

Advances in Project Management Series¹

Why culture really matters: The hidden perils of acculturation

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According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, acculturation is defined as the cultural modification of an individual, group, or people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture. The phenomenon refers to the cultural change that stems from intentional blending between cultures, which aims to alter a pre-existing perspective, approach or way of thinking and replace it with a preferred, and more highly valued alternative response pattern.

A 'giant' new kid on the block

The 1984 breakup of AT&T in the US, resulted in the creation of seven independent telecoms companies that were formed from the original twenty-two AT&T controlled members of the Bell system. Pacific Bell, controlled by the holding group, Pacific Telesis Group, was considered by many to be the weakest of the emerging new organisations.

“Of all the Bell regional holding companies, Pacific Telephone holds the most risk for investors. The company’s record of poor earnings and its long-running feud with the California Public Utilities Commission make it a risky investment at best.” New York Times, 1985

Finding itself within the new and fiercely competitive Californian telecommunications marketplace, Bell Pacific had to reform itself into a savvy and successful organisation, much removed from its Bell origins. Bell Pacific launched aggressive marketing campaigns to capture a significant share of the burgeoning market. However, the company quickly found itself enmeshed in controversy for selling unneeded telephone services to non-English speaking customers who did not understand what they were buying. As tales of the dubious sales tactics of the company became public knowledge, morale within the organisation plummeted and its reputation, increasingly on par with that of a dubious used car dealership, also took a hit (Kirp, 1989).

¹The PMWJ *Advances in Project Management* series includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK and by Routledge publishers worldwide. Each month an introduction to the current article is provided by series editor **Prof Darren Dalcher**, who is also the editor of the Gower/Routledge *Advances in Project Management* series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. To see [project management books published by Gower and other Routledge publishers, click here](#). Prof Dalcher’s article is an introduction to the invited paper this month in the PMWJ.

Bell Pacific decided to turn its attention to transforming the organisation into a modern and efficient conglomerate. Modernising the company would require the shaking up of its massive workforce of 62,000 workers and drastically reshuffling the rigidly hierarchical structure, described as a steep pyramid with 14 very precisely delineated levels.

In search of a new culture

More crucially, management also targeted the total transformation of the culture within the organisation. They were worried that Pacific Bell did not have the right culture and competitive attitude and concerned that employees were not sufficiently entrepreneurial for the corporation to be able to succeed in its new environment.

Looking for direction, they turned to a well-known, local Californian recluse and organisational development consultant, Charles Krone. Years earlier, Krone made his fame as an internal specialist within the Proctor & Gamble soap division, for which he set up a liquid detergent plant in Lima, Ohio, that outperformed every other soap plant in the company (Rose, 1990). His counterpart, Herb Stokes, who had since become a corporate consultant and rancher in Abilene, Texas — led a similarly successful effort at a P&G paper products plant he organised in Albany, Georgia. Krone's methodology was based on a mélange of systems theory, socio-tech thinking, sufi mysticism and the writing of 20th Century Armenian Mystic George I. Gurdieff who believed that most humans spent their days in 'waking sleep' and that is only by shedding ingrained habits of thinking that individuals could liberate their inner potential.

Krone's work was supposed to teach people to think more precisely, but it was jargon-laden and off-putting (Rose, 1990). Pacific Bell contracted with two associates of Charles Krone for \$40 million worth of leadership development and personal-growth training (Kirp, 1989), to acculturate the workforce and embed the new culture. Some reports suggest that the full figure was closer to \$147 million. Staff at Pacific Bell were instructed in new concepts such as 'the law of three' (a thinking framework that helps to identify the quality of mental energy that people have), and discovered the importance of 'alignment', 'intentionality' and 'end-state visions' (Spicer, 2017).

'This new vocabulary was designed to awaken employees from their bureaucratic doze and open their eyes to new higher-level consciousness... But it had some unfortunate side effects. First, according to one former middle manager, it was virtually impossible for anyone outside the company to understand [it]. Second, the manager said, this new language led to a lot more meetings, and the amount of time wasted nurturing this higher consciousness meant that everything took twice as long.' (Spicer, 2017)

While the acculturation effort was packaged in the New Age language of psychic liberation, the training was backed by all the normal threats of an authoritarian corporation (Spicer, 2017). Managers were regularly summoned to the offices of their superiors, following the traditional hierarchical structures, to quell rebellion and ensure their underlings followed instruction.

The idea behind the system was that certain words help employees to communicate better, improving the health of the entire organisation. The approach backfired massively. Instead, of opening up communication, it sharpened divisions between the few adherents and the rest of the organisation (Kirp, 1989). Instead of easing relations with the Californian utility regulator, the controversial corporate expenditure triggered a public inquiry and ultimately resulted in the issuing of a 'cease and desist' recommendation, which Pacific Bell decided to ignore.

While attendance at the "Krone sessions" was supposed to be voluntary, those who resisted were left with the impression their careers would be jeopardized (Rose, 1990). Eschewing the organised opportunity to "care more about their work and express themselves more clearly", several Pacific Bell employees wrote to their congressmen with allegations of mind control, sparking a public outcry.

On October 30th 1987, Pacific Bell finally announced the abandonment of its costly leadership development programme in favour of a more mainstream employee-training programme.

"We tried to do too much too fast," President Philip Quigley conceded in announcing an end to the program... "With all the challenges posed by the changing nature of our business, we found we were moving too quickly." (Keppel, 1987)

The role of culture

Organisational theory, organisational behaviourists and change experts have long recognised the fundamental role of culture and its impact on the success and failure of organisations and their endeavours.

Failure is a great and dear teacher. As we have seen, organised attempts at engineering an appropriate culture, underpinned by agreed and acquired attitudes, norms and emotions can cause significant industrial and emotional upheaval, spectacularly achieving the exact opposite of the harmony and growth originally intended. The consultants working for Pacific Bell failed to recognise the need to reconcile the proposed new methodology with the existing culture within the organisation thereby feeding an on-going clash between cultures.

MIT Professor, Edgar Schein, who has made his reputation, and academic career, in the area of organisational culture has observed that '*organizational learning, development and planned change cannot be understood without considering culture as the primary source of resistance to change.*' (Schein, 2016).

Schein noted the central role of culture: '*The bottom line for leaders is that if they do not become conscious of the cultures in which they are embedded, those cultures will manage them. Cultural understanding is desirable for all of us, but it is essential for leaders if they are to lead.*' (Schein, 2016).

Schein developed a detailed organisational culture model to make culture more visible within the organisation by dividing organisational culture into three levels:

- **Artefacts:** Artefacts and symbols that mark the surface of the organization and include any tangible, overt or verbally identifiable elements in an organization: Logos, architecture, furniture, dress code, office jokes. Artefacts are the visible elements in a culture and they can be recognised by people not part of the culture.
- **Espoused values:** Stated standards, values and rules of behaviour
- **Assumptions:** Basic underlying assumptions and values; deeply embedded ideas, taken-for-granted behaviours which are usually unconscious, but constitute the essence of culture. These assumptions are typically so well integrated in the office dynamic that they are difficult to discern from within.

The three layers of culture are sometimes described as the onion layers of culture, with the outer layer representing the visible and identifiable artefacts, with inner layers made of espoused values, further underpinned by hidden assumptions. The model can easily explain why making external changes at one level, such as the company logo, will fail to address internal priorities, issues and values and thus will fail to embed and anchor a wider change in culture.

Culture invades project management

Now, what would happen if we turned the lens of culture onto our very own profession?

The guest feature this month, authored by Gabrielle O'Donovan, examines the creation of a culture of partnership between project management and change management. It is extracted from her recent book *Making Organizational Change Stick: How to create a culture of partnership between project and change management* published by Routledge. Gabrielle takes issue with the poor results of organisational change initiatives and wonders whether the disconnect between the cultures of project management and change management plays a key part in embedding the gap between the different disciplines and stopping the bridging of cultures which should surely lead to a better track record in delivering organisationally ready change initiatives.

Gabrielle's work makes a case for establishing a productive partnership between the professions of change management and project management and she sets about to determine what such a partnership might look like. Her model focuses on culture as a common link between the professions and she utilises it to ascertain why the new culture is essential for business benefit realisation and utilise it in the development of life cycle integration and improvement across the different domains. The work proposes strategy, structures and processes that are informed by the cultures of both disciplines and which are able to integrate the strengths of both areas and develop a sustainable, and commercially powerful and meaningful business change.

Gabrielle's work extends existing ideas within cultural theory to develop new and heightened understanding of the impact of culture in projects. More critically, she is able

to utilise such models to surface ideas regarding the common culture needed to underpin the integrated perspective of change and projects. She is also able to offer specific mechanisms for developing the joint culture through shared artefacts, life cycles and perspectives that can enrich both disciplines. Following the proposals made in the work can enrich the development and management perspectives and offer the common ground needed to build a supportive new culture capable of supporting new understanding and insights.

When Culture strikes back

Management professor, Adam Grant observed that *'The culture of a workplace - an organization's values, norms and practices - has a huge impact on our happiness and success'*.

Yet, one of the key problems is in seeing how cultures can work together and looking across the divide to build on what is already commonly in place.

French Philosopher, Pierre Bourdieu noted *'the point of my work is to show that culture and education aren't simply hobbies or minor influences. They are hugely important in the affirmation of differences between groups and social classes and in the reproduction of those differences'*.

Culture continues to provide an immutable barrier to communication and problem resolution.

The imposition of the new change regime at Pacific Bell created difficult conditions for tens of thousands of internal employees. Amongst them was a young computer programmer struggling to make sense of the shifting new work culture. During the difficult transition period, the young programmer started to draw a cartoon that mercilessly mocked the new management-speak and strange culture that invaded his workspace and impacted his life. The comic strip featured a hapless and micromanaged office drone, his disaffected colleagues, his evil boss, and an even more evil management consultant who was intent on making everyone's life a misery (Spicer, 2017).

The cartoon became an instant hit, syndicated in newspapers all over the world. The programmer's name was Scott Adams and the series of cartoons he created was *Dilbert*.

The consultant's brand of 'kroning' methodology, as it became known, barely lasted a couple of years. However, in a bitter twist of irony, the humour that emerged from the pain of dealing with the vagaries of management speak, and ill-conceived acculturation continues to entertain new generations of workers and managers. Indeed, the longest lasting legacy of the Pacific Bell educational programme experiment, which cost at least \$40 million, is the series of cartoons celebrating its folly... Dilbert has won multiple awards and is now recognised as one of the best international comic strips as it continues to share the lessons of poor management and flawed culture.

It is only by paying attention to culture and its deeper impact that we can begin to address the anthropological side of bringing people on board and the social and personal aspects of embedding and delivering meaningful change.

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Editor's note: Editor's note: Prof Darren Dalcher is the editor of the Gower/Routledge Advances in Project Management series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. The PMWJ Advances in Project Management series includes articles authored by Routledge book authors; the above article is an introduction to the invited paper this month by another Routledge author. [To see recent project management books published by Routledge, click here.](#)

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Professor Dalcher has written over 200 papers and book chapters on project management and software engineering. He is Editor-in-Chief of *Software Process Improvement and Practice*, an international journal focusing on capability, maturity, growth and improvement. He is the editor of two book series, *Advances in Project Management*, published by Routledge and of a companion series *Fundamentals of Project Management*. Heavily involved in a variety of research projects and subjects, Professor Dalcher has built a reputation as leader and innovator in the areas of practice-based education and reflection in project management. He works with many major industrial and commercial organisations and government bodies in the UK and beyond.

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