

Breakthrough thinking on organisation culture

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Someone in a session I was facilitating last week on organization culture remarked that what we were talking about was nothing new and challenged us to consider what the breakthrough thinking is on it. She was asking the question, 'What are the sudden advances in knowledge or technique that would help us approach organizational culture differently than the way we are currently?'

It's a good question. But one is hard to answer. We tend to think of 'breakthrough thinking' in relation to health or science, not organizational culture. This week's New Scientist, for example, has a [Special Report](#) on 'the breakthrough drugs that keep you younger for longer. And the film '[Longitude](#)', which someone else happened to mention this week, in a different discussion, is about the [breakthrough](#) of the clock method of ship navigation. 'A stunning technical breakthrough came when English carpenter and clockmaker John Harrison built five prototype sea clocks between 1735 and 1772.' For more recent scientific breakthroughs read '[A Brief Explanation of three of Steven Hawking's scientific breakthroughs](#)' or Bill Gates selection of '[10 Breakthrough Technologies 2019](#)'.

But look more closely at these examples and you'll see that the 'breakthrough' is usually a culmination of painstaking research, false hopes, failures, multiple lines of investigation over many years, and a working through of Sam Becket's [line](#) '*Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better*' that finally produces results.

Of course, there are some eureka moments that are instant breakthroughs. An [article](#) in Smithsonian Magazine tells us 'Sometimes, however, a commonly held understanding really is overturned in one fell swoop. As science fiction writer Issac Asimov is said to have quipped, the exclamation that heralds such discoveries isn't really "Eureka!" but "That's funny."' But even those are in a context when, as author [Richard Gaughan](#) says 'preparation, opportunity, and desire come together,' coupled with the fact that they occurred before 'watchful eyes and scientific minds trained to observe them'. In these instances, 'the result can be an accidental discovery that changes our understanding of the world.'

If we want to think of culture 'breakthrough' – in relation to the way we hope to manage or change culture (assuming that this is do-able - a discussion point we took up) then we are likely to need both the conditions that would give rise to the 'breakthrough' and the watchful eyes and minds trained to observe it.

Rebecca Solnit in her book '[Hope in the Dark](#)', exemplifies the watchful eyes and trained mind of a culture observer. She asks 'Who, two decades ago, could have imagined a world in which the Soviet Union had vanished and the Internet had arrived? Who then dreamed that the political prisoner Nelson Mandela would become president of a transformed South Africa? ... few recognize what a radically transformed world we live in, one that has been transformed not only by such nightmares as global warming and global capital, but by dreams of freedom, of justice, and transformed by things we could not have dreamed of. We adjust to changes without measuring them, we forget how much the culture changed.'

She instructs us to 'Turn your head. Learn to see in the dark. Pay attention to the inventive arenas that exert political power outside that stage or change the contents of the drama onstage. From the places that you have been instructed to ignore or rendered unable to see, come the stories that change the world, and it is here that culture has the power to shape politics and ordinary people have the power to change the world. You can see the baffled, upset faces of the actors on stage when the streets become a stage or the unofficial appear among them to disrupt the planned program.'

One of the current tenets of organizational culture is that it is shaped and 'owned' by leaders. See, for example, Boris Groysberg et al's, HBR's article [The Leader's Guide to Corporate Culture](#). The authors tell us: 'For better *and* worse, culture and leadership are inextricably linked. Founders and influential leaders often set new cultures in motion and imprint values and assumptions that persist for decades. Over time an organization's leaders can also shape culture, through both conscious and unconscious actions (sometimes with unintended consequences). The best leaders we have observed are fully aware of the multiple cultures within which they are embedded, can sense when change is required, and can deftly influence the process.'

The article goes on to state that 'Our work suggests that culture can, in fact, be managed. The first and most important step leaders can take to maximize its value and minimize its risks is to become fully aware of how it works. By integrating findings from more than 100 of the most commonly used social and behavioral models, we have identified eight styles that distinguish culture and can be measured. ... Using this framework, leaders can model the impact of culture on their business and assess its alignment with strategy.'

Suppose we took a different view from that of Groysberg et al. Suppose we recognized that culture cannot be 'managed' but is emergent via the complex systems described by Solnit? Suppose we used

watchful eyes and turned our heads and saw that culture lies not in organizational leaders' power/hierarchy structures, or 8 styles, or a framework, (or [iceberg model](#)) but in the inventive arena outside these boundaries: would that result in an organizational culture 'breakthrough' in the way we approach it?

I wonder if we are stuck in the way we think about organizational culture and whether there is a 'breakthrough' possible on it? Maybe we could use the set of questioning assumptions exercise that I find useful if I feel I'm getting [hidebound](#) or the person/people I'm working with are. (I think these originally came from Marilee Adams book [Change Your Questions, Change Your Life](#)):

1. What assumptions am I making about the issue, opportunity, challenge topic ...? What assumptions is my client/are others making?
2. What am I assuming, based on previous experiences, that may not be true *now*? What is my client/are others assuming?
3. What am I assuming about available resources? What is my client/are others assuming?
4. What limitations am I assuming to be so—and what surprises might I find? What is my client/are others assuming and what surprises might they find?
5. What am I assuming about external circumstances? What is my client/are others assuming?
6. What am I assuming about what's impossible—or possible? What is my client/are others assuming?

As I said, the challenge of the question 'where's the breakthrough thinking on organizational culture?' is a useful one. I don't know the answer – I doubt if it's going to be a 'Eureka moment' but it may well happen through painstaking research, failures, and trying again, and questioning our assumptions about it.

Have you seen breakthrough approaches to/thinking on organizational culture? Do we need to be looking for them/it? Let me know.

The post "Breakthrough thinking on organization culture" was first published by Dr. Naomi Stanford here <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/breakthrough-thinking-organisation-culture-naomi-stanford/>

About Dr. Naomi Stanford

Dr. Naomi Stanford is an organization design practitioner and author. During her earlier UK career, Dr. Stanford was an employee of large multinational companies, including Price Waterhouse, British Airways, Marks & Spencer, and Xerox. She moved to the US mid-career working as an organization design consultant to a range of organizations in the government, non-profit and private sectors. She then returned to the UK to work in the government sector. Naomi is now free-lancing as an organization design consultant/adviser. Additionally, she writes books, articles, and a weekly blog (over 800 so far). Naomi speaks at conferences and tweets regularly on organization design. Currently, she is writing the third edition of her Economist book 'A Guide to Organisation Design', to be published in March 2022.

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