"Humans are the only species who is not locked into their environment. Their imagination, reason, emotional subtlety and toughness, make it possible for them to not only accept the environment, but to change it"

Jacob Bronowski

THE PROCESS of CULTURAL SHIFTING

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The term "cultural shifting" is used in this article to describe the process of new or unique items becoming part of an existing community. That is, when a new person, product or idea becomes accepted as viable in the community, then a cultural shift has occurred. The process of cultural shifting is described more fully in the book, along with better understanding of social capital and community engagement in any of the books or articles available at www.alcondeluci.com

The Metaphor of a Bridge

The challenge of cultural shifting is best understood when thinking of the concept of a bridge. Bridges are interesting structures as they blend two important notions, the simplicity of connecting two points, and the complexity of the engineering necessary to make the connection. This blending is clear when you look at the challenge of seeing the reconnection of people to community. The challenge is simple as we try to find ways for people, who are disconnected, to be reunited. The complexity is in making this happen.

A vivid example of this is when the change agent looks at the inclusion of people with disabilities back to the mainstream of the community. To understand this example however we must appreciate the powerful forces of exclusion that precede the challenge. That is, historically people with disabilities have been perceived out of a medical model of deficiency and dysfunction. In my books, Interdependence: the Route to Community (1991, 1995) as well as Beyond Difference (1996) the effects of the medical model and the stigma of difference that have created formidable cultural realities leading to community devaluation are explored. In these books I make the point that the medical treatment model has resulted in people with disabilities being seen in the context of inability, problems or incapability.

With this metaphor of a bridge the change agent can think about the individual with a disability on one side of reality, and the community on the other side. The goal for rehabilitation is to assist the person with the disability move from being excluded on the one side to joining the community at large on the other side. In this example, the gap between the person and the community can be represented in the problems or deficiencies the person is seen as having.

When considering this metaphor it seems clear that the problem or the reason that the person with a disability is off set from community is due to their differences, disability or perceived problem. Given this reality the medical model suggests that the best way to get people from one side of the illustration to the other is to focus the problem or in this case, the disability. In most human service programs this is exactly how the issue of inclusion is addressed. That is, conventional wisdom (the medical model) says that we try to attack or mitigate the differences so that the person can be more easily included into the community. Indeed, in my previous writing I explore this medical model approach in much greater detail. This conventional approach is a linear, and microscopic approach to the inclusion of people with disabilities. It suggests that if we can fix the problem, we can more easily get the person included. The major target for change is the person with the difference.

Although this approach has been practiced for years, in essence it has not led to real community inclusion. We have moved people "into" the community but not really helped them become "of" the community. To continue to position the person with the disability as the problem and to try to change them is to chase the wrong butterfly. This is not how culture has shifted.

Rather than to put emphasis on the person and focus attention on to their differences, I am suggesting that we re-think that approach. Indeed, consider the example of a disconnection between two points. That is, much like our illustration above, if you find yourself at point A and you are interested in getting to point B, but there is a river in your way, one might see the river as a problem. To this end, we might seek out help from an engineer as to how we might mitigate or get rid of the river so that we can pass to point B safely.

In some ways this is how the medical model frames the problem of inclusion for people with disabilities. It suggests that the way to get people included in the community is to fix the problems they have. That is, fill in the river!

However, when we use the metaphor of a bridge, the challenge changes from seeing the river as a problem to thinking what other ways we might safely pass over. Obviously, the focus turns to what it might take to build a bridge. In this shift of thinking, the river is not a problem, but a reality to be addressed based on the strength and stability of the shorelines where we plan to anchor the bridge. Consequently, the more important factors are not the problem posed by the river, but the strength that can be garnered to build the bridge.

To this end, to create a real shift in culture follows this metaphor of a bridge and demands that the change agent think about four critical steps. These steps go contrary to the medical model and in many ways how the human service system relates to people with disabilities. To my way of thinking, however, this is the only way we can get people truly included in the community.

Four Steps to Cultural Shifting

When thinking about how any new person, product or idea can be incorporated into the existing culture the following four steps are always present. As we explore these 4 steps keep in mind how they may have worked for you as you have attempted to incorporate any thing new into your community.

Step 1 – Find the Passion or Point of Connection

As with our bridge metaphor, finding the key points of strength and passion is the first step to cultural shifting. To build a strong bridge we must have a solid foundation to assure the bridge will be safe for passage. For the passage of people, products or ideas into culture require the same strength. To this end we must identify all that is strong or good about that which we hope to shift the culture around.

In many cases people know their passions and interests and are quick to tell you if your bent is toward looking for the positives. With other folks you have to dig. In the work we do with our agency, we often-meet folks who have been so sheltered or inexperienced that they do not readily display their passions. Some people have been so devalued that they cannot seem to find their passions at all. In these types of situations we must give the time and space necessary for people to identify those points of connections. This only happens when people feel valued and respected. It also happens when we welcome and include those who have a history with the person help uncover the passions. Families or other relations have been invaluable for the capacity-building work we do in Pittsburgh.

When you really think about it, this process is the same one we try to use with our children. One of our primary efforts as parents is to discover the interests and capacities of our children so as to connect them to communities that celebrate those same interests. Often this is a discovery process. This was driven home to me when just this past spring my wife and I spent a Saturday cleaning out our garage. As we found and removed old bikes, cameras, hockey sticks, baseball bats, a ballerina tutu, an old trumpet, and other items, I realized that we had identified the relics of culture. All of these items were potential interests we were looking for with our children. Ones that resonated for our children created the steps to community for them. Others became artifacts to our anthropological process for community inclusion.

Step 2 – Find the Venue or Connection Point

With cultural shifting, once the change agent has identified the positive capacities for inclusion or incorporation, the next critical step is to find the place that the person, idea or product will relate. Quite simply, finding the setting where the person, idea or product might be accepted sets the stage for inclusion and cultural shifting.

By venue or connection point I am referring to the viable marketplace for the person, idea or product. With ideas or products the change agent can think in the conventional framework of a marketplace. That is, if you have developed a product that is best suited for accountants, your potential marketplace would be with the fiscal offices of a corporation or with and accounting firm. This, or similar marketplaces offer the best possibility that your product will be understood and, hopefully, purchased.

The concept of venue and connection point has a clear importance. If you are looking to find a framework of new friends, you have a much better chance of connection if you take a hobby, passion or capacity and join up with others who share that same passion. A good, and easy way to examine this is at the website, www.meetup.com. This interactive site will allow you to identify your interest, and your locality, and then introduce you to a variety of clubs, groups, or associations that correspond.

Regardless of situation the bold fact is that people gather. They gather for all kinds of reasons and interests. For every capacity or passion there is a place that people gather to celebrate these passions. Once we get over our habits of segregation and congregation we can come to see that these places are ones that offer a wonderful start point to culture. In these gathering places we can find the key to cultural shifting and the dispensing of social capital and currency.

Step 3 – Understanding the Elements of Culture

The key elements of community. These elements include:

1. **Rituals** – These are the deeply embedded behaviors of the culture that the members expect others to uphold. These behaviors can be formal actions or symbolic activities that members just pick up. A vivid example here for me was the rituals of my college fraternity. After spending the time pledging, we were introduced to the formal rituals that were expected of each brother. After spending a few weeks in the fraternity I also began to pick up the informal rituals that were specific to those of us who were members at the time. In some ways the formal rituals are ones that live beyond generations because they have been deeply sanctioned. The informal rituals are the ones that are developed by the current cohort and are generational in nature.
2. **Patterns** – As we stated before, the patterns of a culture refer to the movements and social space occupied by the members. Patterns are captured in how the members relate to each other as they go about the business of the culture. Patterns almost always revolve around the territory occupied by the

members. As territorial animals we are very rigid and defensive of that which we feel we have laid stake to in joining the culture.

3. **Jargon** – This relates to the language, words, expressions and phrasing members of the culture use to describe or discuss that which they hold as important. Often these words might be technical or very specific to the cultural theme. Other times the jargon might manifest in sayings or expressions that are not technical, but are widely understood by other members and become important to the exchange of the culture.

4. **Memory** – This refers to the collective history of the culture. The memory is honored in formal ways by producing yearbooks, annual reports, and other official documents or celebrations that chronicle the actions of the culture. Other types of informal memory also happen within culture by the weaving and telling of stories or anecdotes. Both of these approaches create a living history of the culture and establish the bond that causes members to want to continue the work of the culture. Memory leads to community wisdom.

Step 4 – Finding or Enlisting the Gatekeeper

The final step in cultural shifting revolves around the gatekeeper. The only way new people, ideas or products can successfully enter an existing community is when they are introduced and endorsed by a viable gatekeeper. A gatekeeper is an indigenous member of the community who has either formal or informal influence with the culture. These gatekeepers can be formally elected or selected leaders, or they might be one of the members who everyone can count on to get things done. Further, the gatekeepers can either be positive or negative, assertive or unassertive about the person, idea or product being introduced.

These gatekeepers are powerful because they transition their influence to the person, idea or product they are endorsing or rejecting. This transition of influence is the first step to the inclusion of the new thing into the culture. The mere fact that the gatekeeper likes or dislikes the idea is enough to sway other members to their side. Remember, 60% of the membership of any community is usually neutral (or slightly on the negative side) on issues. The gatekeeper uses their power and influence to persuade others to follow their lead. The assertive gatekeeper will readily offer their opinion, the unassertive gatekeeper must usually be asked.

To effectively shift a culture to accept something new requires that the change agent identify and then enlist a gatekeeper to facilitate the passage. This is simple, yet complex in how it plays out. On the one side we know that gatekeepers are a part of any culture or community. We know that 20% of these gatekeepers are positive people interested in taking risks to promote things they feel good about. We know that when the gatekeeper endorses a person, idea or product that other members observe this and open their thinking to the same. We also know that the more enthusiastic the gatekeeper is to the new item, the more apt others are to do the same. All of this makes sense when we think about culture and community.

Finding and enlisting gatekeepers can be tricky business, but it is an essential ingredient for cultural shifting. Change agents must learn as much as they can about gatekeepers to enhance their effectiveness.

"Community is like a ship, everyone ought to be prepared to take the helm"

Henrik Ibsen

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