LUCID

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THOUGHT

{ # Culture eats strategy for breakfast!

The title of this Lucid Thought is a quote that is reported to have been used as a slogan by the Ford Motor Company during their corporate transformation. We have used it because on three occasions over this last month we have been facilitating workshops with very different clients when the challenges of their organisational culture being a major obstacle for them in achieving their objectives has arisen.

In one example, a systematic optimism bias underpinned by **"we are intelligent, this can't happen to us"** was at play. In a second example, the dominant culture was **'cosy'** and **'nice',** not holding individuals or groups accountable for results. In the third example, the strong desire for collaboration and consensus resulted in governance structures that were not fit for purpose in driving key business decisions. In all three cases, the culture was promising to **"eat strategy for breakfast".**

The theoretical perspective on organisational culture is well researched, for example the great work by Gerry Johnson on the organisational cultural paradigm. Shared stories, symbols, structures, processes and rewards provide the underpinning context for shared organisational behaviours such as approaches to communication, and leadership and decision-making styles. Strong organisational cultures provide cohesion and focus and institutionalise success, and that is good. But they can also sustain ineffective practices and unthinking **'herd-like'** behaviours. Organisations with weaker organisational cultures are easier to change, but then of course more difficult to control. Therein lies the dilemma for all organisations and working groups.

The latest research by Murray-Webster and Hillson in their new book **"Managing Group Risk Attitude"** (Gower, 2008) also uncovers insights into the power of organisational culture. In researching the primary influences on groups making decisions in risky and important situations, it was found that groups consistently aligned either around the nominated leader (typically the person who had the most organisational power and who cared most about the decision) and then "followed the leader"; or aligned around the norms of the organisational culture using this as justification for behaviour and decisions.

So what is to be done?

Awareness of what is happening has to be the first step and there are lots of ways that organisations can use to begin this awareness and diagnosis step (if you'd like to learn about some we'd be happy to help with specific suggestions of tools and interventions you could use – some ours, some belonging to others).

Following this, however, there are some personal attributes that are proven to have significant effect. These attributes are component parts of what can be called emotional literacy or intelligence (again we can recommend some good reading and diagnostics in this area). Another label used by some is personal mastery. The key elements seem to be:

- *Constructive discontent*
- *Intentionality (sometime called delayed gratification or impulse control)*
- *Courage*

Constructive discontent can be summed up by the lovely quotation attributed to the Chicago chewing gum pioneer William Wrigley Jnr

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Creating Value by Shedding Light on Managed Change
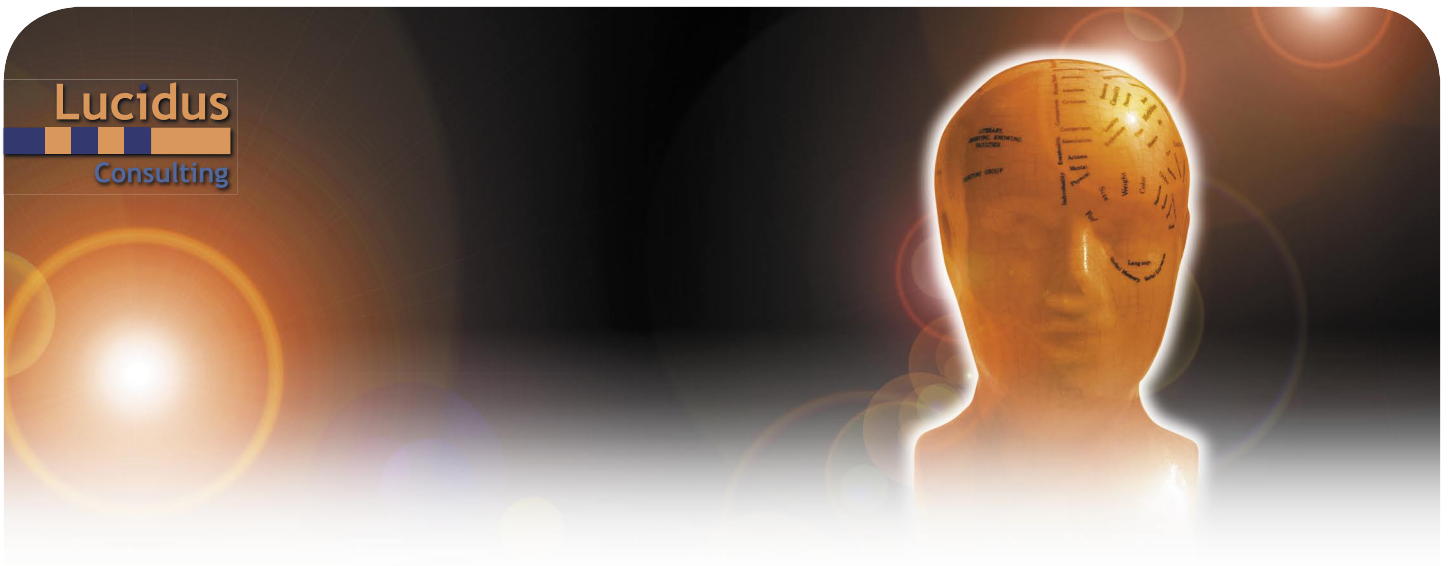
who said **"when two people in business agree, one is unnecessary".** It is about the ability to discover and use human discontent for a constructive, positive purpose. If aspects of your organisational culture are preventing the achievement of objectives then the first step has got to be for some debate about the norms and habitual patterns of behaviour, rather than blind acceptance.

Intentionality requires a focus on a longer-term goal and an ability to **'choose your moment'** to have the best outcome. Like the words of the popular 1940s song **"Fools rush in (where angels fear to tread)"**, to break into habitual patterns of behaviour requires an intention to achieve a longer-term goal and an ability to find times when an assertive intervention has a good chance of being heard.

Despite all that, to challenge the status quo tends to take **courage.** According to Wikipedia, **courage,** also known as bravery, will or fortitude, is the ability to confront fear, pain, risk/danger, uncertainty, or intimidation. Whilst most of us won't need to use **"physical courage"** in the workplace, we are often required to have **"moral courage"** or the ability to speak out in a way that challenges the organisational norms in the face of opposition, discouragement, shame or scandal.

Some of you might by now be thinking has this really got something to do with project management? Our answer, and the answer of a growing number of commentators in our discipline, is a resounding yes of course it is something to with project management. Projects do not succeed in a vacuum, they only succeed when the organisational and human context is right. An ability to manage ones self as well as lead others in that context is arguably the No.1 skill.

So if your work leaves you with the sense that the culture in the organisation is **'eating you and your project for breakfast',** this Lucid Thought may have provided some food for thought in how you might manage that.

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