



The Leader as **MYTH MAKER**

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John O. Burdett



ORXESTRA® INC.

The Leader as **MYTH MAKER**

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Discontinuous CHANGE

In pulling together anything approaching “thought leadership” three things must be borne in mind. One: the constraint of time means executives have to be very selective in what they read. Two: as a society we are at a tipping point, a period of organizational reinvention kicked into high gear by the COVID epidemic. Three: a book that focuses on “what about” is far less valuable than one that, in equal measure, also addresses “the how to.” We examine each of those three conditions below.

One. In addressing *the time available to read* dilemma, I have organized the content into, what can best be described as, “a one-chapter book.” Thirty eight or so pages, not two or three hundred. Recognising that this is a pragmatic, yet value-adding, format, this is my seventh one-chapter book. I also realise that in making this offering a thirty-minute read, I am swimming against a growing tide of opinion that material that can’t be absorbed in five to seven minutes is quickly set aside. Although there is no doubt that our attention spans are getting shorter, the quick-read scenario is a long way from being a universal truth. I have three reasons to support the value, when appropriate, of an offering along these lines. Some aspects of change are hard and making them overly simple does a disservice to the reader. My own experience in coaching a number of CEOs is that top leaders are readers, especially in turbulent times. And finally, small might be beautiful, but not if you want to play in the NBA.

Two. There is no doubt that both within society and, as a result, in business we are at a tipping point. A point of discontinuous change where the organization of the last century is no longer a “fit for its purpose.” The 20th century organization was *built to last*. A way to operate that emphasised bureaucracy, stability and control. Success = shareholder value. Uncertainty, the need to compete on ideas and breakthrough technology – digital and otherwise – demand a very different kind of organization. One *built to change*. A way to operate where riding the waves of disruption, unprecedented agility and speed of learning dominate. Success = stakeholder value. It can be argued that unless we evolve a very different way to answer the question, “What is an organization?” existential threats such as the environment will only grow in scale and significance.

Three. All learning starts with a question. The overall theme of *The Leader as Myth Maker* is that “the organization” is a myth – a created story that has utility only as long as those involved believe in it. In reinventing the organization we have to first reinvent the myth that shapes and sustains it. The needed balance between know-what and know-how can be found in the key questions that are addressed in each part.

Part One: We Create Our Own Reality

- What is organization culture?
- What is the difference between a culture anchor and culture driver?

Part Two: Myths Made Us Who We Are

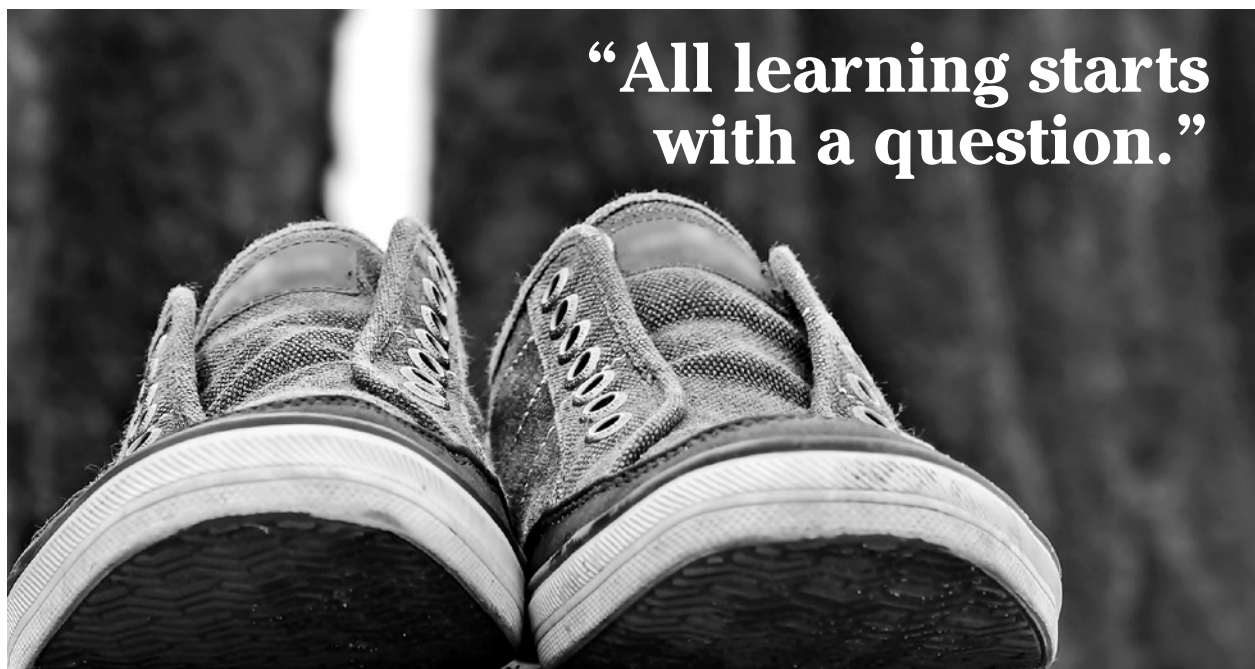
- Why are myths central to our sense of meaning?
- Where and how in our history did myths emerge?
- What is the relationship between myth and the ability to scale large organizations?

Part Three: Modern Myths and the Five Elements of Myth

- What is the difference between myths in the ancient world and modern myths?
- Are there different kinds of myths?
- What are the five conditions required for a myth to have currency?
- What role does myth play in “reinventing” the modern organization?

Part Four: Common Organizational Myths

- What common myths hold back today’s organizations?
- Do you need to challenge any of the embedded myths in your organization?
- What three dysfunctional myths are a major force in today’s society?



Part Five: Shaping, Challenging or Reworking Myths

- How do you challenge, change or embrace myths?
- What role do observation, challenge, language, storytelling, ritual, symbolism, brand, beliefs, knowing what is sacrosanct, tribal behaviour, organizational design, knowing why the customer buys, identity, organizational values and strategy play in managing myths?

Part Six: Conclusion and Where to Go From Here?

- From what to what? In reinventing the organization, what overall “shift” is involved?
- In understanding/shaping myths, where do you start?
- What is the emerging role of technology?

Who is the book for? The simple answer is any leader faced with the challenge of understanding, redefining or reinventing the organization’s culture. Nominally, that might imply the head of human resources. The thinking behind *The Leader as Myth Maker* goes somewhat beyond the accepted notion of “culture change,” however. The underlying tenet that the book builds on is that the organization that served society so very well in the last century is a poor fit with the challenge of the 21st century. Moreover, the usual candidates that come to the fore when addressing culture, e.g., purpose, values, leadership competencies, organization design, although invaluable, do not address the deeper challenge – reshaping the emotional architecture (myth) upon which the 20th-century organization is based.

Who is the book for? Culture is a system, a system with a good many moving parts. Miss or ignore an element and unintended consequences lie ahead. And the emotional glue that fills the “space” between the various parts of “the system?” The overriding/dominant organizational myth. If you lead or are a partner in the culture conversation, *The Leader as Myth Maker* would be a meaningful investment of your time ... one might even say “an invaluable use of your time.”



Part One:

We Create Our Own Reality

“What is familiar quickly becomes what is perceived to be real.”

The overwhelming response when we ask someone to describe their work experience draws on capability, imagery, assumptions, past experiences and second-hand opinion. What is familiar quickly becomes what is perceived to be real. Emotion – not logic – shapes the perception of *what is*.

This created reality is given meaning through myth, modelled by metaphor, held together by habits, shaped by story, reinforced through ritual, bolstered by bias, empowered through the ethos of engagement and structured by where in “the system” you happen to sit. Mix in the brand message, the primacy of the organization’s values, what gets measured, the strategic imperatives, how people learn, the nature of diversity and inclusion, the freedom to act as described by the organization’s structure, who gets hired and promoted, the role of technology, the clock speed of delivery, and what it means to be a leader and you are starting to flirt with what can be thought of as “the organization’s culture.”



In addressing organization culture it is relatively easy to address those things that move the organization forward (culture drivers), for example, strategy, measurement, brand, process, compensation, technology, talent management, innovation, business development, etc. What gets overlooked (ignored) are aspects of culture that, if not addressed, hold the organization back (culture anchors). The most resistant being those elements of culture that sustain and support the prevailing overarching and supportive myths.





Part Two: Myths Made Us Who We Are

“In our constant search for meaning, we created stories that explained crop failure, what happens after death and the meaning behind the stars in the sky.”

Four million years ago, we were the master of our domain – the humble tree. Life on the ground was more dangerous but *terra firma* expanded our ability to forage for food. The not-so-simple task of standing erect also gave us the ability to see over the tall grass and carry useful objects over relatively long distances. Beyond that, our most creative venture was the constant search for an ever-sharper stick.

About three million years ago, our ancestors added meat to their diet. Firstly it was the flesh of dead animals. We lived as scavengers. Two million years ago, we had evolved to the point where we started to hunt small and, eventually, larger prey. Bringing down larger animals was initially through traps and ambush.

Discovering how to “manage” fire – around 800,000 years ago – changed everything. Eating “predigested” food led to a shorter digestive track. Energy that previously supported digestion became available to fuel a larger brain. The result? Better weapons and more effective ways to work together.

Our kind emerged 300,000 years ago. The birth of *Homo sapiens* heralded in a hunter-gatherer era that, in large parts of the world, only came to an end relatively recently. It was a time where every unsuccessful hunt was a crisis. We looked like Olympic athletes but we were survivors – not winners. We found ourselves positioned towards the upper end of the food chain – not at the apex.

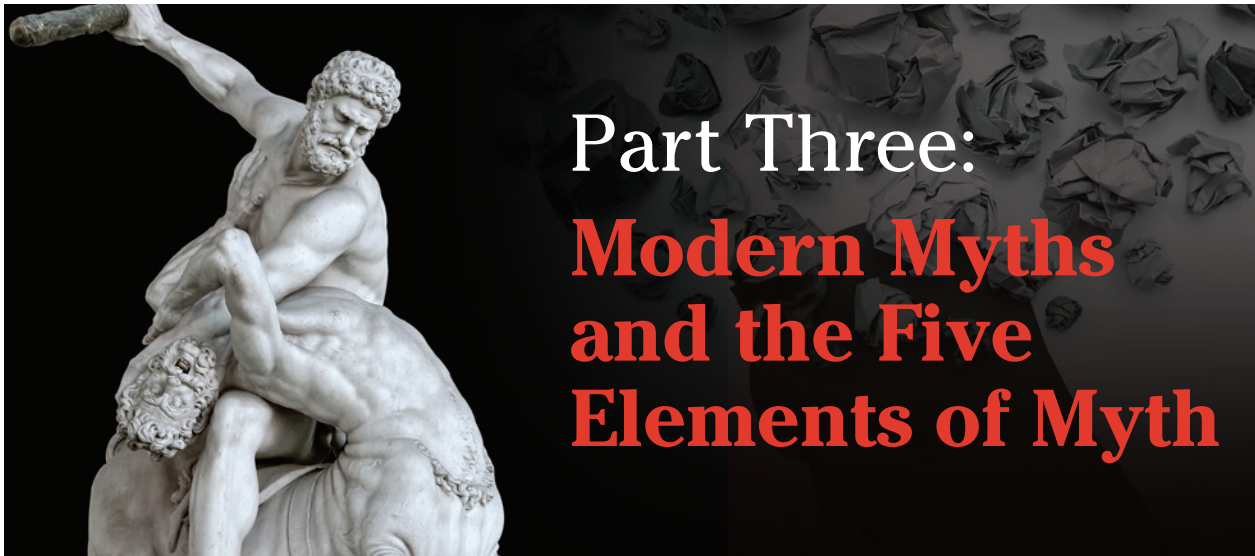




Although our early kith and kin had the same size brain as we do today, there was an important difference. Their learning and communication skills were significantly less developed.

And then, about 70,000 years ago, there was an (unexplained) explosion in our cognitive ability. We developed early language. Gossip became to humans what grooming was to the other apes. Gossip was fulfilling; we started to secrete different chemicals in the brain. Simple language became more evolved. Storytelling, symbolism (cave painting) and more sophisticated planning emerged. And to explain the unexplainable we generated myths. In our constant search for meaning, we created stories that explained crop failure, what happens after death and the meaning behind the stars in the sky.

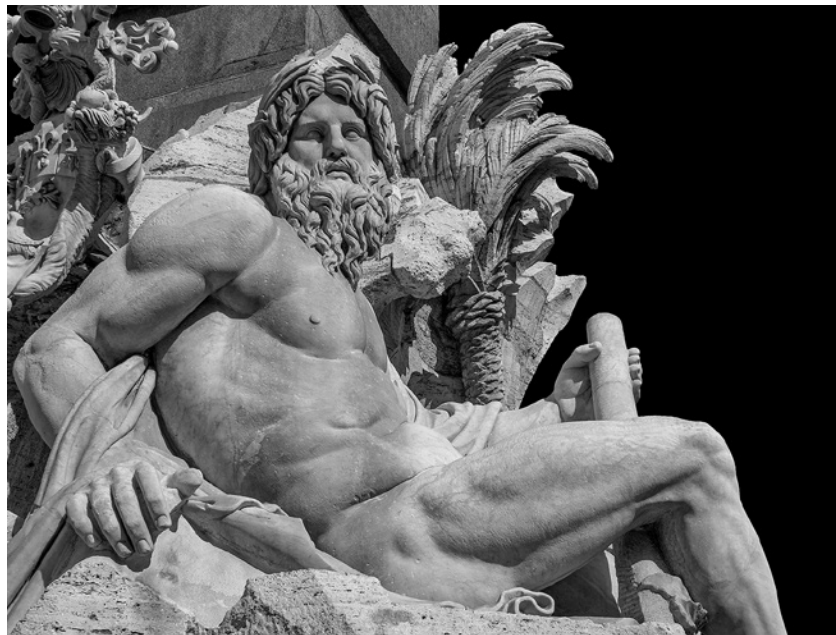
British anthropologist, Roger Dunbar, tells us the natural size of a community for the human ape is no more than 150. After that, a second “tribe” emerges. Social media research provides similar evidence. Ongoing development of informal networks (gossip), complex language, symbolism, storytelling – and especially myth – enabled us to move into much larger groups of hundreds, later to become thousands. Factor in 21st-century technology and the size of a community is infinite. It becomes bound together not by the limits of interpersonal-based trust but a different kind of shared insight – fictional stories (myth making). Include beliefs, values, rules, laws and sanctions in your myth making and you are ready to create a multinational corporation, an evolved version of the modern state or, even, a new tax-free religion.



Part Three: **Modern Myths and the Five Elements of Myth**

“There is no such thing as ‘an organization.’ It’s a contrived reality.”

Myths are the invisible hand that guides much of our behaviour. That doesn’t mean that they are all cut from the same cloth. Myths can fulfill a compelling emotional need but can, nevertheless, be short-lived. “Peace in our time.”¹ Tragically, a number of myths have provided cover for heinous acts: slavery, the Holocaust, Rwanda. Although it sounds like advertising copy today, “the sun never sets on the British Empire (and the blood never dries)”² was a jingoistic rallying cry for colonialism in the Victorian era. It also masked a



good deal of brutality. Somewhat perversely, that a myth has an optimistic storyline doesn’t mean that it will have a positive ending. “The Titanic is unsinkable.” Other myths have greatly benefited society. The emphasis here should be on “greatly.” Tired and flawed though it may be, over the past 2,000 years, little has benefited humankind more than the organization of the last century.

It’s important not to confuse a myth in the modern context with the created stories in the ancient world. The Greeks believed that the Gods lived on Mount Olympus. It dictated much of their everyday lives. That only a few Vlahiki goats actually lived on Mount Olympus didn’t detract from their beliefs. Myths permeated

1 This was British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s short-lived myth, introduced outside of Downing Street after returning from a meeting with Hitler in 1938.
2 The second part of the myth was (or is) rarely included.



all of the great empires in history. The Romans adopted Greek deities, albeit giving them different names and traits. Ancient Egypt had over 2,000 Gods. The Persian Empire embraced a pantheon of twelve central Gods – each responding to a different need. The late existential psychologist, Rollo May, said, “A myth is a way of making sense in a senseless world. Myths are narrative patterns that give significance to our existence.”

Although responding to a need as old as time, myths that have even temporary currency in today’s wired society have to be wrapped in, at least, the aura of truth. Trump got elected, in no small measure, because he rode to power on the myth that he was a negotiation savant, an entrepreneurial mastermind and that successful businessmen make great Presidents.³ Whether they were, or are, actually true didn’t matter. What did matter was that enough people believed that it was true at the time. And not just in the US. Authoritarian leaders around the world are cloaking their push for power by propagating Trump-inspired myths. For those who do become true believers, it’s the myth that is real – the “facts” are no more than an inconvenient distraction. Joseph Goebbels is reputed to have said, “If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it people will eventually come to believe it.”

A myth that transcends the ordinary has to meet five conditions: (1) it has to respond to a deep-rooted, emotional⁴ need; (2) it has utility only as long as people believe in it; (3) the myth maker has to be trusted; (4) the underlying story has to be communicated using simple language;⁵ and (5) ritual, story and symbolism have to support it. Social media being the ultimate medium for malicious myths.

Here we need to step back and accept an underlying truth. There is no such thing as “an organization.” It’s a contrived reality. A collective myth. A mental model that can be sustained only for as long as those caught up in it continue to believe in it. And not a few business and societal leaders have stopped believing in the organizational myth that dominated the 20th century. See **Figure one**.

Inexplicably – considering the evidence – a number of major organizations have decided to double down on yesterday’s “big on financial control, tough on people agenda.” A “batten down the hatches” approach can be seen in: (1) replacing older managers with less seasoned (and less expensive) candidates; (2) workflow that makes bathroom breaks a privilege; and

3 There is little evidence that outstanding businesspeople make great leaders. Churchill was an unmitigated disaster in business. Roosevelt wasn’t much better and Truman’s business career reached dizzying heights as a failed owner/operator of a small mining company.

4 Any number of lasting and transformational myths have little or no empirical evidence to support them.

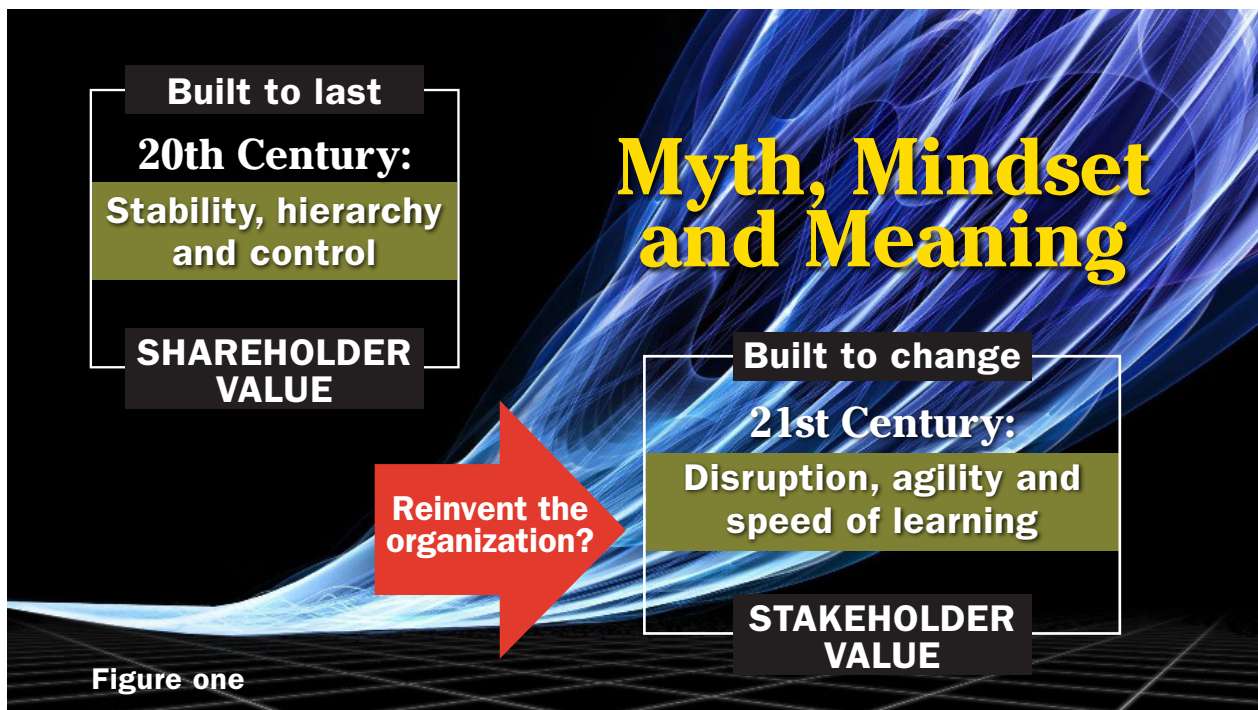
5 It could be argued that Trump’s rise to power met all five conditions. The emotional need lay with the millions of Americans who felt that, in a successful economy, they had been left behind. His lack of “sophisticated” language – gained by the “elites” as a result of their prep school and Ivy League college educations – actually endeared him to blue-collar voters. For symbolism at the outset read, “the Trump Tower escalator,” the red tie, the “sunless” tan. The ceremonial trappings of being “the President” added to the credibility (for his followers) of his myth making. The paradox? To win over his supporters you need not facts (they don’t appeal at an emotional level) but a more compelling myth. When trust falls way, of course, then so does the myth.



(3) video and keystroke monitoring of productivity that is positively Dickensian. If you are a creative and talented employee, this all begs the question, “Why swim with sharks, when you can play with the dolphin?”⁶

Buildings don’t make an organization, nor do machinery and/or other artifacts. A good many tech companies operate with clicks and no bricks. Advanced electronics or sophisticated systems don’t make an organization. The Transcontinental Railway (1885) was built across 4,600 kilometers of Canadian wilderness without the slightest hint of a computer. The customer doesn’t make an organization. Indigenous peoples have self-organized for millennia without any need for a sales force. A legal agreement, a stock market quotation or a share certificate don’t make an organization. Thousands of Egyptians (not slaves) built the pyramids without any form of legal documentation.

An organization is a group of people – possibly many thousands or even millions – inspired by an idea, in pursuit of a common purpose, bound together by a shared belief in a meaningful myth (created story).⁷ Nothing more, nothing less. The enabling resources that we think of as being integral to “the organization” may well make those involved faster to act, more efficient and better able to communicate, but without those resources there



6 See *The Way of the Dolphin* on the TRANSEARCH International website.

7 In an individual organization, the collective behaviour we refer to as “culture” equates to a shared story that is influenced, in turn, by a wider meta story (the contextual myth).



would still be an organization. If you took the fencing away, the farm would still be a farm. The boat that carries you across the river is not the river.

The role of myth in today's society can't be overstated. Arguably, the single biggest challenge facing our kind in this century is to change the underlying narrative (the created story) that defines the modern (21st century) organization – as we did 100 years ago. It's not going to happen all at once. There will be market leaders and astute followers. There will also be false starts. Environmental, social and governance (ESG) will be but the first wave of socially conscious investment.

You can't attach a rocket to a bicycle and decanting sour wine into new bottles doesn't improve how it tastes. Attempts to force fit today's emerging technology into an organization dependent on hierarchy and siloed thinking are destined to fall short. And totally off the mark are notions of stakeholder capital that assume multi-stakeholder, strategic alliances⁸ can flourish in an organizational climate dominated by the question, "How do we make



⁸ Managing multi-stakeholder, strategic alliances represents a cultural challenge all of its own.



money from this?” It wasn’t an iceberg that sank the aforementioned Titanic. Nor was it misconduct by Captain E.J. Smith. It was a myth perpetuated by the White Star Shipping Lines.⁹ At the end of the day, it’s all about culture. As a society we are facing a binary decision. Rework the 20th century organizational myth or live with the consequences, starting with the existential threat that the environment represents.

Those who will successfully lead us into the future are, of necessity, myth makers. This isn’t theory. Theory is the bizarre notion in quantum physics that we are nothing but images of images and that reality is but a thin, fragile veil beyond which there is nothing. I don’t understand it either! Discontinuous change – take it as a given that tomorrow will not be a continuation of today – is a very pressing issue. And failure to recast the myths that sustain an organizational culture that is past its “sell by date,” carries deep and long lasting, business and societal implications.¹⁰

9 “We place absolute confidence in the Titanic. We believe that the boat is unsinkable.” – Philip Franklin, Vice-President of White Star Line, owners of Titanic.

10 When it comes to culture, leaders invariably talk a good game. Their language and suggested direction, however, tend to be more aspirational than pragmatic. Moreover, when we take organizations through an assessment of the culture that they have and the culture that they need, they end up looking a lot more like organizations from yesteryear than many of the leaders involved would have admitted before the assessment.



Part Four: Common Organizational Myths

“The environment (ecological intelligence) is clearly important but not at the cost of optimising profitability.”

Myths play a central role in shaping your culture. Redundant, outdated, misinformed or manipulative myths prevent you from moving forward (cultural anchor). Do you need to revisit any of the following mix of myths, rituals and symbolism?

1. The purpose of business is to make money. It’s always been that way.
2. Strategy drives culture. Having defined the culture, the next step is to align our culture with the strategic priorities.
3. A commodity business doesn’t have, or need, a compelling purpose.
4. The organization of the future will look pretty much as it is today. It will evolve, but the notion of “self-management” – the organization as a “team of teams” and





making the organization “as flat as possible” – flies in the face of the talent (and leadership) available.

5. Leadership balance. Successful leadership is far more about employing the head (Direction – cognitive intelligence) and empowering the hand (Delivery – practical intelligence), than it is engaging the heart (Developing people – interpersonal intelligence) and enriching the spirit (Day-to-day dialogue – interpersonal intelligence). You get to the latter (heart and spirit) when you can find the time.
6. The environment (ecological intelligence) is clearly important but not at the cost of optimising profitability.
7. Remote work carries with it advantages and disadvantages. Fortunately, power within the organization still lies with the employer. Even top talent will have to fall in line with the decisions the executive team makes.
8. Work from home is messy, but I am pretty sure we know how to manage our way through any negative impact on creativity, inter-team synergy and/or developing the team.
9. There is a general acceptance that leadership competencies, such as “comfort with ambiguity,” “resilience,” “speed/agility of learning,” and “leading remote teams,” are worthy of further discussion. We don’t see any pressing immediate need, however, to embed them in our approach to hiring leaders, succession, ongoing coaching and/or leadership development.
10. We recognise that the people dimension (the “soft stuff”) is getting ever more attention. That said, “efficiency” dominates our thinking. Any shortfall in people management (e.g., the work from home strategy, a need for innovation) today will be solved in the future by investment in AI, robotics and technology generally. Technology will rule. People will become less and less of an issue.
11. The real value of AI is that it overcomes bias.
12. When we hire into a mission-critical role, past performance, personality and fit with the team dominate our thinking. Our need to create “fit” with tomorrow’s organization/culture is of secondary importance to that of delivering short-term results. Moreover, we don’t measure culture. It’s too difficult to pin down. The organization we currently have will get us to where we need to be. The employee engagement survey is a pretty good measure of the organization’s culture, anyway.
13. We are very clear about four things: (1) exactly why our customers buy what it is we do; (2) what those in the middle of the organization believe makes the organization special; (3) that those who interface with the customer are fully committed to our



brand promise; and (4) moving forward what, as a business, we need to let go of. We act accordingly.

14. There is clearly a good deal of “noise” around shareholder capital. The capital markets, however, demand short-term results and, without legislation, the role of the shareholder isn’t going to change any time soon. Winning is everything. How you win, not so much. For one stakeholder to win, other stakeholders have to give up something. What are investors willing to give up? Stakeholder capital is an interesting concept but it’s not really practical. I am happy to support it philosophically. In the meantime, we can’t ignore the current reality.
15. “Competitive advantage” is a simple concept. You deliver the right product at the right time at the right price. Anything beyond that is unwarranted, unhelpful and unnecessary.





16. We aren't too concerned about symbolism, ritual and/or myth. They are too abstract to really do much with. We focus on the tangible.
17. We tell people the truth as soon as we know it. In times of crisis all people want to hear are the facts. Just the facts!
18. Decision-making and how things happen in the business are driven by financial constraints, how we are organized, policies and procedures. The role of the informal organization is important but of secondary concern. The "golden rule" applies. "Those with the gold, rule."
19. Every business is a growth business.
20. The best way to manage performance is through the annual performance review. The most effective aspect of that review is "measurement" against a normal distribution curve.
21. People are either good storytellers or they are not. We don't emphasise storytelling. We don't train people in storytelling. Our approach to leadership development doesn't reinforce storytelling. At all-company communication sessions, staff meetings, townhalls (virtual?), etc., we don't make any deliberate attempt to weave storytelling into how we get the message across.
22. Talent management clearly has a significant impact on the success (or otherwise) of the business. It's clear from our actions, however, that best-practice is seen as a matter of ongoing, year-on-year improvement. Regularly assessing team effectiveness, measuring recruitment success and/or systematically validating our approach to succession is not part of our agenda.
23. Language doesn't need to be exact to facilitate understanding. Cooperation and collaboration, for example, mean pretty much the same thing.
24. We have a good Board of Directors. They have a great deal of experience and are a font of wisdom gained over many years. Whereas it's clear we are moving into a new business era – a societal and business tipping point – I am sure that they will adapt and quickly develop the insight and capability needed, not just in terms of ongoing governance but in providing the leadership demanded in culture (e.g., organization design) and technology (e.g., digitalisation).
25. Our overall philosophy is, "We will change when we have to." It has always worked for us in the past.



If you are still of a mind that myths are of little matter, consider these declarations.

1. There is no real evidence that people are responsible for global warming. The warming and cooling of the planet is a natural phenomenon.
2. We live in a free society. Getting the COVID-19 vaccination (or not) is wholly a matter of individual choice.
3. “The election was stolen.”

In the midst of a pandemic, the learning is invariably tactical – drawn out of what worked and what didn’t. It’s on the way down the mountain that there is opportunity for reflection, where we can start to flex insight against opportunity. Without reflection, of course, there is no learning.

Like Prometheus’ punishment for stealing fire, the myths that bind us quickly become the perceived “reality.” Myths may appear to be intractable, but we have to remember that they are created stories. We need to reflect, challenge and then create new myths. In the meantime, today is the fastest things have ever been – but the slowest they will ever be. “Wait and see” is an anthem for those who lack the courage to act. Leaders must lead!



“Be fast or be last”



“Listening is the hidden baton that choreographs contribution.”

The myths you support today will shape the culture and performance that you will be able to deliver tomorrow. Not all is lost, however. The myth maker’s tools make cultural mastery attainable. The “tools” that follow are integral to “culture as a system.”¹¹ A watch is also a system (mechanical). Leave a piece out and it won’t work. Apart from observation – you can’t act on what you don’t know – the approaches outlined are deliberately in no special order. There are times when the smallest change can make the biggest difference (nudge).

- **Observation.** Beginnings start with endings. Tune in to the dance. Recognise patterns and “interrogate” the status quo through the eyes of someone entirely new



11 “Fundamental” but by no means are these all of the elements that make up culture as a system. For further insights see Part one, paragraph two.



to the organization. Don't judge, be in the moment, develop a beginner's mind. Start by letting go of what "you know to be true." Practitioners of a Zen philosophy call it "the capacity for emptiness."

My first leadership role involved responsibility for hourly industrial relations in the UK auto sector. The role encompassed 12,000 employees, 30 unions, several unofficial unions, numerous wildcat disputes and even an occupation of the major plant by employees that lasted several weeks. To complicate things, renegotiating the non-legally binding term agreement was an annual event.

The myth that appeared to make this dysfunctional behaviour appear intractable was rooted in the 19th century: child labour, legislation that made unions unlawful, total disregard for health and safety, brutal working conditions and payment in coin that could only be spent in the company store. The manner and manifestation of the myth is best explained by a conversation I remember clearly, even years later. Early on in, what was for me, a new role I asked the convenor (head of the union) for his suggestion over a fairly mundane issue. His response was to "educate" me on





the union-management relationship that had existed within his sphere of influence for many years. “The ways things happen around here is that management makes the decisions and the role of the union is to disagree with them.” Union good. Management bad! A faint but indelible echo of the Tolpuddle Martyrs¹² was still firmly embedded in the union’s collective memory. In addition to solving the immediate problems, you needed to overcome an institutionalised myth.

Everyone from top management all the way down to the 500 plus shop-floor supervisors had, in their own way, bought into that myth. The problem is that you can only recognise how dysfunctional the narrative is if you can start to view it from the outside in. Ongoing confrontation, of course, only made the intractable even more so.

I can only give a thumbnail version of what happened, but change was enacted. The key was to totally change the role of middle management. Biweekly briefing groups with the supervisor and their shift, hiring clerical support to allow the supervisor to focus on problems and not administration was the start of it. A significant investment in training – with support from two Harvard University business professors – was also part of it. But at the heart of it? To change the union-management dialogue such that the focus moved from continuously revisiting imbedded problems to an informed dialogue around what the business needed to do to support the customer. By putting the supervisor fully back into the communication loop and by giving them enhanced skills, a different breed of shop steward was voted in. By changing the union-management dialogue (where possible), a platform of shared interest emerged.

I moved within the organization to the US. The focus? A non-union, green-field start-up in the Midwest. Same employees, same customers, same equipment ... but a new myth and, with it, a very different conversation. Four years later, I joined the corporate office. The company operated in over 100 countries. Different myth(s)!

- **Challenging myths.** According to some studies, we make about 35,000 non-conscious decisions each day. Non-conscious because our brain is wired to save energy. If we stopped to think about each decision, by the time mid-afternoon rolled around we would still be figuring out the best way to leave the bedroom. These non-conscious choices can be viewed as pre-rehearsed mental routines. We act without thinking. We switch into autopilot. The problem develops when we face something new – we reach in for the mental routines that have worked in the past. At that point we are “stuck” in the past. Something similar happens when we are “unfairly”

¹² The Tolpuddle Martyrs were six agricultural labourers from the village of Tolpuddle in Dorset, England, who, in 1834, were convicted of swearing a secret oath as members of the Friendly Society of Agricultural Labourers. For attempting to form a “trade union” they were sentenced to penal transportation to Australia.



challenged. “Why?” We are all familiar with the defensive routines employed. “It’s not my job/fault.” “We have never done it that way.” “We lack the resources.” An embedded myth quickly becomes the default thought process (mental model) when faced with something new or challenging. In its own way, it becomes its own defensive routine. To challenge either myth or defensive routine simply ask, “What evidence do you have for that?” Opinion presented as fact, without challenge, soon takes on the assumption of being a “fact.” A defensive routine also represents something of a conversational black hole. If you get sucked in, you may not be able to extricate yourself.

- **Language matters.** And when the team must venture into new territory, it matters a lot. Language creates imagery and imagery dictates our behaviour. Same old language, same old behaviour! Be attentive to the language being used. In that they shoot imagery straight into the brain – especially the metaphors employed. Do the metaphors in common use support, or work against, the future the organization seeks to build? What do terms like “collaboration” and/or “team” mean in the different parts of the organization? Is it recognised that silence is often the most impactful question of all?
- **Become a storyteller.** We explore possibility through metaphor and learn through stories. Tune in to the stories being shared. Do they reinforce/amplify what you need to become – or do they tether you to the past? Unless it is already happening in some of the places some of the time, change is unlikely. Without stories, the organization’s heroes remain unsung. Without heroes, a critical thread of the organization’s DNA is missing. Without heroes, there is no one to fan the early embers of endeavour. Passion means to **PASS-Inspiration-ON**. Negative stories inform but only positive stories inspire.
- **Ritual.** There is a reason why institutions that pass the test of time are wedded to ritual. The Catholic Church, the British Royal family and/or the Freemasons come to mind. Think of a ritual as the glue that holds long-established myths in place. If you want to emotionally defund a myth, address the rituals that give it oxygen. The British Royal family without the titles, pomp and ceremony and/or the sovereign’s role in opening parliament, trooping the colour or the Christmas broadcast would be just another dysfunctional family. Myth, ritual and culture are mutually dependent. By way of example, the following rituals have a far wider impact on the organization’s overall culture than is generally understood: meetings, the sales motion, the recruitment interview, the induction process, the townhall meeting, awards for excellence. How are those rituals enacted in different parts of the organization? Do they mean the same thing? If the organization is based in



Cincinnati not everything needs to happen exactly as it does in Cincinnati.¹³ Then again some things do.¹⁴ Consolidate, change or create a new ritual. The latter, incidentally, can be little short of a cultural hand grenade. Think of how much brouhaha “taking a knee” has caused.

- **Symbolism.** Understand the impact of symbolism. If a ritual gives a myth oxygen, symbolism gives it colour, hue, distinctiveness and texture. Who gets hired, fired and/or promoted are a symbolic representation of “tomorrow’s leadership.” As is who parks where, who the CEO sits next to at the year-end lunch and who is asked to speak at a next townhall. As an HR executive, I was involved in a major downsizing initiative (52,000 employees in numerous countries). In that I was “from the corporate office,” I knew that going to any of the operations – especially on a Friday – was best avoided. People act like professional trackers, always looking for evidence of what’s really going on.

I had occasion to coach a senior executive who, without exception, deliberately arrived late to every team meeting – a symbolic act of unbridled arrogance. The



¹³ The cause of a good deal of conflict and value destruction in acquisition.

¹⁴ BHP, the Australian mining giant, have identified specific words that have to mean exactly the same thing regardless as to where in the world the operation or business is. They visit this lingua franca regularly.



team in question was constantly in flux. The team's performance reflected the underlying resentment. Another time I coached a very high-potential individual who, to accelerate their career, was moved from the US corporate office and anointed as the Canadian country manager. A one-on-one 360° with subordinates revealed that there was no small degree of discontent. Their concern? When their new country manager walked through the office it was with total disregard for anyone else there. They saw it as a symbolic act of rejection, ignorance and perceived self-importance. The new country manager had failed to recognise that Canada is a far more collegiate culture than the US. It was career-limiting behaviour. A move to a country where autocratic leadership was the norm soon followed. Culture is a lens through which symbolism is writ large.

Leaders live in a goldfish bowl. The higher in the organization, the higher the magnification. If you are the CEO or operate out of the C-suite every act is symbolic. The organization's values aren't what you say they are, they are what you do. The knock-on effect of promoting someone who doesn't live the organization's values is a future problem with retention. It also sends exactly the wrong (symbolic) message to the organization's aspiring talent. "That's how you get on around here." When the organization is under stress, how those in mission-critical roles act is especially important. Let people know what's going on as soon as you know. If you don't, employees will simply make it up. It's called "human nature." Oh, and tell them the truth! Culture without trust is a journey to nowhere.

- **Brand.** Your brand is a special kind of myth. If customers connect with the story your brand represents, they will continue to buy your product/service even if the alternative is less expensive. **BRAND** means **Better Results And No Disappointment**. Validate that employees at every level are committed to the brand promise. If those who interface with the customer don't fully believe in the brand, you don't have a brand ... you have little more than an advertising slogan.

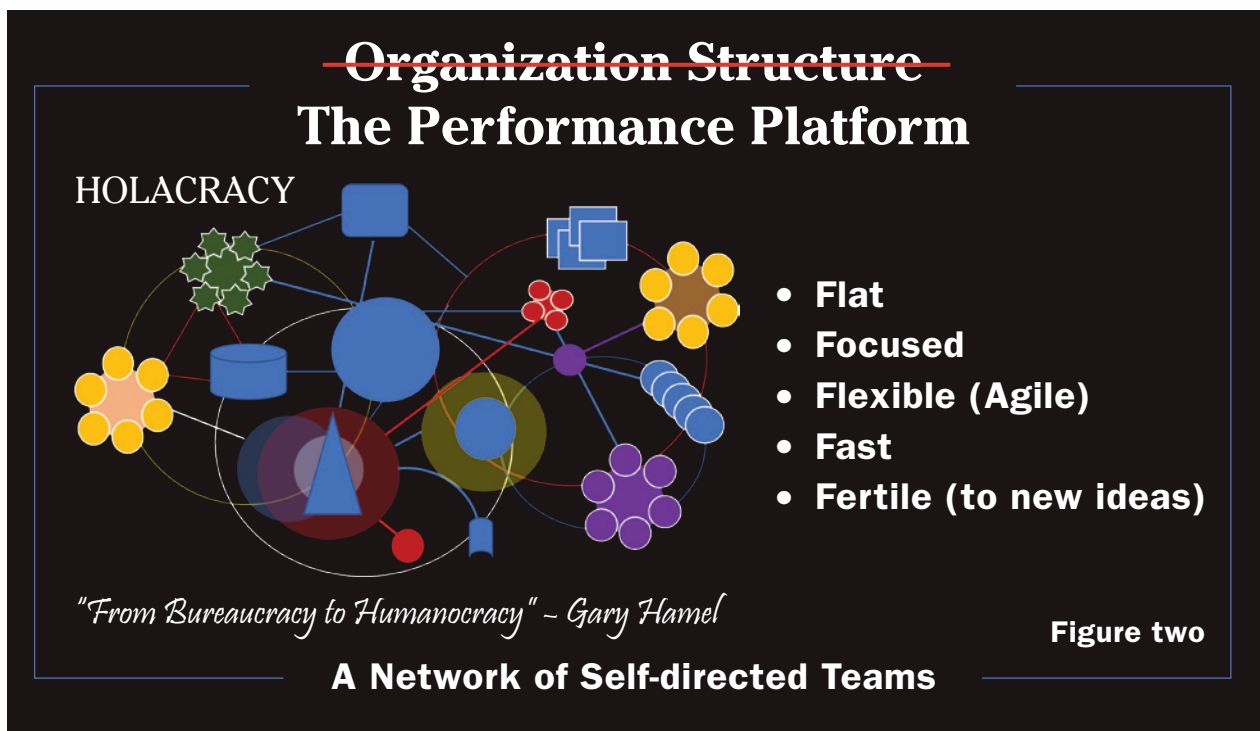
No less important than the commercial brand is the organization's employment brand (myth). If you don't attract top talent, only an optimist on their birthday would expect to be able to hire top talent. The genesis of employment branding is knowing why your top performers stay. What do they love about the business? What keeps the best, attracts the rest! The first stop on the employment journey is your website. Based on the immediate visual impact, visitors make a decision to stay (or move on) in the first five seconds. If the "created story" that your website represents doesn't immediately visually capture what it is that, as an organization, makes you special – reinvent it. Without the ability to attract top talent, being among the runners up is inevitable.



- **Belief system.** What you believe is what others perceive. It's true for coaching and is no less the case if you are leading change. But you've got to really believe! I spent a decade or more working closely with Sergio Marchionne. Sadly, Sergio is no longer with us. Fortunately, his heritage is. His remarkable success as CEO of Lonza Group, SGS, Fiat, Chrysler and also as the boss of Ferrari often prompts people to ask, "What was his secret?" A genius with financial issues, he was extraordinarily good at managing up. His true self came to the fore, however, in his belief system. Like Steve Jobs, he believed deeply and passionately – not in what was possible – but in what *would* be. There was no "could," "should" or "our aim is." If there were 1,000 people in the room and few, if any, believed fully in what he was promising, not one of them left the room contemplating for a moment that Sergio didn't *fully* believe. Belief is a seductive and empowering leadership capability. It is the "act" in **action**.
- **What is sacrosanct?** Uncover what employees think makes the organization's culture special. From our experience, it isn't always what those who make up the C-suite think it is. Work on culture should first identify what those in the middle of the organization believe is sacrosanct. Do you need to keep it, nurture it, reinforce it, or change it? Ask different groups from across the organization to take pictures on their phone. Find a way (in virtual space?) to first build a montage of those pictures and then ask the group why they chose those images. I have, on several occasions, been brought somewhat late into an organization's cultural agenda only to discover that they had done a brilliant job of ploughing under what it was that got them to where they were.
- **Tribal behaviour.** Understand how tribal behaviour defines what it means to be a team. Even more problematic – especially in virtual space – is the relationship between teams. The imperative in implementing strategy isn't, as many consulting offerings suggest, "hierarchical alignment." It's the nature and degree of collaboration between teams. And if you haven't measured it, don't expect to manage it.
- **Organization design.** The term "structure" is misleading – it contains within it the *assumption of hierarchy*. Replace *structure* with the term "performance platform." Assume that tomorrow's organization will be a network of self-organizing teams. Work the "F" word into your organization design conversation: **F**lat, **F**ocused, **F**lexible, **F**ast, and **F**ertile to new ideas. Holacracy is but one of the organizational designs currently being explored. Meeting with organizations that have embraced this approach leads me to question the extent to which Holacracy can be scaled. See **Figure two**.



- **Why does the customer buy?** Cast aside why you think they buy ... and delve deeper. Make it a priority to invest “listening time” with the ultimate buyer, not just who you sell to. I clearly remember being part of a major reframing of organizational culture with one of the world’s biggest retailers. It involved numerous businesses in sixteen countries on three continents. The project involved senior managers visiting the supermarkets, that they were responsible for, with different customers. What quickly became clear was that, although they had a perfect understanding of what their customers buy, they had a far from clear understanding of why they bought it. Do you know – really know – why your customers buy what it is you do? If you don’t know why customers buy, how do you know how to develop new business?
- **Identity.** Challenging the motivated. Why do your best people stay? Know that what, ultimately, retains your top talent is a sense of belonging. Without a robust and sustaining organizational identity, it’s tough for even the most trusting employees to find traction in something that they can’t relate to. Why would anyone follow a strategy they don’t believe in? And why would anyone be committed to something that is unclear? With tomorrow in mind, revisit the five central pillars of identity: vision, purpose, values, diversity and inclusion, and brand.
- **Organization values.** Know that “the behaviour that has primacy,” as defined by Gen X and their older siblings, in all probability, is a poor fit for millennials and their





younger cousins. To Gen X, “quality” referred exclusively to the product or service. To the now dominant generational cohort, it’s a term that should also speak to quality of work life. “Safety,” similarly, has laudable origins. Preventing accidents at work! In an environment where diversity and *inclusion* take centre stage, should it not also encompass psychological safety?

- **Strategy.** The only thing that can be said about strategy, with certainty, is that it’s a work-in-progress. The ongoing need for agility of both thought and action, thus, becomes absolute. By comparison, a linear strategy amounts to a commercial handicap. Embrace a scenario approach. Do so, however, knowing that when scenarios rule, resilience, comfort with ambiguity and cognitive diversity will define what it means to be a leader. You can’t be an acrobat if you have to wear a straightjacket.

In learning to look anew at the “way things happen,” we are aided by the reality that culture is a hologram – scratch a part of it and you get a legitimate sense of the whole. As you go through the questions that follow, keep in mind that resilience isn’t simply bouncing back. It’s also growing from the experience. Good is the enemy of the great.

Look at the business through your customers’ eyes. Why do they buy what you do? How often and in what ways do you measure the organization’s culture – today *and* tomorrow? As you walk (if you can) into the reception area, what does it tell you about what the organization stands for – your identity? What do you believe in that transcends opinion, carrying political favour or past practice? How passionately do you convey those beliefs? What did you do today to amplify the organization’s values? When did you last challenge someone for not living those values? Does the organization’s design – *performance platform* – facilitate or hinder agility? Where in the organization are you exploring new organization forms?

What do those who might be described as “top talent” love about the organization? How can you do more of it? How often and in what ways do you measure team effectiveness? Is psychological safety front and centre in everything to do with the team? In virtual meetings what, more often than not, doesn’t get said and who, amongst the attendees, usually fails to contribute? Listening is the hidden baton that choreographs contribution. Listen for the metaphors used. Reframe the metaphors that will hold you back. Was the most recent person added to your team assessed against the culture you need? If you were a job applicant, what is the message conveyed on the organization’s website? Are you a storyteller? What would it take for you to become a great storyteller?

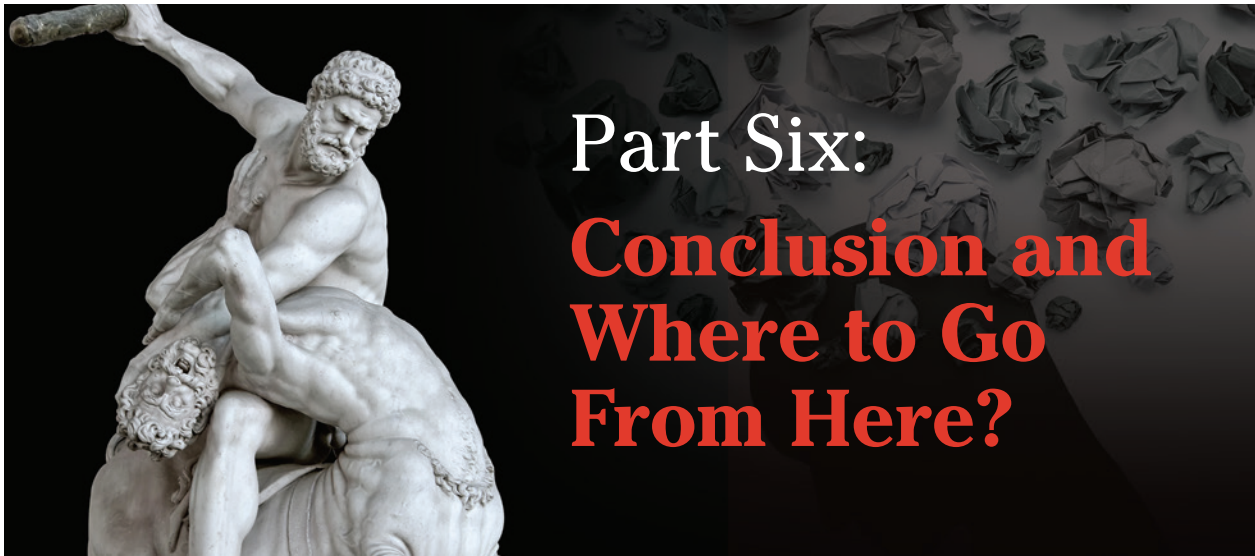
The people we learn the most from are those who are very different from ourselves. Who could you spend time with tomorrow who isn’t part of your “tribe?” Diversity is the handmaiden of innovation. Does your approach to leveraging individual difference embrace



diversity of thought? Does “inclusion” have special meaning for remote employees?

We are creatures of habit. When faced with that which is new, we reach in for the practices that have worked in the past. We are constrained by “emotional handcuffs,” restraints cast from the story-based, weft and weave of the myths that bind us. You can’t step into the same river twice and it’s an act of self-delusion to assume that what worked in the last century represents an answer to the challenges that lie ahead. What legacy will you leave? Leaders are myth makers.





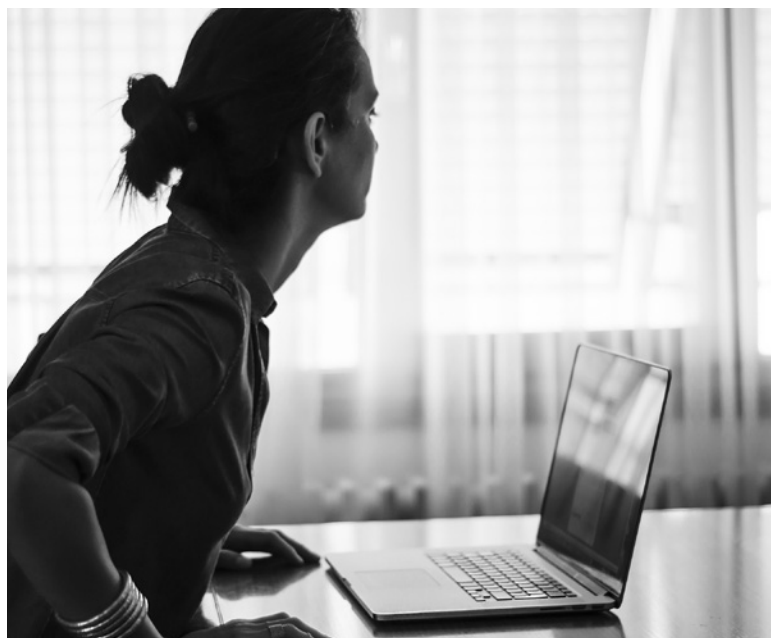
Part Six: Conclusion and Where to Go From Here?

“Culture is the business platform that supports what the customer wants to buy – and how they want to buy it.”

There is no “new normal” – only the new reality. *Back to the Future* is a movie – and only a movie. COVID-19 and the resulting shock to all things corporate means that agility is the new game in town. As a result, how we learn is becoming at least as important as what we learn.

A word about agility. Clearly, agility needs to be central to, amongst other things, the supply chain, core processes, organizational design and who gets hired. What is often overlooked is that agility is ultimately about trust. Whilst other leaders were imposing work from home rules, General Motors CEO, Mary Barra, directed her staff to work *appropriately*. “Our employees are capable of making smart decisions without overly prescriptive guidance.”

“Work from anywhere” may end up being as big a disruptor as the Internet. It has reinvented not only the place of employment but, in many senses, what it means to be



an organization. It could be that the workplace eventually morphs back to something resembling the status quo of 2019. The evidence suggests otherwise. Consider the following data: the exponential growth of gig employment over the past five years; at least 50% of employees have a job that is compatible with remote employment; in one study 38% of employees suggested that they would take a 20% reduction in pay if their new role offered remote working; and the “move to the country” many professionals have engineered.



And the next wave of technology? AI-enabled connectability, collaboration and creativity. Meanwhile, if the work involves abstract concepts or demands creativity, expect the “difficult to find talent” involved to demand a choice in how the blended work experience applies to them. By comparison, it is inevitable that administrative tasks, including much that is currently embraced by the term “work from home,” will be fully digitalised. More technology, fewer workers. More technology, fewer administrative workers, especially, in high-income countries.

Most leaders spend a good deal of time thinking about culture. Many even introduce elements of the culture conversation. The reality, however, is that the majority of those holding down pivotal organization positions don’t really face the issue of culture until they have to. Unfortunately, with the speed of change being enacted, late is too late. And don’t expect things to slow down any time soon.

It’s a mistake to think of culture as a series of individual parts, standalone problems to be solved. Nor is culture a one-time project, the exclusive domain of HR or “too difficult” to measure. Culture is the business platform that supports what the customer wants to buy – and how they want to buy it. Even if the “what” doesn’t change, be assured that the “how” will.

The ever-moving endgame? To create tomorrow’s customer, to share a story that engages all of those with a stake in the business and to move from an organization that is *built to last* to one that is *built to change*. It’s a journey that means:

- From strategy – to scenarios;
- From stability – to sustainability;
- From hierarchy – to a higher purpose;
- From division – to diversity;
- From content – to context;
- From constituency – to community;
- From tribes – to a team of teams;
- From bureaucracy – to “humanocracy;”¹⁵
- From boundaries – to boundaryless;
- From improvement – to innovation;

15 See Gary Hamel’s recent book of the same name. Gary Hamel and Michele Zanini, *Humanocracy: Creating Organizations as Amazing as the People Inside Them* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2020).



- From service – to serving;
- From exclusion – to inclusion;
- From being comfortable – to comfort with ambiguity;
- From application – to agility;
- From learning – to learning how to learn;
- From better leaders – to more leaders; and
- From the shareholder – to the stakeholder.

An incremental, piecemeal, analytical, problem-solving approach won't get you there. Working on only part of the system is to, at best, invite unintended consequences.

What is the platform for ongoing enquiry? How do you know what's working? How do you recognise and take heed of the “noise” that forms perception? What prompts you to cross-examine that which remains mute? And where do you start? Get into the middle of the organization. Meet with both the customer and the end user. Sit in on team meetings. Spend time with the organization's top talent. Understand the firm's history, especially the



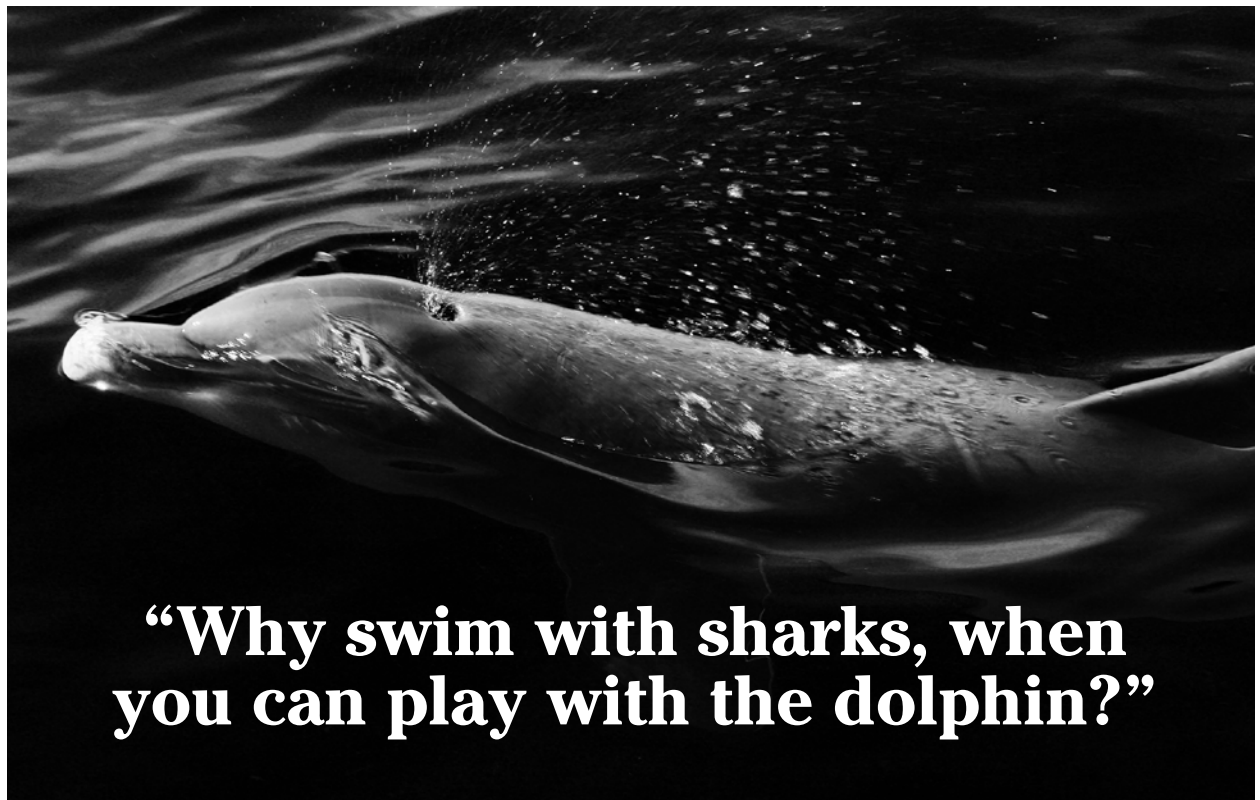


gravitational pull of its “birthing myth.”¹⁶ Listen to the stories. Are they positive or negative? Who are the heroes? Flex the metaphors in common use against tomorrow’s possibility. Interpret symbolism. Build a dialogue with remote employees. “Test” the value proposition. Follow the road less travelled. Observe – recognise patterns, unjudge, challenge the status quo, see with the eyes of someone entirely new to the organization. Develop the capacity for emptiness. Challenge assumptions. Ask naïve questions. Unlearn. Let go of what you know to be true. Where possible, measure, especially culture – today and tomorrow. The dilemma? Our greatest weakness – both as individuals and as an organization – is invariably a major strength that we have doubled down on. The more successful we are, the more it blinds us to other possibilities. And judging success in purely financial terms is the biggest trap of all. Where are Kodak, BlackBerry, Nokia and, especially, GE today? Leaders leave a legacy.

Work on organization culture must focus on both those things that move the organization in a new direction and those elements of the culture that, if not addressed, hold the organization back. Shaping, supporting and enabling culture as a system are myths. If you overlook, ignore or underestimate myths you have, by default, decided to become more of what you have always been. Leaders are myth makers.

As we pass into the second quarter of this century, the maps that guided us in the past century are outdated; inadequate for the journey and uncertain territory that lies ahead. Faced with discontinuous change there are three kinds of executive. Those who intimate, “Go on.” Those who say, “Come on.” And those who ask, “What went on?” Confusion isn’t an especially attractive leadership trait. Doing what we have always done is a mandate for mediocrity. In turbulent times, leaders **must** lead.

¹⁶ Consider the extent to which the Second Amendment to the US Constitution – “the right of the people to keep and bear arms” clause – although ratified in 1791, still influences the gun violence debate in the US.





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John Burdett has worked in over 40 countries as an executive and as a consultant for businesses that are household names. He continues to work on leadership development and organization culture for some of the world's largest corporations. In 2019, his work with ABB's top 240 executives received a major international award for the most innovative leadership development initiative of that year. His ongoing partnership with TRANSEARCH International means that his proprietary work on talent acquisition, in any one year, successfully supports many hundreds of top leadership appointments on six continents.

He has written extensively on executive coaching and was awarded international coach of the year by the Finnish Institute of International Trade. Business graduates at the University of Texas indicated that his material on coaching was the single most valuable learning source they took away from their undergraduate degree. He has also coached numerous executive teams around the world in how to coach. He currently coaches a select group of CEOs. Apart from a range of corporate leadership workshops, he has taught at business schools on both sides of the Atlantic. His work on the MBA program at the University of Toronto received a teaching excellence award.

John holds a doctorate in management development and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. In addition to numerous business articles and twice being awarded article of the year by MCB publications, he has published 15 books on leadership, talent management, coaching and organization culture. A number of them bestsellers. His Talent Trilogy was completed in 2016. *The A-Z of Organization Culture* came out in 2017. *Tomorrow Will Be Different – Will You?* was published in 2020. In addition to the publications outlined, his five-part *Leadership Beyond Crisis Series* came out in 2021. He has just completed his *Executive Playbook – It's Time to Rethink Succession*.



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