Reconciling Today’s Organizational Culture with Yesterday’s Human Nature

By

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Introduction

“Today, humanity is like a waking dreamer, [being] caught between the fantasies of sleep and the chaos of the real, we have created a Star Wars civilization, with Stone Age emotions, medieval institutions, and godlike technology.”

By instinct humans are a group animal. The survival instinct that drove our ancestors to form groups is the biological product of qualities inherent in our human nature. Since inception, our species has found security in groups, and has “attached” individual identity and meaning to their role in a band, clan, tribe, or nation.

The attachment behavior that led to forming groups was human nature’s protective adaptation to a dangerous environment. This nature was such an important part of our past that we have brought many of those instincts, traditions, and beliefs with us into this modern world. It is the persisting aspects of our group attachment drives that lies underneath and supports much of our culture and aggravates many of our confounding behaviors.

In many ways today’s organizations are a modern equivalent to those primitive bands, but new priorities and an escalating rate of change have forced modern organizations to become less personal and more practical. The pressure to change has also caused a profound shift in organizational culture and forces our human nature to seek new forms of attachments.

In an effort to clarify some complexities faced by our organizations, this paper will explore the possible relationships between the various aspects of human nature, culture, attachment behavior and change.

Human Nature

The early road to human survival was first enhanced by group bonding for protection. As we later moved away from a vegetarian diet and toward more meat consumption, group life also served to facilitate the organization of hunting parties. Good outcomes in hunting depended on the ability to plan and implement complex hunting strategies. It also depended on the ability to work together with prior planning towards a shared goal and common purpose. Groups that could function cooperatively and for the mutual benefit of its members had a better chance for survival.

“The human specialty is intentionality, fashioned from an extremely large working memory. We not only interact intensely with one another, but to a unique degree we have added the urge to collaborate.”

Whether in reality or in illusion, it seems those groups that survived worked as though with one mind. In fact as its purposes became more ingrained and its cohesion more effective the group began to function as an “entity” of its own. It is in much the same way that a body’s organs and appendages naturally work together in support of a coordinated and cooperative sense of purpose.

The case is made by Stapley (2006) that there is an “as if” aspect of group dynamics that can be abstracted to suggest that independent “group” thinking and feeling somehow occurs as a composite based on projections from its members. It appears there is some dimension in group dynamics that contains material that can be referred to as a group, or organizational unconscious.
In the development of our human nature other important group traits include the ability: to form networks, “to take comfort and pride from familiar fellowship”, to cooperate with members of the group, to give and receive “favors, and exchange information”. These were among the factors necessary to build cohesiveness, and “are among the absolute universals of human nature and hence of culture”⁵.

**Culture**

Culture is a term that is hard to define, but it can be characterized as a composite of all we do and how and why we do those things. In the human race it is universal, international, national, regional, local, and personal, and its influence spreads up and down those channels. Culture—with its values, points of view, and traditions—shapes the way we see life, understand the world, define ourselves, think, act, create community, relate to others, and express our sense of belonging to family, groups, and nations.⁶

“While organizational culture enhances organizational commitment and increases the consistency of employee behavior, there are potentially dysfunctional aspects of culture. It can be a barrier to change when the shared values are not in agreement with those that would further the organization’s effectiveness.”⁷

Organizational cultures are also systems consisting of complex conscious and unconscious parts that are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. It is difficult to know how a change in one component will affect other interrelated components—at least not until action is taken in the effects observed. There is one aspect of organizational culture, however, that is unique, consistent, and invites further investigation—it involves its propensity to accept “attachments”.

**Attachments**

It is likely that from humanity’s earliest existence until the present, we were born seeking to “belong”. Compared with the uncertainties we suddenly faced at our birth, the fetal world must have seemed ideal. Whether it is in our memory or as is more likely in our genes, we are compelled to find another “something” to which we could attach. Early on these attachments may have included other family members, a thumb, a binky, a teddy bear, or a blanket. And as we grew, so did the nature of the attachments we sought and with which we bonded.

“The great strength of attachment theory... is that it focuses on a basic system of behavior—the attachment...”
behavioral system—that is biologically rooted and is species specific.…It is manifested by behavior that has the predictable outcome of keeping the individual in proximity to one or a few significant others… [and] is believed to have evolved through a process of natural selection because it yielded a survival advantage.”

Not until we started a career and became a functioning part of the group did we first begin to sense the depth of meaning in these attachments. Once we attached primarily to a group—instead, we now attach to symbols or representations of the group. Understanding the importance and the purpose inherent in substitutes comes from the realization that they now stand for the group, and provide us with a sense of security and familiarity that we seek.

John Bowlby understood attachments perhaps like no one else. While he spent much of his career studying children, his experiences were not lost on adults. Regarding the implications of attachment behavior in the workplace he states there are both tangible/ intangible attachments:

“In 1970 John Bowlby began working with Colin Parkes in an effort to clarify the reaction to “loss” of an attachment object in adult behavior. They established that reaction to loss in adults consisted of four phases: numbness, yearning and protest, disorganization and despair, and reorganization and they linked it to grieving. After the publication of this paper, Parkes visited Elizabeth Kubler-Ross in Chicago and contributed much to her thinking on the stages of the grief process as described in her book On Death and Dying.

Parkes went on to work with Cicely Saunders, founder of the hospice movement. Using attachment theory and research into “loss” led to the concept of grief, rather than as a state, as a process working to establish a new identity. Since then the stages of grief have been linked to many other types of adjustment, and specifically includes the adjustments inherent in the change process.

After observing the nature and consistency of the instabilities that arise in employees as a reaction to [the loss of an object of attachment], regardless of the nature of the object, it now seems apparent that [the loss results in] the activation of attachment behavior.” Thus, attachment behavior is activated by the loss of an attachment and results in a type of grieving and requires a period of adjustment. This is the essence of the difficulty that surrounds and confounds organizational change.

Change

It is virtually impossible during a change initiative to know what problems will be encountered and what will be the ultimate impact on the organization. The apparent inability to assess the nature of these difficulties before they emerge is a reason why organizational change initiatives are so often unsuccessful.
Any organizational change risks placing the culture of the organization in a relationship that is counter to the inherent nature of the individual. It is not in our nature to accept change easily—it usually represents a loss of something familiar. Nevertheless, in the present economic environment, organizational change has become a fact of life, and we can expect that the rate of change will continue to escalate at an ever increasing pace.

Several years ago the impact of the speed with which the world is changing brought us into a state of stunned consciousness—this was accomplished in a less than five minute YouTube video by Karl Fisch. Listed below are just a few of the updated answers to his question—“Did You Know?”

- Soon China will become the number one English-speaking country in the world.
- China and India have more honor kids than the U.S. has kids.
- The amount of technical information is doubling every two years. For students starting a four-year technical degree, this means that half of what they learn in the first year will become obsolete by their third year.
- We are currently preparing kids for jobs that don’t yet exist; using technologies that haven’t been invented; to solve problems that we don’t even know are problems yet.

“\textit{The trend [toward rapid change] has thrown confusion into the joining of groups. We are ruled by this urge—or maybe a compelling necessity—that began in our most distant ancestry. Still today every person is a compulsive group-seeker, hence an intensely tribal animal. It is through this tendency to submerge ourselves in a group we seek to find a certain security.”} 18

Perhaps the difficulty that we have with our organizations and with its change initiatives can be briefly summed up by saying—we have lost what was once the instinctive meaning of our attachment to the “group”. If we have been distanced from what we sense is the original purposes of our organizations, we then look to find meaning in those more peripheral things in the organization.

It is important for us to feel, as our genes do, the weight of disappointment over the loss of the meaning in the group. It is because of this that we seek new ways to replace within our employing organization what we have lost—the security that comes with participation that brings a sense of belonging.

\section*{Conclusion}

In this paper we presented four human qualities that seem to have either positive or negative correlations with each other. The possible connection of these qualities suggests that there is a circular process that emerges in the life of a group. It involves an interaction between human nature, culture, attachment behavior, and organizational change.

As a culture began to emerge in the earliest human groups it was based on security needs and used attachment behavior to form bonds between individuals. This led to a collaborative working relationship. Based on this alliance the culture provided the various attributes necessary for the security and the survival of this newly formed group. At some point, however, a threatened or lost attachment would lead to a period of instability and mourning.
It appears some groups were successful in surviving the loss associated with change. In this environment change is inevitable, and may enhance the purposes of the organization. But paradoxically while it may activate attachment behavior and brings a period of mourning, it could also be used to bring us closer together and further reinforce our attachment to the group...

Today the employing organization is an equivalent to the type of group that provided all the security needs for our most distant ancestors. The size and the nature of modern organizations does not lend itself to easily or directly addressing many of those concerns. In order to survive organizations now depend on economics, dividends, and investors. Much of the organization’s interest is now based on survival for its own sake, and not for ours. Therefore it no longer provides us with all the security we inherently seek.

For us as individuals, Bowlby provides us with the following insight:

“…[a healthy response to loss] is defined as the successful effort of an individual to accept both that a change has occurred in his external world and that he is required to make corresponding changes in his internal, representational world and to reorganize, and perhaps to reorient, his attachment behavior accordingly.”19

It is “as if” modern humans have facilitated the development of a vicious cycle. Human nature compels attachments, change leads to broken attachments which lead to disruptive behaviors which destabilize culture, which increases the need of human nature for secure attachments… We may find them still available in the symbols, rituals, and artifacts embedded in our cultures.

In many cases, it seems organizations have jettisoned concern for their employees with a grudging payment of their wages. As leaders in organizations, it is our responsibility to understand and respect the inter-relationship between human nature, organizational culture, the consequences of change, the meaning and mechanisms of attachments, and the security and stability of our workforce. If we do not apply this new information during our planning and management initiatives, our efforts will continue to fail at an unacceptable rate.

Although we now live in the world of today, it will take considerably more time for us to leave behind the very different and distant world of yesterday. In the meantime, we will adjust and learn to find the security we seek in the available substitutes….
References


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