boss, we haven't climbed that pole for 15 years and haven't we been wildly successful?*"...

Of course you are now way ahead of me and considering the quite major implication of all of this ... What if the monkeys we need to climb the pole to survive? Would they be able to overcome the conditioning? Would they change? Would there be one brave monkey associate who would climb that pole?

So: are your customers increasing their expectations? Are your competitors getting stronger, more aggressive? As our government regulations get reformed and our vendors adopt different practices and the younger labor force holds different expectations and... and... to what extent do we need to change; to reengineer processes and adapt existing practices; to learn new behaviors; to *climb that pole!*

MANAGEMENT BY WALKING AROUND... IN A LOOP

Originally published March 17, 2012



A CEO who had begun to practice his own form of “management-by-walking-around” learned from his employees that the company inhibited innovation by subjecting every new idea to more than 275 separate checks and sign-offs. He promptly appointed a task force to look at this situation, and it eliminated 200 of the obstacles. The result was a higher innovation rate.

--- Chris Argyris, Good Communication That Blocks Learning

Finally, a success story in one of these posts!
Not so fast.

This may sound like a success story, but, is it? It certainly is; the CEO uncovers a flawed process and, with his team, drives a dramatic improvement. What's not to like?

[Chris Argyris](#) would call the CEO's work above a great example of "single-loop learning;" addressing an issue but leaving the more fundamental problem unexamined and unsolved.

A double-loop approach would have the CEO asking some tougher questions; questions about --- yes, you guessed it --- the company culture.

Good: "How long have you known about the 275 required sign-offs?"

Better: "What goes on in this company that prevented you from questioning these practices and getting them corrected or eliminated?"

Best: "What beliefs do my leaders hold, and what behaviors do they exhibit, that lead them to support and embed a process that requires 275 sign-offs and approvals?"

Phenomenal!: "What assumptions am I making and what biases do I hold that are manifesting themselves in the culture of this organization, leading to an approval process with 275 signoffs and associates that are reticent to challenge that process?"

Double-loop learning asks questions to understand what's underneath the visible, presenting problem. It seeks the fundamental cause and effect.

I often get accused of asking too many questions. In fact, a couple of years ago, after a quarterly meeting, I was approached by a peer and admonished: "John, you are asking too many

Double-loop learning asks questions to understand what's underneath the visible, presenting problem. It seeks the fundamental cause and effect.

MANAGEMENT BY WALKING AROUND... IN A LOOP

tough questions. You are putting people on the defensive. You need to fit in more, go with the flow of the presentations.”

<sigh>

I feel compelled to help others (and myself) break out of the single loop! Interestingly, though, most managers are thrilled when they successfully walk the single loop. In fact, don't most organizations reward managers that are effective in walking the single loop? They are always solving problems, right?

So why incessantly ask questions that seem to deny the good work that they've just done and that everybody else recognizes?

Besides; who has time? I mean, there's so many other pressing problems to solve!

I keep asking because one successful double loop walk is worth many, many... yes, *many* single loop walks...

Management by walking around... in a *double* loop. Make a difference.

RABBIT CHASE | MASLOW'S HAMMER

Originally published July 30 and August 2, 2012



The NYPD, the FBI, and the CIA have engaged for years in serious competition to determine which organization is the most deft apprehender of criminals. The president, wanting to resolve the question once and for all, directs his chief of staff to release a rabbit into a forest, and challenges each organization to utilize its best methods to bring the rabbit in to him.

The CIA goes in.

They place animal informants throughout the forest. They place hidden microphones on all of the trees and motion detectors behind each rock. After three months of intensive investigations, they conclude that rabbits do not exist.

DON'T CLIMB THAT POLE!

The FBI goes in.

After two weeks with no leads, they burn the forest, killing everything in it, including the rabbit, and they make no apologies --- the rabbit had it coming.

The NYPD goes in.

A mere two hours later they come out leading a badly beaten bear by the ear. The bear is yelling, "Okay, okay, I'm a rabbit, I'm a rabbit."

[Author unknown, but greatly appreciated! If you or anyone you know has a proprietary interest in this story please authenticate and I will be happy to credit, or remove, as appropriate.]

I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail.

--- Abraham Maslow

Blog reader Mike, reacting to the Rabbit Chase post: "High....arious! I'm laughing so hard I'm not sure if I can function any more today."

And Audrey: "I have tears in my eyes from laughing so hard!"

Today, we chase the rabbit down the rabbit hole. With Maslow's hammer.

Audrey continued her comments with this astute observation: "I'm amazed no one put out carrots or leafy vegetables in a trap to lure out the rabbit!"

Yep. Curious, isn't it? Well, not so much really, when you think about it. I mean; can you envision the CIA, the FBI, or the NYPD working with carrots and leafy vegetables?

Of course not.

Our belief systems and mental models dictate our methods.

Audrey goes on to comment: "Seems like they valued what they can do (and have done in the past) more than what they were going after..."

Audrey! You nailed it! :-)

They each fell victim to the Law of the Instrument. If the only tool you have is a hammer, everything is a nail. Pound away.

I think Mr. Maslow was being kind with his depiction of the dynamic as *I suppose it is tempting...* I think, if we are true to experience --- our own, and what we've seen --- we'd have to say it's pretty common.

This isn't just a CIA, FBI, and NYPD problem. Our belief systems and mental models dictate our methods. And methods matter.

When we're working with nails, hammers are impressively effective. With rabbits, not so much.

So who won the competition? The rabbit, of course. The CIA, FBI, and NYPD are still looking for the nail.

GREMLINS OF CULTURE

Originally published April 15, 2013



To be a challenger once, it is enough to challenge the orthodoxies of the incumbents; to be a challenger twice, a firm must be capable of challenging its own orthodoxies.

— Gary Hamel and C.K. Prahalad; Competing for the Future

Orthodoxy is the gremlin of organizational cultures.

We are familiar with gremlins. We don't want to see them in the vicinity, especially not out on the wing ...

But, orthodoxy? The secular working definition we'll go with is authorized or generally accepted theory, doctrine, or practice.

DON'T CLIMB THAT POLE!

So now let's revisit: *orthodoxy is the gremlin of organizational cultures* translates to authorized or generally accepted theory, doctrine, or practice can wreak havoc and bring down the flight of organizations like nobody's business.

Stay with me.

I have early and often pondered here on the topic of organizational culture. I find culture a curious thing. It is challenging to pin down, describe, and understand its origins, let alone get a clue on how to change it.

My culture thoughts in *Don't Climb That Pole!* extrapolated from some monkey business to get a glimpse of the birth of culture gremlins.

In *Management by Walking Around ... In a Loop* we explored how our learned behaviors can make us reticent and make our managers, well, loopy ... orthodoxy gremlins on the wings.

In *Rabbit Chase* we laughed at the struggles of the FBI, CIA, and NYPD when trying to catch an elusive rabbit in the forest. To each their own gremlin ...

* * * * *

Often, when organizations lose altitude, culture gremlins lurk. The gremlins are why it is challenging to maintain altitude, or, as in the quote above, to be a challenger twice.

Let's unpack that quote a bit.

To be a challenger once, it is enough to challenge the orthodoxies of the incumbents.

Entrepreneurial organizations challenge the orthodoxies of the marketplace to drive its growth and success. A new and different business model (Dell); an innovative approach to the market (Netflix); an elegant product/service design (Apple); you have others in mind as well.

To sustain our success and effectiveness in the face of competition and/or market change, we need to rethink what we believe and how we work.

GREMLINS OF CULTURE

In all of them, the challenge is outward-directed. Toward the incumbents.

To be a challenger twice, a firm must be capable of challenging its own orthodoxies.

In other words, to sustain our success and effectiveness in the face of competition and/or market change, we need to rethink what we believe and how we work.

But why?

Because our success means we're now the incumbents. As an incumbent, facing a formidable challenger is only a matter of time. Time drives change, and change challenges everything and everybody.

Organizational success embeds policies and practices and cultural norms. They are like seat belts giving comfortable hugs. Everyone is enjoying the ride.

Until the policies start to restrict the freedom to adapt to changes in the marketplace. Until the practices become unwieldy and inefficient when scaled up to handle the growth. Until the cultural norms become orthodoxies that start feeling less like a hug and more like a choke hold.

And you start to feel the steepness of the descent in the pit of your stomach.

* * * * *

Organizational success incubates culture gremlins.

Orthodoxy.

Sustaining success requires the capability of challenging those orthodoxies. Our own orthodoxies.

Our gremlins.

Without that capability ... well, you really don't want to see the gremlins of culture out on your organizational wings when you're at 30,000 feet but quickly losing altitude.

(And if you do, I hope you have an OD guy as your wing man. OD guys go after gremlins of culture with a vengeance.)

PEOPLE - SERVICE - PROFIT

Originally published September 16, 2013



Federal Express, from its inception, has put its people first both because it is right to do so and because it is good business as well. Our Corporate philosophy is succinctly stated: People - Service - Profit (P-S-P).

- Frederick W. Smith, Founder, FedEx, Chairman, President, and CEO, FedEx Corporation; citation from Manager's Guide USA: The FedEx Express Guide to Leadership, 2002.

DON'T CLIMB THAT POLE!

*R*ight... (said sarcastically). Anybody buying that?

I did. In fact, I still am! Despite having left FedEx over a decade ago.

I “bought in” once I appreciated the shifting perspective that gives this corporate philosophy life and power. Here’s what I mean:

People first is clearly setting the priority for leaders and managers. Taking care of your people is the first priority.

Then comes the sneaky-stealth shift in perspective.

If leaders/managers put their people first, their people will put customers first. Exceptional service to customers generates profits.

People, service, profit.

Not exactly the order of priorities of the average company, is it! At least, not in evidence from their actions. Sure, they all spout the right sentiment *people are our most important asset* but good gosh can you find any part of that belief in their decision making?

* * * * *

FedEx provided its managers specifics regarding their people-service-profit approach to make the philosophy actionable and take it from theory into practice ---

- Give employee considerations a high priority when developing corporate programs and policies; when acquiring and designing facilities, equipment, and systems; and when scheduling and arranging work.
- Involve employees as valuable team members.
- Promote from within when possible.
- Spend the time and effort necessary to manage the personnel issues; especially training and coaching.

- Maintain outstanding communications, and make available any information requested that is not personal, privileged, or controlled by government regulations.
- Enact progressive programs to ensure that all individuals are treated fairly.
- Attempt to avoid furloughing employees, and retrain any whose jobs are affected or eliminated by business conditions or technological change.
- Provide competitive wages, benefits, and profit-sharing opportunities that are consistent with corporate earnings.
- Treat every single employee with respect and dignity.
- Encourage the heart by saying “thank you” and “well done” often.

Here’s a quick activity for you! Use the above as a checklist for where you work now. I’m betting this exercise might be rather disconcerting.

And lest you think I am seeing FedEx through rose-colored glasses, I’ve no concerns sharing that, in my experience, FedEx wasn’t perfect; those management practices above were at times inconsistently executed.

Perfect execution is not required to accomplish exceptional results. But a differentiating mindset is.

I don’t know what the organization is like now. There are blog readers out there that might be able to inform on that point, if they so choose. I, for one, would love to know to what extent the philosophy is recognizable in current practices given current challenges.

What I *do* know is that while I was there, I had a palpable feeling that I was working for a company that was a class above the field.

Given the benefit of my subsequent OD experiences, I am now able to view those FedEx precepts and their inconsistent application with a more mature, seasoned discernment. What I know now is that perfection is not required to separate from

DON'T CLIMB THAT POLE!

the pack. Perfect execution is not required to accomplish exceptional results.

But a differentiating mindset is.

Leaders and managers put people first ... people will put customers first, providing exceptional, differentiating service. Profits follow.

Right!

MY STARFISH REMINDER

Originally published March 1, 2012



The tide had washed ashore hundreds of starfish. They would soon die of exposure. Chris was tossing the starfish, one at a time, back into the ocean, in a slow, meditative movement.

“Why do you bother?” her friend asked, overwhelmed by the sheer number of starfish dying. “It won’t make any difference.”

Chris stopped for a moment, looking at the starfish in her hand. She replied, “It will to this one.”

[Author unknown, but greatly appreciated! If you or anyone you know has a proprietary interest in this story

DON'T CLIMB THAT POLE!

please authenticate and I will be happy to credit, or remove, as appropriate.]

In my OD work, I am predominantly concerned with building the capability of organizations to execute their strategic plans. This almost always has me wading into structure, policies, processes ... speaking of integration, of alignment...

*Ultimately, it isn't the system that performs. It only enables. **People** perform.*

It's all about the complexity of the system.

Not!

I admit: I need to be reminded that it is also about the simplicity of caring.

Structures, processes and the like don't say "thank you." They don't express an affirming empathy for a customer's exasperation. They don't put aside everything when an associate needs someone to listen.

Ultimately, it isn't the system that performs. It only enables.

People perform. And people who care, make a difference!

Not rocket science, I know... but, for leaders --- and organizational consultants (ahem) --- it is important not to lose this perspective.

And aren't we all --- regardless of our roles --- leaders? So when, in the daily ebb and flow of working, we see others needing a hand, and if while helping we wonder if we're really making a difference; don't we have the opportunity to answer much like Chris tells her friend in the story as she's about to save the starfish in her hand? ---

"It will, to this one."

CLOSING THOUGHTS

We've all felt the push-pull of culture.

Exploring through these stories — momentarily stepping into the push-pull and then out to reflect — we discover some deeper truths:

- Culture is so powerful it can overwhelm strategy. A brilliant strategy may be a necessary ingredient for business success, but it is by itself not sufficient. Growth plans and business models will not produce results as intended without an enabling and supportive culture.



DON'T CLIMB THAT POLE!

which create the cultural norms that shape behaviors; the behaviors in turn shape the culture...

One last (but most certainly not least) piece of insight: Recall (paraphrased, enlarged) from that last post – *It isn't the culture that performs. People perform. The culture only enables. Or disables...*

Big big big implication here: If performance, in the aggregate, isn't above the bar, blaming your people will not be helpful.

Look beyond them. Explore the push-pull of your culture.

What do you think? What are your push-pull culture stories? Would love to hear from you... johngreco@odeaconsulting.com



Inspired by the intrigue and ever-flowing lessons he experienced while working within diverse organizational cultures, John began blogging his work and life insights in 2012, creating johnponders.com.

John has been practicing his unique principled commitment to excellence as an organizational consultant for over thirty-five years. He is the founder of ODEA; an organization development consultancy that he hopes will continue his life's work into semi-retirement.

John has earned a Master of Science in Organization Development from Loyola University Chicago and holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration from the University of Illinois.

John is married to wife Jamie and has one adult son (Jesse). Living in Elgin Illinois USA, John is a life-long Cubs fan still basking in the glory of their epic 2016 World Series win...

DON'T CLIMB THAT POLE!



Odea is an organization development practice that helps leaders, teams, and HR professionals enable change, build organizational capability, and drive results.

Our different thinking is a mash up of strategic thinking and systems thinking with a healthy helping of behavioral science added into the mix. We focus on identifying systemic conditions that constrain performance potential, helping clients see beyond symptoms to structural causes, leading to enduring solutions.

www.odeaconsulting.com