WHITE PAPER

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LINCOLN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS SCHOOL

ROYAL AIR FORCE Tedder Academy of Leadership

The Tedder Talks 2020 – Leading Organisation Culture Change: Summary Paper

Interviewees:

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Kevin Billings, CEO and founder of Legation Strategies, Hon Group Captain, 601 Squadron

Lord Karan Bilimoria CBE DL, Founder of Cobra Beer, Independent Cross-bench Peer House of Lords, Chancellor University of Birmingham, President CBI, Hon Group Captain, 601 Squadron

Sally Bridgeland, Actuary, (advisory, financial services), Hon Group Captain, 601 Squadron

Air Vice-Marshal Maria Byford QHDS RAF, Chief of Staff Personnel and Air Secretary

Neil Everett, CEO, Selenity

Air Vice Marshal Ian Gale MBE, MBA, MA, RAF, Assistant Chief of the Air Staff

Hugh Griffiths, CEO and Founder, Inzpire

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Air Commodore J F (Fin) Monahan OBE DFC PhD RAF, Head Doctrine, Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre

Dr Habib Naqvi MBE, Director, Workforce Race Equality NHS England

Paul Newman, CEO, Chairman and founder of ICAP Energy Ltd

Joe Robinson, CEO Improbable Defence

Siobhan Sheridan, People-Civ HR Director, Director of D&I, MOD

Peter Singer, Strategist at New America & Professor of Practice at Arizona State University

Professor Mary Stuart CBE, Vice Chancellor, University of Lincoln

Kerrin Wilson, Assistant Chief Constable, Lincolnshire Police

Interviewer:

Dr. Craig Marsh, Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Director,
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Introduction

This paper summarises the key themes emerging from the RAF Tedder/University of Lincoln "Tedder Talks", a series of short video interviews with a diverse group of leaders from inside and outside the RAF conducted using an online platform over the summer of 2020. The purpose of the interviews was to explore the experience of senior leaders in leading organisation culture change. It is designed to accompany the library of interviews, available on the Tedder and University website, each around 20 minutes long, and a summary video highlighting the main themes from the interviews, conducted by Group Captain Emma Keith, Commandant of the Tedder Academy, RAFC Cranwell, and Dr. Craig Marsh.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first outlines some common ways the interviewees conceptualised the notion of 'organisation culture', obviously which is a necessary condition for thinking about how to lead cultural change. There was also an interesting convergence of views about what represents 'good' organisation culture, despite the diversity of individuals and organisations covered by the interviews, and these are described in the second section.

The third section describes the main points that serve to answer the core question, as it were, of the interviews: how do you lead organisation culture change? – and is divided into subsections to illustrate some of the main insights.

Finally, all of the interviewees left us with their 'top tips' for leaders engaged in cultural change; the fourth section briefly summarises those insights.

1. What is organisation culture?

'Organisation culture' doesn't lend itself to easy definition (by one count, according to a recent academic paper, there are over 1500 such definitions), and senior leaders, through experience and/or academic study, develop their own 'paradigm', or working model to guide their approach to leading cultural change. There were several common and characteristic descriptions that emerged from the interviews, with concrete examples of 'good' and 'bad' culture; there was also a great deal of unanimity on what 'good' culture represents in a modern organisation.

The most common working definition considered an organisation as analogous to a living organism, in which culture is represented by: "An organisation's personality, its character" (Gale); "I think about an organisation as a person, and the culture becomes the heart and soul of that person" (Killeavy); and "what an organisation believes about itself" (Byford).

A common characterisation of culture was 'the way we do things round here': "It's about how it feels to work in an organisation, about how things are done" (Naqvi).

That is, the 'how' of the organisation versus the 'why' of purpose and the 'what' of strategy. This definition also reflects the very common view of all our interviewees that culture contains elements that are both visible (traits, behaviours, artefacts and symbols) and invisible (values, unwritten rules of behaviour, attitudes, and deeply held beliefs):

"The configuration of norms, values, and beliefs that are held by the employees of that organisation and that sets them apart from other organisations" (Henton); "the assumptions we have, and values that we uphold" (Sheridan).

This element of the 'invisible' was characterised by several interviewees as the way people behave "when no-one is looking" (Gale).

Organisation culture was also clearly defined by several interviewees as having a strong, binding characteristic that distinguished one organisation from another, that is recognisable - especially to outsiders, though not always when you're inside it: "for someone that has worked there all their lives, it's obvious and intuitive, but for an outsider, completely baffling" (Bridgeland).

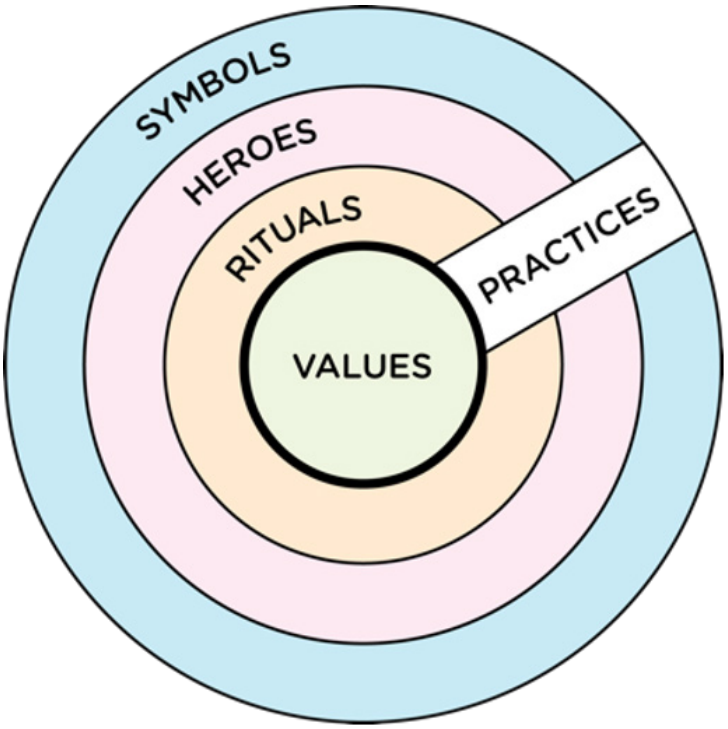
It is, importantly, amenable to being managed, and an essential 'tool' for leaders in achieving their aims, to be deployed to "drive objectives to where you need them to be" (Newman). and "to ensure people reach organisation goals" (Billings). One interviewee specifically used the analogy of 'glue' that binds the organisation together (Griffiths); another "the water we swim in" (Sheridan). It was also described as an "esprit de corps" (Bilimoria), a "motivating factor" (Henton), and something that "ensures everyone is working toward the same purpose" (Wilson). It is a "tool for leadership that needs thought and preplanning" (Killeavy); and a "strategic element for leaders to consider that needs aligning with structure and process" (Stuart).

The overriding, primordial importance of recognising and managing organisation culture was reflected in a recurring quotation from the late management guru Peter Drucker, that 'culture eats strategy for breakfast'. In other words, if "you're not managing culture, you won't achieve your strategic aims; you won't get there at all" (Newman). However, there was a more sophisticated elaboration of the relative importance of 'culture' and 'strategy' from our interviewees, lest one fails to appreciate the importance of leading both:

"Culture snacks on [strategy] a bit, but you can't get away with a fantastic culture and a bad strategy, you have to align those two aspects together" (Robinson).

In summary, these working definitions describe a degree of coherence in the way senior leaders from diverse organisations conceptualise organisation culture, which, despite the many ways organisation culture has been defined by those who study it, reflect most closely the 'cultural onion' referred to directly by a couple of interviewees, and still widely taught in management courses on culture. It is perhaps best known from the work of Geert Hofstede:[1]

1 Geert Hofstede: Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions and Organisations across Nations, Sage, 2001



Hofstede believed that 'symbols', on the outer layer, are the most superficial, whilst values in the core, are the deepest manifestations of culture. They are words, gestures, pictures or objects that carry a particular meaning that is only recognised by those who share the culture.

Heroes are persons, alive or dead, real or imaginary, who possess characteristics which are highly prized in a culture, and who thus serve as models for behaviour.

Rituals are collective activities carried out by the group. Whilst rituals are overt ways the group can demonstrate their shared connection. Ways of greeting and paying respect to others, social and religious ceremonies are examples of rituals.

At the heart of the onion lie values, which Hofstede describes as "The broad tendencies to prefer certain states of affairs over others" (Hofstede 2001).

Hofstede's work implies that values are one of earliest things that became engrained in our psyche, becoming a firm part of our identity, even before adolescence. Because they are developed so early on in life, many values pass into our subconscious. From an observer's perspective, knowing another person's value set is not something which is observable nor necessarily predictable, nor can the person who holds the values actually coherently elicit what they are when prompted. Hofstede implies this when he says, "Values can only be inferred from the way people act under various circumstances". Culture can therefore hide more than it reveals.

On the right of the onion, Hofstede includes the phrase "Practices" which spans the first three layers starting from the outside. These layers are actually observable in a physical, behavioural and tangible sense, but contrastingly, their cultural meaning or imbued value set is not observable and, in most cases, only the holder of the said culture truly understands how each should be interpreted.

The majority of interviewees saw culture as 'one thing', a homogeneous trait of organisations analogous to the personality of an individual; however, one interviewee saw culture as something more heterogeneous, a collection of formal and informal 'sub-cultures' with no neat pattern to it:

"it's about bringing together the beliefs and values of the organisations – all the different beliefs and subcultures… it's messy, not something that you can take a clinical view of or think you can just change it from 'here' to 'here'…. It's a summation of lots of different things" (Hobbs).

This perspective reminds us of the complex and multifaceted nature of organisation culture; and in case there was any room for doubt, all interviewees agreed that leading successful culture change is therefore a long term strategic project, especially in organisations that have a deep and shared history and therefore a 'strong culture', such as the NHS (Naqvi – "a marathon, not a sprint") and, of course, the RAF.

2. Is there such a thing as a 'good' organisation culture?

Although from a diverse set of organisations, the interviewees shared a degree of consensus in the characteristics of 'good' organisation culture, either through the examples of cultures they had changed, or aspirations for their current organisations; these characteristics appear regardless of the size, scope, or nature of the organisation.

All interviewees aspired to create an organisation culture based on 'high trust', openness, engagement with all members, and the free flow of information across hierarchies and boundaries. Indeed the concept of 'hierarchy' itself seems to be undergoing something of a cultural transformation, moving from a rigid mechanism of control and authority, to a mechanism for facilitating information flow, and, crucially, the 'empowerment' of junior levels to contribute fully to change:

"We had very bright people at very junior levels who found it difficult to get heard… so I instituted a regular meeting where I got everyone together, where there was no rank as such, and talked about problems and what's coming up" (Beaver)

Or, putting it simply, creating a culture that allows people to be able to run their own lives: "I wanted to live in a society where there's a high level of trust, and people can simply get on with things" (Griffiths).

Closely related to this consensus on openness and trust was an aspiration for diversity and inclusivity based on protected characteristics. Diversity of thinking - 'neurodiversity' was at the forefront of interviewees' conceptualisation of a 'good' organisation culture; "helping avoid groupthink and strengthening decision making and solution development" (Bridgeland) being some of the stated benefits of diversity. Without a fully inclusive culture any organisation is failing fully to exploit the talent available to it:

"Diversity is all about getting the best out of the talents of our people… in order for our people to bring their talent they have to bring their true selves to work, irrespective of their background, gender, race, or ethnicity" (Byford).

A culture that combines kindness and empathy between its members was a recurring theme of the interviews, regardless of type of organisation. Interviewees emphasised "one community" (Stuart), "promoting being nice to each other, supporting each other" (Everett), with the characteristic of being 'safe' for people to hold difficult or challenging conversations about equality and diversity (Naqvi); whether to counter poor behaviour (Wilson), to raise problems or concerns and "allow people to speak up without fear of reprisal" (Robinson), or indeed to present new solutions (Monahan).

The reason for such a broad consensus on the characteristics of 'good' culture can be attributed to some common external challenges faced by all of them. The first is the rapid advance of technology:

"The confluence of robotics, of AI, miniaturisation, additive printing, when you bring a number of things together, that's when you get a revolution, and they're fundamentally changing the calculus in so many ways" (Gale)

The second, being a perception that the 'next generation' workforce has a value set far more likely to respond to the kinds of cultural characteristics described in the section above (Beaver); the next generation are "much more used to a higher level of empowerment" (Sheridan).

These common challenges, perhaps with a recognition that traditional power-based hierarchies are unsuited to succeeding in such an environment, provide a clear purpose for cultural change and a common view on the desired outcomes for organisation culture:

"In this era the youth have the power, and the knowledge, and they can drive change in the organisation. In the modern age we need our juniors to be teaching, and in some case leading, our seniors" (Gale)

Creativity and innovation, and to some measure a degree of entrepreneurial attitude, are some of the consequences of developing this type of culture" "we should all have the opportunity to be creative, innovative, and entrepreneurial" (Bilimoria).

3. How do you lead, and sustain, organisation culture change?

Leadership was, perhaps unsurprisingly, considered to be an essential criterion for developing, changing, and maintaining organisation culture. From an 'academic' or theoretical perspective one could argue that the distinction between leading cultural change, and leading any type of organisation change, is often blurred or absent in the responses, but this is perhaps indicative that making a cultural shift is becoming increasingly the 'norm' for any organisation change project. For the sake of clarity, no distinction (if one exists) has been made between these two conceptualisations in this analysis.

3.1 Take ownership, plan

There was a strong sense that leaders could not delegate responsibility for leading cultural change: "I've seen it tried, and at some point it breaks because what the leader is saying is different from what is being told further down" (Everett). Neither could it be forced on people, otherwise there will inevitably be both resistance and sabotage: "culture change is fundamentally a pull, not a push activity" (Griffiths).

An element of successful cultural change leadership is to plan and structure the change, laid out by Habib Naqvi who, as well as demonstrable leadership and accountability for the change at (crucially) middle management level, identified three additional essential criteria for success in a very large organisation such as the NHS: 1) the extensive use of different sources of data to monitor and measure the pace and progress of the change; 2), the celebration of success when positive steps are made; and 3) the importance of communications and media, both internal and external, to ensure no-one feels left out of change interventions.

3.2 Be systemic

Some interviewees emphasised the need for a 'whole system' approach to any project that combined leadership and its consequences with consideration of the potential effects - which can be both supportive of and weighing against change - of organisation systems, reward mechanisms, artefacts or symbols, and team environments:

"Looking across the range of levers available to you, in Defence we looked about how our leaders go about empowering people around them, how we educate them to do that, and how we build team-based environments around them, empowering people to take risks and responsibility" (Sheridan).

3.3 Communicate often, consistently and clearly

Supporting the theme of ownership and accountability in driving culture change, many interviewees underlined the critical importance of leaders thinking through and communicating clearly, often, and consistently, "what the change is, why it needs to occur, and how it's going to affect people" (Byford). In particular leaders should ensure that the communication strategy shows how a) the cultural change project is aligned with the organisation's strategic goals: "your intended culture must reflect your strategic aims" (Robinson); b) that it covers the key question usually asked : "in order to get the majority with you, you need to answer what's in it for them" (Griffiths); and c) that the message emphasises the collective nature of the change: "we're all in it together" (Killeavy).

There was also recognition that there would be many leaders in an organisation with responsibility for these key communication tasks, and that a primary criterion for success was to prioritise a sense of common ownership from the leadership cadre for the change project:

"a critical point is to engage every leader in the organisation… who are then going to sell it in to everyone else" (Killeavy).

3.4 Involve others

Insights pointed to the 'top down' nature of leading cultural change and the necessity to initiate or drive change through an organisation's leadership. There was also consensus from interviewees that success can be partly determined by wider involvement in the change process at all levels of the organisation. As well as the obvious advantage of increasing the chances of widespread 'buy in' to the change, this involvement has the added advantage of creating a feedback loop to leaders that gives greater insight into what people think is important for success, and further ideas for refining it:

"picking up ideas from your team, and then driving that from behind, so you're not always leading from the front" (Stuart).

3.5 Create space for constructive challenge and difficult conversations

An important subset of the idea of widespread involvement in change, was identifies as the creation of space for constructive challenge, naturally a difficult behaviour to master, particularly in hierarchical organisations. Many interviewees identified this as an essential criterion and a symbol of the success of any cultural change project. The ability for people to make this kind of challenge - sometimes characterised as the ability to hold a difficult conversation about subjects of disagreement, especially when a senior leader allowed risks or potential failures to be identified and dealt with quickly:

"if you don't have this intellectually safe environment where problems are surfaced quickly, parts of your business could be degrading and you'll be unaware" (Robinson).

It can also minimise the risk of 'group-think'; given that one of the potential disadvantages to a culture change project defined by strong core values is for people to think the same; key to minimising this risk is "enabling people at all ranks to have the courage to say 'this isn't right'". (Henton). Training people in the skill of having these difficult conversations can help to change some of the basic assumptions that lie at the heart of the 'cultural onion' and therefore achieve greater inclusivity. This was described by one interviewee as overcoming the significant difficulty of "introducing the acceptance of permission to challenge the… senior person" (Bridgeland). Hierarchy thus becomes an enabler and a facilitator of the work of those at the 'coal face' (Hale).

In the NHS, the CEO implemented an action learning set process for senior leaders, at their request, to develop the practice and skill of 'difficult conversations' between themselves, and who then "return to their organisations to begin having those conversations with their staff" (Naqvi).

3.6 Deal with failure as a learning moment

A related insight was the need to create an environment that allowed people to deal with failure in a constructive way: "introducing discussion on why it failed rather than blasting them for it seemed like a tiny thing but actually was enormous in its impact" (Hobbs). In high performing organisations there is always a strategic risk that people consider failure to be career limiting or, perhaps less dramatically, a sign of weakness or ineffectiveness. One interviewee referred to the Thomas Edison analogy, in which Edison described himself as someone who knew 1,000 ways not to make a lightbulb: "better to fail doing the right thing, than succeed doing the wrong thing" (Bilimoria). This in turn encourages learning and experimentation, and the "trialling and testing of new ideas and approaches to support successful cultural change" (Wilson).

3.7 Find and work with early adopters

Obviously not everyone reacts to change in the same way, or accepts it at the same pace. In thinking through how to achieve success, most of the interviewees highlighted the importance of working with early adopters, or role models, who most clearly demonstrated the kinds of behaviours, values, and attitudes desired for the new cultural norm. These individuals could help 'sell' the change, and they may not be at the senior levels of the organisation; noting that some may be both junior, and not in formal leadership roles:

"find the leaders who are hidden away, and make sure they're on board" (Killeavy). They are important to engage with and act as ambassadors or 'apostles': "identify the people who truly believe what you believe and get them onside, who then go out and spread the culture for you" (Griffiths).

3.8 Manage resisters

The opposite is also true, that is, the importance of the task of encouraging resisters to the cultural change project to 'come on board'. Paul Newman discussed this issue at length, identifying a main reason for resistance as the fear of loss on the part of the individual (loss of status, knowledge, fear of being left behind). The key message, especially for individuals who may be important negative influencers, is to work with them to identify what they perceive themselves losing in order to help them address those issues. For leaders, this can feel like making oneself vulnerable, and the message is to show people that they need not be worried about opening up to such feelings of loss and being honest about what worries them; then, the fear of loss can be turned through dialogue into seeing new opportunities as a result of the change; or, that there is little point in resisting:

"This can be about fear sharing; saying openly that I may be afraid of the change, but I've thought it through and this is how I think we can work through it. We don't talk enough about fear of change, and how to overcome it" (Newman).

3.9 Develop and reinforce core values and essential behaviours

The theme of developing, reinforcing and encouraging both core values and key behaviours as essential aspects of leading and sustaining cultural change recurred throughout the interviewees' replies. In Lincolnshire Police sustain and monitor their organisation culture by ensuring that core values, which have been developed in consultation with all staff, remain at the heart of all their business processes; project proposals, decisions, awards and new policies, are all tested and discussed in relation to those values:

"We have the PRIDE values and that culture woven through all aspects of the business… at our annual awards for example we highlight people who've displayed high levels of professionalism and integrity" (Wilson).

In the private sector there were several examples of organisations where leaders carefully consulted prior to defining and promulgating a number of core or essential behaviours that were subsequently measured, and rewarded both formally and informally: "our bonus system is based on behaviours as well as results" (Griffiths). They also emphasised the importance of rigorous recruitment processes, that are targeted not

only at core technical skills but also at evaluating the extent to which potential appointees are able to demonstrate that they live by those values and behaviours that are consistent with the desired culture.

3.10 Be consistent, adopt a 'no broken windows' philosophy

There was also emphasis on what one interviewee called the 'no broken window' philosophy for sustaining cultural change (derived from the 'zero-tolerance' approach to crime of the New York Police Department in the 1990s) by not allowing any examples of poor behaviour to go unchallenged. Behaviour could be used as an indicator of both the progress of culture change and a sign of any 'slippage' against the change project "where you're starting to see behaviours that don't align with your culture" (Robinson). Ian Gale identified the changing of behaviour as probably the most important element of leading cultural change, a way of starting what he described as the 'virtuous circle' of change:

"get on and demonstrate that there's a good reason to change, and that there are clear benefits linked to the behaviours… on that journey" (Gale).

3.11 Use symbols and narratives to your advantage

The importance of symbols or symbolic changes recurred throughout the conversations. Sarah Hobbs highlighted how identifying, and making, a 'small tweak' to behaviour or policy can have a symbolic, 'tipping point' effect in a change project that far outweighed the size or complexity of such an inject. For example, finding a way of making people feel comfortable in failing even in a highly regulated environment where such an idea would previously have been considered anathema (Hobbs 19.07). Particular artefacts, such as photographs can powerfully represent both old culture or, when changed or introduced, the new:

"I've seen some really powerful examples… where for example colleagues have commissioned photos of women in close ground combat roles and put them alongside the more historic pictures that are up and about" (Sheridan).

A leader's own style and thoughtful approach can be deployed to good effect to mark and reinforce a change: "Create some myths and legends about you, and about how you're leading, that will spread" (Bridgeland).

Leaders of cultural change will often identify particular moments representing a clear difference from past behaviour or cultural norms, which are either engineered by the leader symbolically, or occur spontaneously:

"when I spoke about the cultural change we'd achieved the team burst into spontaneous applause. A few years earlier they wouldn't have thought it important" (Killeavy).

3.12 Learn continuously, educate everyone

Leaders should never stop learning, taking in information and insights about the changes going on around them in the world, particularly paying attention to online debates where the latest thinking and ideas reside; and turning these into a narrative that makes sense for those around them and communicating this narrative through effective use of social media, that is:

"how you individually speak and communicate in this space, whether you're an operational leader or chief of service" (Singer).

Finally, on the theme of learning in order to sustain cultural change, the importance was noted of educating people at all levels in the implications and complexities of culture:

"we need to teach people what the basics of culture are, to understand how you, as a leader, relate to your organisation's culture, what levers you have to influence it, which are partial, and thinking through whenever you introduce change, the effects of that change" (Monahan).

4. Key tips for leaders of culture change:

All interviewees offered their insights on the key characteristics of leadership behaviour for effective culture change:

- Start with ‘why’, and have a clear and set of goals, communicate them, and be clear about what needs to get done
- Be consistent in showing the sort of behaviour you wish the new culture to represent, and do this visibly
- Find new, creative and original ways of working and problem solving, developing new habits and routines that allow you to get things done differently
- Be kind to yourself, and also to those around you
- Use empowering, rather than autocratic, leadership behaviour
- Acknowledge vulnerability and seek assistance where appropriate
- Find allies, recruit change champions, ambassadors, early adopters
- Be patient, change doesn’t happen overnight, persevere through setbacks, and play the long game: “If you shoot for the stars and make it to the moon, you’ve still made it to the moon” (Gale).

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