



What Makes Your **Organization** **Special?**

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John O. Burdett





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“With the rate of change that now engulfs us, if you lose what makes you special you may never get it back.”



We recently lost the world’s last surviving male northern white rhino. He was 45. Due to age-related degenerative muscle loss he was gently put to sleep.

Sudan escaped extinction when he was relocated to Dvůr Králové Zoo in the 1970s. In 2009 the four remaining northern white rhinos (two were males) were transferred from the Czech Zoo to Ol Pejeta in Kenya. It was hoped that a move to their natural environment and a less stressful life would allow them to breed. Sadly, they didn’t produce an offspring. The term



“less stressful” is something of a misnomer: to thwart potential poachers, Sudan lived under twenty-four-hour armed guard.

The northern white rhino is one of five rhino species. Three of the five species, the Greater one-horned, the Sumatran and the Javan rhino, are critically endangered. The Sumatran and the Javan are down to a few dozen animals. Poaching is, of course, a major cause of their demise but we (every one of us) collectively share the blame.

We may not have spent time with Sudan and his death may not impact our day-to-day life but with his passing we all lost something irreplaceable. In referencing the work of Daniel Kahneman, there is truly a case to be made that, as a society, in the quest to act fast, we really do need to know when to think slow.¹

Virtually every business book and magazine article emphasizes the speed of change. They rightly emphasize the need to stay, at least stay abreast, of the clock speed of the marketplace. Robotics; cobotics; 3-D printing; breakthroughs in materials; grid, cloud, distributive, utility and cluster computing; quantum computation; blockchain; and a host of factors that combine to produce exponential change mean that our organizations are in a win-at-all-cost race to bring to life the, “so called,” second machine revolution.

What can we learn from Sudan? As we are propelled towards an uncertain future, what fragment of humanity can we take from his death? In the dignity of his life and the caring from those around him, what sliver of sanity can we incorporate into our own story? As we put evermore energy into creating value, how do we ensure that we protect that which intrinsically has value?

Let me cast this not at an individual level but in terms of the modern organization. With the wide and ever-fractious divisions in the political sphere, “the corporation” is our best (only?) hope for building true community. This, in turn, naturally leads us to the challenge of “organization culture.”

Culture is story and story is culture. Top talent doesn’t join your organization because of the strength of your balance sheet. They do so because they connect with your story. Customers, similarly, may buy (initially) because of your value proposition but loyalty rests in the extent to which they feel at one with your story. Retaining outstanding employees, expecting people to go the extra mile and responding to crisis all draw, in no small measure, on the power of your story.

Great companies have a great story. Always! No less important, they know how to share that story. Your story has five critical elements:

1. What is our compelling purpose? Why do we do what we do?

1 Daniel Kahneman. *Thinking Fast and Slow*. 2011.



2. Where are we headed? Leadership, in this respect, is the ability to make tomorrow come alive in the room, today.
3. What do we believe in? What are our beliefs? Our values? What recent decisions did you make that were shaped by the organization's values? A leader makes the organization's values come to life in everything they do.
4. What makes us special? Our core business competencies are the start of it but not necessarily the heart of it.
5. What do we do, as a group of people, that makes a difference in the lives of others? What do we care about? How and when do we give back?

From my own work internationally on organization culture it's clear that only about 20% of organizations manage their culture. Are you managing your culture? Here is the acid test. Gather together a group of middle managers and ask them the five questions posed. If there is a high degree of agreement and they are committed to the answers ... congratulations. If not, you have work to do. Failure to manage your organization's culture is costing your business a good deal of money. Moreover, as you play technology catch-up "culture drift"² will be an ongoing impediment you may not be able to overcome.

Let me return to Sudan. He was a magnificent animal who, in his own way, made our kind special. He represents something precious we have lost that we can never get back. In the race for tomorrow, what is it that makes your organization special? As you shape your company's future, what can't you afford to lose? As you move forward, what are you leaving behind that the people you need most take pride in? In the drive to act fast, know when to think slow.

Being customer-centric is a mindset and not a process. Important as charting a digital direction is, if the outcome demanded is at the expense of respect and trust, it's a Faustian bargain. Technology is no substitute for a smile. Connectability without caring is an empty promise. Commitment devoid of courtesy is tomorrow's resentment not yet realised. Engagement without empathy amounts to movement without meaning. Even if she is smarter than you, are you ready to have your digital assistant take over your life? With the rate of change that now engulfs us, if you lose what makes you special you may never get it back.

Beginnings start with endings. Change is about letting go. In any action that speaks to creating tomorrow, today, the history that you need to move away from is always an important consideration. That being said, if your business has been around for a while and you are

2 Culture drift is the assumption that even if we don't invest time to truly managing culture we will, somehow, end up where we need to be. Good luck with that!



still standing, something special brought you this far.³ To surface what that might be I ask teams to express their feelings/insights through images captured on individual smart phones. And, over the course of a couple of weeks, they “discover” those things about the business that they hold dear. I also suggest that they use their imagination. If it’s an emotion or a concept, I prompt them to draw a simple sketch and take a picture of it. If it’s an individual/team, I ask them to take a picture of that person/team. A notice board, a letter from a customer, kids’ pictures in the lunchroom ... nothing is off limits. We print the pictures and then have each individual on the team share why the images he/she chose have meaning. The group montage produced introduces a rich, compelling and interactive conversation about the organization’s culture.⁴ One insight that often emerges, however, is that what those at the top suggest makes the business special isn’t always what those on the front line take pride in. If you are exploring diversity, consider doing the same activity where men and women attach their selected images to adjacent walls.

In conclusion, in the story of Sudan, all is not lost. The plan is to use the sperm stored from several northern white rhino males and the eggs from the two remaining females and implant the embryo in a southern white rhino female. Hopefully, it’s not too late. And hopefully, as you enter the maelstrom of change about to engulf us, it’s not too late for you to recognize and preserve what it is that makes your organization special.

To go deeper into Organization Culture download
The A-Z Of Organization Culture. It is available on Amazon.com,
eBooks, Kobo and Barnes and Noble.
Access using the author’s name John O. Burdett.

3 In my own work I refer to “the Roots and Wings of Culture.” In working with major organization in different parts of the world on organization culture, experience has taught me that, without guidance, far more energy and attention is invested into the Wings than the Roots.

4 This activity is complemented by measuring both the culture the organization has and the culture the organization needs. See *The A-Z of Organization Culture*. John O. Burdett (2017). Not a few organizations, when addressing culture change, have come to regret that they unwittingly ploughed under a quality or an attribute of the business that only later did they understand was invaluable.



In his endeavors around culture, with some of the world's largest organizations, John has worked in over 40 countries.

He holds a Doctorate in management development and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development.

John has authored ten books on leadership and organization culture. Notably the Talent Trilogy: *TALENT* (2014), *TEAM* (2015), and *The Empty Suit* (2016). John's latest book, *The A-Z of Organization Culture* came out in 2017.

His books, articles and assessment tools are embraced by executives on five continents. His company, Orxestra Inc., enjoys a strategic partnership with TRANSEARCH INTERNATIONAL, a global executive search firm. He is also the leadership advisor to The Bedford Consulting Group.



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