Why Culture Eats Strategy

In my almost thirty years of experience as a manager, executive, and consultant I have had one lesson taught to me over and over again. Culture eats strategy, period.

Ron Willingham, creator of the Integrity Systems model, sets the basis for this when he talks about two related areas. The first is the construct of our values and beliefs. He proposes that we operate on three levels – each larger than the other. The three levels have been depicted as a "snow man" and I think that is an excellent metaphor.

The "head" of the snowman is our rational processes or "I think". The next circle is the emotional or "I feel" and the last and largest dimension of our processors is the "I am." The "I am" is that cluster of experiences, learnings, and related activities that shape what we call our values. It also holds our world view of ourselves and others.

The next concept from Willingham is that of congruency. Dr. Willingham talks about congruency on several levels – our view of an activity, our view of our ability to perform the activity, our view of the activity as it relates to our values, commitment to do the work, and our belief in the product or service.
I would submit that organizations have these same kinds of constructs- we just don't talk about them.

When we go into an organization within an intention of changing the "culture" without consideration for these underlying constructs, we will achieve at best short term compliance but most likely near and long term failure.

Elements of a culture include the following:

- Values
- Norms
- Beliefs
- Behaviors

If we don't take these elements into consideration, do we really expect to sustain meaningful change?

I spent a number of years in the credit union industry working with organizations that wanted to create a "sales and service" culture. That is a more difficult proposition than it sounds like as many of the people in credit unions are "refugees" from traditional banking or financial services because they feared or were incongruent with the concept of selling. They felt, as a member based, not

for profit organization, "pushing" products was both uncomfortable for them and inconsistent with the mission and values of the organization. Only by accepting and embracing the concept of congruency between beliefs, values and behaviors, were we able to make meaningful differences in creating a sales and service cultural shift.

The good news is that identifying cultural issues and addressing them will significantly improve your chances of success. The bad news is you have to go further. You must also look at your systems.

In this context when I talk about systems I am including the following:

• Measurements
• Models
• Tools
• Connections

You have to reinforce your "new" values through your hiring and selection process, your reward systems and your products and services. You have to continuously benchmark and realign them.

You might be asking yourself – why do I want to go to all this trouble? This sounds like a lot of work. I submit a very simple reason:

The Environment Is Changing!
From Process Focused Business To Customer-Needs-Focused
From Name or Product Loyalty to What Best Meets Needs
An Increasing Need for Higher Per-Worker Productivity
Changing Employees Expectations

There are other reasons, as well, but the reasons listed above are some pretty compelling reasons.

My partner and I share a very simple premise:

"People join and support a culture not a system. Long term success will only be achieved and sustained when employees believe that embracing a culture is in their best interests and the interests of their customer. Changing systems without changing culture will not sustain long term success."
So we change cultures. We call our model: Moving from compliance to Commitment™.

Ron Majetka in his book Why This Horse Won't Drink, describes commitment this way-

"Commitment is the act of being physically, psychologically, and emotionally impelled. It means that employees gladly give up other options."

By making cultural changes that create congruency between employees' values and how they view their work, you will have an organization of committed employees who value their work.

Think about it. How would you like your employees to describe their relationship with your organization?