

Ethikos Volume 37, Number 1. January 02, 2023

Culture change: What makes it stick?

By Anthony O'Reilly

Anthony O'Reilly (anthony@oreillyadvisorsllc.com, [linkedin.com/in/anthony-oreilly-ethics](https://www.linkedin.com/in/anthony-oreilly-ethics)) is a founder of O'Reilly Advisors LLC in Newton, Massachusetts, USA, helping organizations accelerate transformational change using the discipline of controls. The author was the first Chief Ethics Officer at State Street Corporation, a Global Bank. Previously, he served as Head of Professional Practices at Siemens, AG, and prior to this, as a Partner at PricewaterhouseCoopers.

The first two articles in this three-part series examined how to get started on a culture transformation^[1] and some important moments each transformation must pass through.^[2] In this piece, we explore the most critical—and often overlooked—aspect of culture change: making it stick. Organizations often launch change programs with fanfare and sometimes even bolt on a control mechanism to reinforce it. But all too often, the initiative fails to deliver the heady expectations laid out for it, and the momentum soon fades. Why this is, and what we can do to deliver the promised returns, are the basis for this article. Again, this is based on my own observations from first-hand involvement in three very different culture change programs: during a merger, following a reputational disaster, and responding to a CEO's request for help.

Natural resistance to culture change

Culture does not change overnight. Norms are built over years or even decades, passed down between generations of managers. Therefore, repetition and persistence are necessary parts of any culture change. Initiatives that focus on a high-profile launch and top-down communication are destined to fail as soon as the next company initiative hits the wires. It can be worse if the drive for a culture change is some emergent crisis because sentiments can arise about this being a temporary reaction that will subside as soon as things “return to normal,” allowing inertia to take over.

Senior leadership turns over more frequently than we might imagine. According to a Korn Ferry survey published in 2020, the average C-Suite tenure at the largest 1,000 American companies was 4.9 years. Put another way, on average, a company with just 10 members in its executive committee sees two of these replaced every year.^[3] This means we cannot rely on the force of personality to sustain a culture change. New leaders will emerge with new priorities, perhaps seeking ways to distance themselves from the old ones.

Finally, as described in this article by Rich Lyons, people often struggle to see the link between a culture initiative and business purpose, so when these appear to clash, the culture initiative takes a back seat to getting business done.^[4] In other words, tying culture change to some presumed common good like “integrity” or “building trust” rather than to an already agreed-upon commercial purpose is unhelpful.

This document is only available to subscribers. Please log in or purchase access.

[Purchase Login](#)