

Culture Quotient

Sharpening your awareness of how culture helps companies succeed

In order to survive, humans must provide for their material, emotional and intellectual needs. These are satisfied by culture, a complex system that includes tools, language, arts and beliefs.

—Royal Museum of British Columbia

The reality is that you walk into a sales office, factory, head office and in the first fifteen to twenty minutes, you will get a smell. You will get a smell in the quality of the hum. You will get a smell in the looks in people's eyes. You will get a smell in how they walk about. That is the smell I am talking about...

—Sumantra Ghoshal

A web of culture spreads through an organization and reflects its members' beliefs, daily customs, and communication. It manifests in how members feel about themselves and their work, how they interact with each other, where they eat and even how they dress. We collect stories that show these nuances of culture in organizations. Often these stories help us see how that culture contributes to the success of the company and the commitment of its members.

Consider these story examples:



Every Monday morning a technology company arranges to have bagels delivered to a central location in the building. The bagels are free to all members of the company. People throughout the organization look forward to Bagel Mondays, which have become an institution. When Martha first started working for this company she noticed that every week a group of women gathered in the office kitchen, and from her desk she enjoyed the smell of their bagels toasting. As a new employee, not knowing many people there, Martha wished she could join the bagel social. But she assumed that the women organized the bagels for themselves and she didn't assume she was welcome. Three months later someone told Martha about Bagel Monday.

By initiating Bagel Monday, this company made a goodwill gesture to its members: get the week off to a good start with some nourishment and a social reason and place to gather. Unfortunately since word of this weekly event didn't get out to newly hired people, the gesture backfired leaving at least one person feeling excluded.



A New York investment institution gives away a significant sum of money to charitable groups every year. It's a big event on the firm's calendar: the members gather for an evening to determine how to distribute the funds. Anyone who wishes to has two minutes to make a pitch for the charity of their choice. Then the group takes a vote and donates the money to the organizations receiving the most votes. The president of this company considers this event one of the highlights of the year. It's a great social occasion, members talk about their favorite causes, and the group thinks about the world outside its doors.

This commitment to charitable giving and the event itself are not widely known outside of the firm and aren't explicitly mentioned in the company's hiring process. What could be a compelling aspect of the firm's identity and could serve to draw similarly passionate prospective hires and partners to the firm isn't used to that effect.



At the time of the industrial revolution every manufacturer made its own unique nuts and bolts. Bolts from one factory would not fit the nuts from another. Eventually William Sellers, an American inventor, standardized thread design in the United States. At the same time England developed its own universal thread design. During World War I, when the British and US provided war materials for each other, British guns had to be re-drilled to fit US bolts while US tanks were re-fit with British screws. Both sides recognized the expense and inefficiency, not to mention the lives at stake, but neither was willing to adapt its thread design to meet the needs of the other. It wasn't until World War II (and millions of dollars and countless lives later) that the two nations reached an agreement on how to make common nuts and bolts. ⁱ

The US-British standoff shows cultural differences (in this case pride or attachment to "how we do things") getting in the way of an obvious best solution. Technically both thread designs were almost identical, yet neither side wanted to adopt the other country's design.



A Texas strip club instituted a policy whereby customers received change at the bar in two-dollar bills. Where before a twenty produced a ten and some ones in change, now a customer received a handful of twos. Over time, the greater community grew to associate the two-dollar bills with the strip club, and customers were motivated to spend them before leaving the club. Club patrons, who previously tipped a dollar tip to a dancer, now slipped a couple of two-dollar bills into their G-strings. ⁱⁱ

Culturally speaking, monetary denominations have no particular meaning—a dollar is a dollar is a dollar. But the strip club transformed U.S. currency into something that was directly associated with their business. By branding the two-dollar bill in this manner, the club changed the way money was spent and viewed within their walls and in their broader community.



In preparation for a presentation we did at a convention of library professionals, we asked participants to tell us about unusual bookmarks left in books returned to the library. That request resulted in the following fascinating list:

piece of grass
feather
lottery ticket
unused plane ticket
insurance plan
strip of condoms
a bag of marijuana
restraining order
seven \$100 bills
Dear John letter
two-inch carpenter's nail
toothpick
a raisin carefully placed at the edge of the page, its tip sticking out
valid passport
snapshot of a family on a roller coaster, everyone screaming
a raw strip of bacon

This list and other library stories told at the conference made participants aware of the unique culture they share. The stories allowed them to bridge hierarchical and regional differences and to connect with each other about the work they do. Though just one symbol, the strip of bacon became an icon and reminder of this culture and their pride in it.

What are some of the hallmarks of your company culture? How are they helping (potentially or actually) or hindering your success? Ask each of these questions of yourself, your leaders and the members of your company.

1. What beliefs, events, tools, language, and daily practices make our company unique?
2. What practices do we have that, if they were better known within our walls, would cultivate greater trust, collaboration and commitment?
3. What practices do we have that, if they were better known beyond our walls, would compel prospective members, partners and customers?
4. What practices do we have that are culturally driven but that might not be the best business practices? Is it worth it to change the way we do things? Is it possible to change?
5. What new practices could we establish that could have a memorable creative effect on our audience and community?
6. What particularly iconic stories speak to our members? What brings a universal smile of recognition? What makes them proud? What signifies their connection and belonging?

We recommend the following ways to explore these questions:

- Hold story circles (groups of 8-12 members) that focus on one or more of these questions at a time.
- Start a company-wide dialogue on these questions by email, intranet blog or wiki. For example, ask one of these questions to your company members by email. The following week publish a compilation of the stories and responses you receive and pose the next question.
- Identify long-time members and partners of your company and ask them to write or speak to one or more of the questions.
- Post one or more of these questions in a common or social area in your work environment and invite members to contribute stories and responses. Provide index cards and pens and a way to post the responses.

About Culture Mine

Culture Mine is a trio of consulting partners—Debbie Cullen, Rachel Carey DeBusk, and Stokley Towles—committed to helping organizations develop a stronger identity through knowing and telling their stories. We offer creative services in qualitative research, concepting and production, experiential learning design, training and facilitation, and narrative communication.

ⁱ Hall, Edward T. *The Silent Language*. Anchor Books: New York. 1973. Pages 201-202.

ⁱⁱ Brooks, Amanda. "The Two-Dollar Dance." *Utne Reader*. Ogden Publications, Inc. September 2007. Page 14.