

Urban Putty

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Corporate Culture... What is it? Why does it matter?

Always be ready for pleasant surprises!
Recently, while removing my skates, from a noon-hour glide, I was sitting adjacent to another middle-aged male engaged in the same process.

We could not help but listen to a third just finishing a shower, while he complained for the nth time about the leaky faucets, which the city had not fixed in spite of his repeated calls.

Talk of City Hall in a city of 50,000 where the potholes grow and faucets leak and...and...provide a constant reminder of the shortage of funds, and/or the paucity of political vision and will.

“I told the Mayor we were going to lose our Junior “A” hockey team. I knew from the previous owner that he had been receiving offers from cities on the south shore of Lake Ontario in upstate New York. I also knew that, while he had no desire to sell, his business sense and plan told him he needed a new arena. He was prepared to put up some money, and if the city had been willing, we could have had a new, modern facility, adaptable for concerts etc. in the manner of Sarnia. They were getting 2500 to their hockey games before they built a new arena, and now, with a new one they are drawing 5000 regularly.”

Not bad for a guy who didn't even think the recording device in my brain was 'on' and he would be reading himself on this page.

Knowing that here were two fairly intelligent gentlemen, both interested in ice facilities and hockey and its place in a northern Ontario city with a history of hockey “culture”, I tepidly tested an idea.

“There is both a community college and a university here and if investors could be found to put a team in place that would raise the banner of both colleges, enter into the Major Junior “A” OHL division, with adequate investor support, then possibly the link between learning and sport could be re-established, a link that really never needed to be broken?”

We hadn't yet heard from the most reticent of the three. Yet, as frequently happens, he put many things into perspective in a single sentence. “The university president seems to have very little place in his picture of the university culture for sports,” was his penetrating observation.

“Well, this town has a century of hockey culture; all he needs to do is to tap into it, and bring in some players, all of whom could be students in either or both colleges, and the excitement could begin. Thunder Bay has entered its university hockey team in a league of similar calibre, and regularly fills the arena, in what has become a community success story. Furthermore, St. Michael's Majors already provide an Ontario model of the partnership between education (St. Michael's College) and hockey,” I babbled.

It was only later, after the conversation had subsided, that I learned the silent member of this spontaneous trio is an instructor at the university of which we were speaking.

He knows not only about the university but more importantly about the concept of culture. He has to. He teaches in that area.

And the culture can be considered the total environment of the time and place of the family, organization, community, region, province or country. There are mental models in each culture that represent the kind of voices that are important. An example from a currently playing joke, about Canadian culture:

How can you tell you've just received a call from a Canadian terrorist?

He begins: I hope I haven't called at a bad time but...

I lived in a family of origin where the culture, opposed to any participation in athletics, while rigorously pursuing piano and academics, seems to have been similar to the culture of the university we spoke about earlier. I also grew up in a 'dry' town, incarnating a culture opposed to the 'demon rum,' a culture that had been seriously impacted by the Women's Christian Temperance Union. It was second last, only succeeded by Owen Sound, to vote to give permission to serve liquor with meals in hotel dining rooms, in 1961.

Like most small towns in Canada, ours was also a 'hockey culture' featuring either minor hockey or the town's single, outstanding affordable evening, winter entertainment, the "Shamrocks", sponsored by a local, magnanimous hotel owner.

Each of us is and has been a recipient/product of a family culture, and has helped to mold our marriage-family

culture, along with our workplace culture, even if that process has been largely unconscious.

At one place where I worked, I was, happily, an instrument of change in the direction of reducing smoking, enhancing the equality of the two genders and helping to create more opportunities for bilingual students and instructors.

Cultural change, a seriously resisted dynamic in many Canadian institutions, towns, cities and provinces, is nevertheless a wave which is moving either in the direction of change, or in the direction of preserving and conserving its history. Or both.

A town or city could, for example, be attempting to appear comfortable with new 'technology' in health care, through public subscription of sizeable contributions for MRI machines, and micro-surgery equipment, (open to change) while continuing to resist any change in a broader, more macro picture of itself as a quiet, stable, dependable, "unruffable," and very closed social and political system, especially with regard to its capacity and willingness to extend hospitality to newcomers.

With another skater, in a different conversation, a man who was born and raised in this town, I suggested, "If the two of us, you having been born here and I having come from outside, were both to appear at the front desk of the local daily paper with exactly the same press release, yours would run 'front-page' and mine would be buried in the middle, if it were carried at all."

He enthusiastically agreed and then explained, “Well that is just small town culture!”

Is a hockey team jointly sponsored by a community college and a university a symbol of a changing culture, or a vestige of the past, simply in new ‘digs’?

Does a small town culture have the capacity or even interest in morphing into a mid-sized city, or is it afraid of being tarnished with an uncaring brush, and a new, and uncomfortable set of new mental models to learn, and to which to adapt?

The same questions are at the core of every organization, corporation, family, town, city and all other communities.

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