

A New Metaphor for Culture Change Leadership

The world of work and organizations has changed dramatically in the last several decades since the first *Corporate Culture Survival Guide* was published. What we mean by “leading,” by “changing” something, and by “culture” have evolved into complex, dynamic, systemic concepts that are completely intertwined with each other.

If we don’t take these more complex concepts and their interconnection seriously, we will continue to have change programs that either fail completely or fail to deliver what they promised. Starting with “leadership,” we’ve seen significant movement from “command and control” variants to “transformational leadership,” “distributed leadership,” “servant leadership,” and, in our own thinking, to a broader concept of *humble leadership* (Schein & Schein, 2018).

The concept of “change” has evolved from a predominant assumption that successful change is a series of steps launched at the top of the organization and cascaded down through the echelons in a linear and programmatic manner. That model is still very much with us, but it has begun to compete with a growing number of “bottom-up” or “innovation happens everywhere” change models.

Historically prevalent change models, largely based on Kurt Lewin’s “unfreezing, changing, refreezing” are being displaced by the growing recognition that we are living in a VUCA world of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity in which change is continuous, whether we like it or not (Johansen, 2017).

And what about “culture”? This concept’s very ambiguity allows us to project onto it whatever is the most salient organizational theme of the day. The most common projection has been to see culture, alternatively called “climate,” as the feel of the workplace, which engenders a focus on “employee engagement” and various spirited tactics to get the company on the “Best Places to Work” lists.

We have to take such popular notions of culture seriously because they drive many of the current change programs, but we also have to make a strong argument that if we don’t make an effort to show what culture is really all about, we will not be helping organizations achieve some of their most important goals.

A more refined and complex concept of culture results from the changes in the nature of the work that defines many modern organizations. New forms of work have created new kinds of organizations, which, in turn, have revealed cultural issues that are new and different. Ultimately, leading culture change must be seen as an intertwined complex dance of iterative, inclusive, adaptive, nonlinear steps in 360 degrees, top-down, bottom-up, and edge to edge. Culture is not a function, a result, a lever, an outcome, a tool. Culture is the multifaceted learned structure and practice of the people who lead and people who follow, people who work together and build a history that shapes the future. A myth we should abandon is that culture is “something” that can be easily built, managed, and manipulated by leaders and “champions” to create “positive change” over the course of a sprint, hackathon, quarterly initiative, or even annual planning cycle.

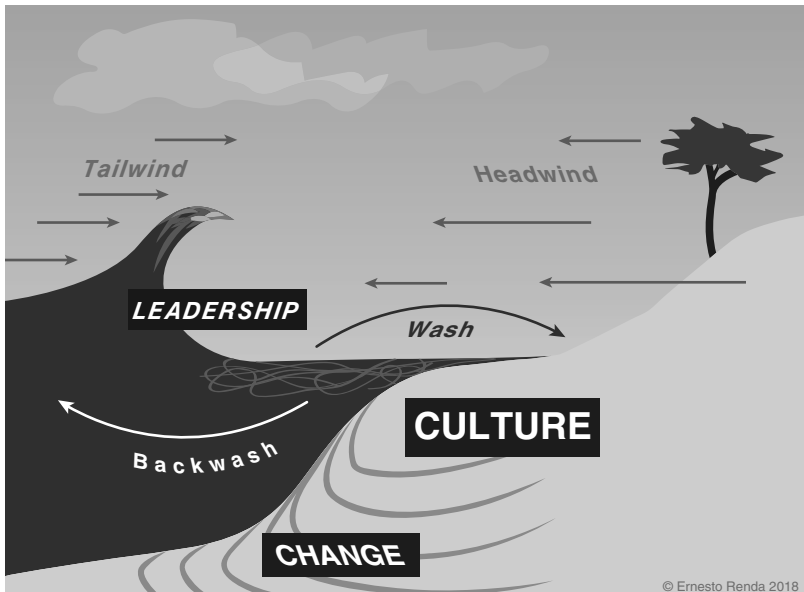
The behavior of leaders and group members based on various values they bring to a new group gradually becomes a shared property of that group and will shape its identity, the way it structures itself, the processes it adopts to get its work done, and the norms it evolves to make life comfortable for its members. Organizational cultures comprise all of these elements of *substrate* in which work happens.

Culture contains observed behavior, the rituals and rites that the group chooses to adopt, the espoused values the group chooses to promulgate, the learning and adaptive structures and processes the group evolves, the deep and taken-for-granted assumptions that give meaning to the daily behavior, and, in the end, culture even contains what the group defines as leadership.

The Beach as a Generative Metaphor

Picture yourself standing on a beach, watching from the side as waves crest and break on a gently sloping beach. Now, take a symbolic leap with us. The water, the ocean, can symbolize the ebb and flow of human initiatives interacting with the sediment of past interactions, which is **culture** symbolized by the sandy beach. If we think of culture *change* as human intentions to make things better, we can think of *tailwinds* blowing from the ocean

Figure 1.1 The Beach as Culture Change Leadership Generative Metaphor



Source: Artwork by Ernesto Renda, 2018

to the shore as the forces toward change, and we can think of *headwinds* as blowing away from the shore toward the ocean, perhaps “resisting” the pressure to change, and their various effects are the natural and technological forces that compel and constrain human action.

When one is dealing with abstract ambiguous changing concepts, such as leading, change, and culture, no analogy or metaphor will really clarify all the complexity. As such, we need a metaphor that captures at least the dynamic positive energy of the concept. The dynamics of the beach with the forces of the water and the wind can serve that function for us.

Leadership can be visualized of as a wave or a set of waves. Wave energy traverses the deeper water as a swell, a gentle movement propelled by some existing or historical force (wind, tide, etc.). As the swell approaches a beach, the normal flow is disrupted, and the wave begins to crest. The wave starting to crest is how we will visualize leadership acting with an intent to create change. The wave cresting is the wave being led by a new combination of forces. The white froth or spray can be thought of as the leader or the leading edge of change.

Change is the outcome of the *swash* of the crested wave on the beach, the impact of the leader’s drive for change impacting the organization, and the *backwash* that then feeds the energy of subsequent cresting waves. The patterns of movement adapt to the forces of the water, the sand/shore and the wind or other atmospheric conditions. The water filling back into the wave, restoring its energy (continuing change) is in a constant feedback loop with the repeatedly cresting wave (sustained leadership). As you study the waves, the feedback and iteration between the leadership crest and resulting change is a *flow*, not a linear cause and effect. The continuous flow, with each crest swash and backwash perhaps looking much the same as the last, will nevertheless have new impacts on the sand or shore, even if it takes many iterations.

Culture is the beach, which created the conditions for the wave to crest (created the conditions for leadership) and is how we will visualize culture. Leadership and change impact the culture (contours of the sand or shore) gradually, perhaps not immediately visible—seeing the change may require observing a few breaking waves. Over the course of a 12-hour tide cycle, or a three-month season, the shape of the beach, the contours of the sand, do reflect the leadership (crest and swash) and change (backwash) process that has been played out. Just as the contours of the beach never remain unchanged, so, too, does culture change with the constant interplay of the crest of the wave swashing forward and the backwash moving sand in relation to the energy of the break and the corollary friction of the beach. Culture is both a friction impeding change and an accelerant shaping the gradual response to the leadership and change cycles.

Intent: Our visual must also capture the process of culture, change, and leadership, continually interacting as a historical process, which is also an intentional man-made process. The next symbolic leap we suggest is that the wind direction and force represent both the forces of nature, the environment in which the beach exists, and the human impetus. At the risk of being too literal with our symbolism, the shape of the wave, the relationship of the crest to the backwash, the relationship of wavelength and frequency, is directly related to which way the wind is blowing. Again, we think of this as human impetus, intention, and resistance. Tailwind shapes the dimensions of leadership, headwind shapes the dimensions of resistance. Change in relation to culture reflect both the dimensions of leadership and the dimensions of resistance.

In planning any kind of change it is perilous to remain at this level of abstraction. Imagine your CEO or board of directors suggests “we need to change our culture,” and you explain the beach metaphor, and ask them if they can articulate where in this model they want to begin, and what problem they are trying to solve by asking for “culture change.” Do they want to shift the

sand around, or move some rocks, or clean up all the kelp debris left behind by turbulent wave activity? What winds are blowing and in which direction?

We suspect you will get some puzzled looks but hopefully it will illustrate this point: The metaphor helps us visualize the complex interaction of leadership culture and change. It may be very important to help illuminate this interaction with this generative metaphor.

The Power of Being Concrete and Specific

The next leap that needs to be made is to start getting specific. What is a CEO's or board of directors' intent in suggesting that "our culture needs changing"? What exactly is not working? What problems are they trying to solve in their organization? *What is worrying them?*

In other words, the only sensible way to tackle culture, leadership, and change as a dynamic interconnected system is to begin with the question "Given that culture is the past, present, and future of the whole system, what specifically needs changing; what, if anything, is wrong where; what is upsetting or disconfirming; what would you like to see different tomorrow in this fluid, dynamic system?" Do we need more tailwind to stimulate initiative and innovation, or less headwind resistance from the old, outmoded processes and structures, or how do we deal with the crosswinds that disrupt the flow and create turbulence? Or, maybe the color of the sand as a metaphor needs to be specified as "our culture problem is that we don't have enough of the right kind of talent."

Intentional change cannot be just waving your arms to create some impetus (tailwind), but should identify clearly what is wrong, so that energy and force can be specifically applied. What *specifically* needs to change and why? "Changing the culture" does not qualify as a sensible answer because it means, de facto, "change everything," change the beach, change the direction

and force of the wind; these things take time and require specific starting points.

A rich generative metaphor will do one other thing: It reminds us that we not only have to be specific about our immediate change goal, but we can never lose sight of how the various parts of the system interact with each other. We can identify specific behaviors, attitudes, structures, and processes to make them targets for change but will likely discover that culture interconnects them all and a change in one aspect will eventually have impacts throughout the system.

The simplest and best example of the failure to see the whole system is the common desire to “change the culture of cooperation, to make teamwork a positive value.” For example, many a board and too many leaders have mandated that sales forces of different divisions of a company should work as teams when they visit customers to avoid the problem of customer confusion about pricing, discounts, and account “ownership” (the single throat to choke).

At the same time, the proposal to change the reward system to group rewards for cross-divisional teams, to abandon the system of individual incentives and annual awards for best salesperson, and to change the system of how sales managers are selected for their ability to create teamwork, are all too frequently rejected. Many an organization has discovered that a widely held belief about the nature of sales is that it works best on an individual incentive basis.

The desire to change toward a team-based selling culture turns out not to be in sync with a tacit assumption about how sales success is actually motivated in the present culture. Changing sales culture by declaring team-based incentives is far more multifaceted than a policy or accounting change. Declaring “teamwork Wednesdays” may be a place to start (a set of waves breaking on the shore), but it may take a few years of Wednesdays to change the deep underlying assumptions about sales success and sales compensation. The contours of the beach change slowly.

What About “Positive Culture”?

It’s a common misperception that what some people call a “positive culture” is a reflection of how engaged employees are in their work. They believe that levers such as desirable benefits, slick and hip designs for office work spaces, modern incentive packages that are personalized to the individual needs of younger millennial workers, and the list goes on, will produce such a positive culture.

Observable artifacts of modern companies may indeed trigger rises in engagement scores on anonymous surveys, but those will at best be temporary and will not likely change any of the deep assumptions about that organization’s identity, assumptions about its technology, and how this fits their perception of their markets, how they chose to structure themselves, how they have evolved a reward and career development system, and yes, in the end, also how they treat their employees on a day to day basis. In other words, the beach is a vast, complicated, multilayered thing, parts of which may indeed need cleaning up, but the whole beach is far too vague a target of change, and by analogy, so is culture.

It has also become common to latch on to the general term “culture” as in creating a “culture of innovation” or a “safety culture,” or a “quality culture.” Our point in talking about leadership, culture, and change in a more practical way is to be more specific, as we will see. In fact, when we consult with leaders who want to change their culture, the first critical intervention is often for us all to agree to stop using the word “culture.” We need to be more specific, preferably giving behavioral examples of what the problem is, what is worrying us, and what we are really talking about.

The main reason for being specific is that when we look around the organizational landscape, we see different variants of beaches in many kinds of natural conditions (technology) and human-created historical conditions.

1. **Organizational age and size:** Young start-ups that are just creating and consolidating their beliefs, values, and behavioral norms are different from the mid-life companies that

have survived so far but now compete with the more powerful older established organizations, those organizations that have had a long history of success but now find themselves in danger of being disrupted. Building a new beach, evolving and protecting the beach you built, and tearing down some of the rocks on the old coast to allow a new beach to form are very different change processes.

2. **Organizational type:** Profit-driven organizations in the business sector, clinics and hospitals in health care, utilities and service organizations, nonprofits, foundations, arts and performance organizations, and government and political organizations all have evolved different types of beaches based on their societal functions and the broader values operating in those different societies. Culture change in such organizations is fundamentally different because the values on which those organizations are based are different.
3. **The type of work and the underlying technology:** Organizations have undergone a huge shift over the past hundred years from being production machines using various sorts of manual labor to being knowledge-based service systems that combine purely cognitive work processes with robotics, artificial intelligence, and other more automatic production and distribution systems. New forms of work will create new kinds of organizations that will create different kinds of cultures and different forms of change.

In other words, what we mean by leadership, what we mean by culture, and what we mean by change have all evolved dramatically and have themselves become more specific, so we lean on a variety of examples in this book rather than just focusing on one general model.

To create a template for those stories, we introduce in the next chapter some refinements of the concepts of leadership, culture, and change that can serve as middle ground between the general definitions and various examples that we will provide.

