

## Event Learning Points

Event Title Roundtable Dialogue with Professor Adrian Furnham on Leadership Behaviours in Shaping Organisational Culture

Date 25 June 2010

Presenter(s) Professor Adrian Furnham  
Professor in Psychology (ad hominem) in the University of London



Organised By: Centre for Organisation Development (COD),  
Civil Service College

These key learning points are captured as part of the contributions made by the speakers and participants during the event. The key objective of circulating the event learning points report is to share what was discussed so as to perpetuate the discussion beyond the event.

## 1. Event Background

Prof. Furnham was engaged for a 1 day programme at the Civil Service College (CSC) which included a lecture on “Leadership Derailment” and a lunch meeting with the Centre for Leadership Development at CSC. This roundtable dialogue was an exclusive event organised by the Centre for Organisation Development for a small group of Organisational Development (OD) Practitioners heading the OD function in public service organisations. Prof. Furnham spoke briefly on the academic views of culture, his view on how organisational culture was formed and shared his opinions on leaders and their role in organisational culture. Lastly, Prof. Furnham invited questions and comments from the participants.

## 2. Presentation Highlights

### Three Approaches to Viewing Culture

Prof. Furnham began the session by defining organisational culture as “the way things get done around here” (as opposed to “the way things were said”). He later went on to share three different academic approaches to viewing culture in an organisation.

He cited Deal and Kennedy’s work as how Sociologists would view organisational culture - that corporate culture followed from what the organisation was actually there to do. Deal and Kennedy's model of culture was based on characterising different types of organisations, based on how quickly employees received feedback and reward after they have done something and the level of risks that they took. In the research, there would be four different archetypes<sup>1</sup> that could define an organisation’s culture.

Psychologists defined culture by the way the organisation behaved. They did not place judgement on what kind of culture was good or bad but accepted that it depended on how individuals perceived of it. Prof. Furnham cited four dimensions of culture that was based on Hofstede’s<sup>2</sup> work on national and regional cultural groupings that might influence business behaviour of organisations. The four dimensions were:

- a) Individualism vs. Collectivism – Refers to the extent to which employees are expected to stand up for themselves, versus alternatively acting predominantly as members of a group or an organisation.

---

<sup>1</sup> 1. Work Hard, Play Hard Culture, 2.Tough-guy Macho Culture, 3.Process Culture, 4. Bet-your-company Culture.

See [http://changingminds.org/explanations/culture/deal\\_kennedy\\_culture.htm#Four](http://changingminds.org/explanations/culture/deal_kennedy_culture.htm#Four)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.geert-hofstede.com/>

- b) Tolerance of Ambiguity - It indicated the extent to which a culture influences its members to feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations.

Power Distance - Extent to which employees expect to have different levels of power in an organisation, ranging from select groups being significantly more powerful versus everyone having similar or equal power.

- c) Masculinity vs. Femininity - Refers to the value placed on traditionally male or female values. Male values for example include competitiveness, assertiveness, ambition, and the accumulation of wealth and material possessions.

Lastly, Anthropologists determined culture by searching for physical signs and symbols that would indicate the culture of an organisation.

### **“What Gets Measured Gets Done”**

Prof. Furnham shared that organisations think that they can shape corporate culture and get their employees to behave in a certain way through changing their attitudes. However, it is difficult to change someone’s attitude, and therefore behaviours would not change accordingly as well. Prof. Furnham firmly believed that culture change happened the other way around, which is if you change behaviour; one’s attitude would be shaped eventually. The key to doing this in organisations would be to articulate clear performance outcomes as “what gets measured gets done”. However, it was also important to select the right performance measures so that the desired behaviours are elicited.

He went on to relate some examples to support his argument:

Example 1 – Bus drivers in London were measured on their punctuality. It was therefore not uncommon for buses to speed past bus stops without picking up passengers. The drivers were also not attentive to collecting fares nor paying particular attention to the passengers’ needs.

Example 2 – Traffic wardens in New Zealand were measured on the distance that they walked each day during their patrol, and some achieved this performance outcome through remaining stationary but swinging their legs with pedometers attached so that they would record longer distances than what they have actually travelled.

### **Leaders and Organisational Culture**

Pioneers or early leaders in organisations play a significant role in the shaping of corporate culture. Prof. Furnham illustrated this by sharing that he felt Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew’s legacy still lived on in influencing how things are done in Singapore. In countries like Hong Kong and Singapore, he could still see evidences of British-ness in the way of life leftover from the colonial days. A new leader

entering into an organisation will face some challenges if he decides to reshape or change such deeply entrenched corporate culture. Prof. Furnham offered five techniques in which leaders could explore to change culture:

- a) Fellowship Model  
Gather people together through meetings and seminars to talk about the new desired culture of an organisation. The disadvantage of this method would be that it is conflict avoiding and it does not address what was not working well in the first place. Action plans are usually not concrete or specific, and tend to be implemented too late.
- b) Economic Model  
People who were a hindrance to the building of the new desired culture could be bought out and asked to leave the organisation. However, this approach is usually perceived as insensitive to the feelings or needs of those affected.
- c) Political Model  
Finding influential individuals in the organisation to catalyse and effect the change that was required.
- d) Academic Model  
Commissioning research and relying on collected data to substantiate the change. The disadvantage to this was that it could sometimes lead to a situation of analysis paralysis.
- e) Engineering Model  
Restructure the organisation to create an opportunity to renew and start from a clean slate again. It unfreezes the established patterns of networks and behaviours and shakes up and changes the existing relationships that people had.

Culture changes as a result of behavioural change, and the leader's role is to decide on behaviours that are useful to achieving organisational goals, and make these behaviours explicitly known to the employees. Behaviours should be effectively managed through the performance management process, and employees should be rewarded accordingly when they exhibit the desired behaviours. The leader would also have to live out the behaviours that were espoused. While it is usual to have an explicit and implicit culture in any organisation, employees who observed incongruence between the two could become suspicious and non-trusting among themselves and to the management, which would affect the organisation's overall functioning and effectiveness. This is particularly important to the younger workers belonging to Generation X (born after 1980), who value alignment of one's personal values and belief system with that of the organisation's.

### 3. Discussion

Following Prof. Furnham's remarks, the group engaged him in an informal and lively exchange. Their key points were captured as follows:

#### **Question #1:**

##### **How do you socialise new people into a culture?**

Prof. Furnham felt that young people tended to get cynical quickly and could detect hypocrisy quickly. Therefore, for them, the espoused and actual culture of an organisation must be aligned. It would be useful to encourage the new hires to interact with the existing employees actively so that they can be socialised quickly into the existing culture and ways things are done in the organisation.

#### **Question #2:**

##### **Our leaders are getting younger, how does it affect the organisational culture when the leader wants to change things?**

We could view leadership from various perspectives and the generational approach could be one way. Young leaders these days tended to be deeply ambitious but not as respectful of others. However, their youth also brought a sense of energy and flexibility in their leadership style. At the end of the day, a good boss could be defined as one who uses different modalities to reach out to his employees, but one does not need to be well liked to be a good and powerful boss.

#### **Question #3:**

**Would an organisation-employee relation become very transactional if the focus is on performance measures, i.e. what gets measured gets done and gets paid? Such a process might not create more sustaining behaviours, e.g. identification with the company. As a starting point, should we identify the behaviours first or should identifying the outcomes come first? A lot of outcomes are not easily definable as well.**

Prof. Furnham made the observation that Singapore is a very process oriented place and people can easily lose sight of the purpose or find it hard for them to understand what they are involved in certain activities. It is also important to note that money is a hygiene factor but not a motivator as its effect fizzles out very quickly. Money as a motivation factor is of lesser value and relevance when people start to compare with what others are receiving relative to their contribution. There were also those who viewed other things as more important than money, e.g. time.

Performance or outcome measurement is still the most powerful tool for eliciting desired behaviours essential for culture building. For outcomes that cannot be

defined easily or specifically, proxy measures could be used. Leaders were required to make behaviours explicit, reward it and get employees to model it. It must be recognised however that theory and practice were often different. Many leaders climbed their way up to their positions by behaving unscrupulously, yet when they were at the top, they required others to behave nicely, honestly, and play fair. To Prof. Furnham, that was one of the paradoxes of leadership and culture. In his interactions with organisations, IKEA stood out as a company that had maintained its humble roots even after a long history and many changes of leadership. The founder of IKEA was a simple, hardworking carpenter who believed in design innovation and the staff of IKEA still embodied this spirit and culture till today.

**Question #4:**

**How can we talk to our leaders about organisational culture? What advice can you give us?**

Prof. Furnham felt that OD Practitioners should not mention culture or values in their conversations with their leaders in isolation. Instead, talk to the leaders about organisational behaviours and outcomes that are relevant to the accomplishment of business objectives and goals, and the process of culture building will follow. He also felt that it would be relatively easy for Singapore organisations to do culture change as we were very rules and procedurally oriented . Once clear rules and procedures were established to make employees behave in a certain manner, the desired culture will be shaped.

**Question #5:**

**To what extent must culture change be driven from the top?**

While culture change could be initiated from the ground up, such important change or transformational process would not work unless the top leadership supports and models it.

**Question #6:**

**Are you saying that we should stop the envisioning process in our organisations since it does not make sense to the staff?**

Prof. Furnham felt that the process would probably be mildly interesting and inspiring to staff but the effects would not last and people would forget the vision and mission statements quickly.

## Questions #7:

**Performance Management is actually the most difficult part of the HR portfolio and there is often scepticism and cynicism associated with it. How do you prevent this from happening?**

The performance management process should not be allowed to be degenerated into a paper filling exercise. Performance measures must spell out clearly the behaviours required for superior work performance, and the extent the employee have to demonstrate these behaviours to be deemed effective. This should help allay some of the cynicism employees have on performance management. We need to be mindful that performance measures if not well thought out could lead to dysfunctional behaviours from employees. Prof. Furnham recounted his personal story of a London policeman who had refused to file a report for his lost bicycle. The police in London were measured against the number of cases solved and the policeman in question knew that it would be difficult for him to solve the case and retrieve the bicycle back.

## 4. Key Learning Points

1. Culture change happens when you change behaviour, as attitudes will also be changed alongside it.
2. Behaviours can be shaped through clear and explicit performance measures.
3. The culture of an organisation is greatly influenced by its early leaders but new leaders can adopt different strategies/models to change it:
  - a. Fellowship Model
  - b. Economic Model
  - c. Political Model
  - d. Academic Model
  - e. Engineering Model
4. Leaders are required to make behaviours explicit, reward it and model it.