

Vanguard Articles - The paradigm paradox

The 'paradigm-shift' programme is a new genre purporting to change organisation culture. As with other labels (e.g. TQM, BPR), we risk lumping many things together which are quite different. So for the sake of clarity, the paradigm-shift programmes referred to here are those which are based on the work of Stephen Covey. I describe them as a genre because already this thinking has taken several forms (in my experience) but Covey's work is the most common underpinning and is very cogently argued.

In the course of working in organisations over the last few years I have come upon such programmes, labelled with inspiring titles. As they purport to change the culture, it is reasonable that they should be scrutinised to learn how and how well they achieve their purpose. It will not be argued that Covey's work is not of value. It clearly is. The argument will be that his ideas are wrongly applied to organisations (or applied at the wrong time).

It is almost as though we learn nothing from our experience. In the Eighties fortunes were wasted on customer care and quality programmes, and it will be argued that paradigm-shift programmes are suffering the same fate.

What does Covey teach?

A paradigm-shift is an "aha", that is to say, seeing something another way. Covey teaches how to think differently about yourself (intrapersonal paradigms) and how to think differently about working with others (interpersonal paradigms).

He argues that the way we see the problem is the problem. Applying his ideas, people learn that they have freedom to choose, they develop confidence in being proactive, they learn to begin 'with the end in mind' and hence create a future they have envisioned. People also learn the value of integrity in working with others and how to create 'win-win' strategies to improve co-operation. It is a powerful and empowering technology.

The relevance to organisations wanting a culture change appears obvious - who wouldn't want every employee in the team or whole organisation contributing powerfully to the future? And so Covey's concepts are written into programmes of culture change. The argument is that you shouldn't think about changing people, you should give them the tools and they will change themselves.

Starting with the intrapersonal, people learn to change by examining their current beliefs and the beliefs held dear by the current culture. They learn to 'unconceal' (a new word introduced by this genre) or disclose that which has previously been covert (undiscussed) or, even, undiscussable.

By being clear about what is, people can achieve breakthroughs, another key word meaning working outside of current paradigms. That, it is argued, is the key for creativity and inspired action.

Moving to the interpersonal, people learn a new language for working with others. No longer do you call someone up for a chat about a problem, you 'make a request' and your request may be 'accepted' or 'declined'. When things aren't going well, people feel confident to declare a 'breakdown', safe in the knowledge that like-minded people will be at hand to help.

Sounds great doesn't it? My first experience of such programmes was in 1989 in an IT organisation. The programme names were up-beat descriptions for inspired teams and inspired leaders. An analysis of the actions from the programmes showed that few people were doing things that could be argued to be of economic benefit to the organisation (ie. affecting revenue, efficiency or customer service).

Some had started with good intent but their projects had waned, perhaps fought off by the receiving culture. Many, however, had chosen to do things entirely unrelated to economic performance (eg. leave the company "the event helped me find myself", set up interest groups and so on). Since this first experience, I have sought out project lists following programmes in other companies and have found similar results. It is true that some people succeed with initiatives that prove to be economically worthy. However, initiatives which threaten the current operating culture are typically resisted to extinction and many initiatives simply bear no relation to the economic performance of the organisation.

It is also the case that many problems still existed which had alarming economic consequences and were cultural in origin. For example:

In one company we found eighty million pounds-worth of potential business not getting bid because it was 'stuck' in the pre-sales processes. Many of the creative initiatives spawned by the programme ('breakthrough projects') were sales-related but none dealt with the fundamental problem. Work was not getting bid. Bad measures were the main cause, creating competition in some instances and failure to give help in others ("I don't want to help you, it won't help my numbers").

In another, as many as 50% of the customers ringing in with an invoice enquiry abandoned their call. Customers learned to call instead on the customer services (sales enquiry) line. As many as 40% of the calls coming in to the sales line were billing queries. These were logged and passed on to invoice enquiries, taking days to get actioned. Often the customers called again. Once again, it was measures that were getting in the way. Executives working on functional measures, bad debt, sales volume, call volumes, time to answer calls were oblivious to the problems. Breakthrough projects which went across these boundaries met with resistance from managers.

These were not isolated problems. They were examples of general problems in these organisations. Similar costly problems could be found elsewhere, they existed because of the way managers thought about their work. While the initiatives appeared to change

behaviour, the underlying norms and practices relative to doing work were not articulated or challenged and it was these that maintained sub-optimal business performance.

How to do the work is the superordinate paradigm

The problem is that the programmes don't talk about work, how to do work, how to understand work, how to learn from it and how to improve it.

If an organisation wants to unleash its workforce, to create a winning culture, people need to know what to do about the work. Acting in concert towards a common vision demands that people have a common framework and language. Covey follows the Western and, particularly American, management view that organisations are collections of individuals and that culture change means releasing their potential. It is a view based on the more general belief that performance is an 'individual' phenomenon. Deming taught the opposite. Performance, he said, is more than ninety per cent governed by the system. If it's thinking that has to change, it is our thinking about work, about how to run the system that's important.

The systems described in the examples above were inefficient, not customer friendly and likely to impact revenue adversely. It is the systems that should have and could have been the focus for people's energies.

Paradigm-shift programmes, like customer care, quality and BPR programmes are up against the existing culture. At a recent conference, the presenter was asked, "What were the down sides of your paradigm-shift programme?". The answers were: people paying lip-service; people at higher levels feeling threatened and protecting their turf; and experiencing tension living in the gap between the reality and what some people want it to be. These data suggest that the programme is being fought by the system.

In an airline, cabin crew were so alarmed by their 'Breakthrough' programme that, through their staff union, they issued a briefing paper to all crew on how to survive the programme. It was titled 'Your Brainwashing Self-defence Kit'. Reading the paper it was clear that cabin crew care about the operational aspects of their work (eg. having the right meals etc) and had major problems seeing the connection between what they regarded as a 'therapeutic' intervention and getting the work done. Two excerpts illustrate:

1. Be present but do not participate. Do not wear the T-shirt. Do not play the games. Do not hug anyone. Do not tell anyone your secrets. Do not discuss your emotions. And, most important of all, do not walk out.

If you follow this advice you will almost certainly be selected for some one-to-one counselling from an unqualified crew member with staring eyes, fixed smile and nodding head, usually during a meal or coffee break. If you fail to recognise them visually you will quickly recognise the standard phrases. 'Why did you feel the need to not participate/rebel?

What did it feel like to....?' and the old favourite, 'if you feel you want to talk to someone about this I am available'.

2. And now some key words to use on the presenters

Anything definite and unarguable. Black and white. Right and wrong. All tangible aspects of the job, peanuts, blankets, newspapers, delays, anything hard and solid. Basically, when they are being grey and woolly be as specific and work related as you can and vice versa, when they are talking hard (which is rare) talk about caring, support and professionalism. Use words like support, which they love, in reference to physical problems in the job, which they hate. Describe product shortages as lack of support, this really confuses them.

Similarly, in an IT company, people learned to 'get through' their 'leadership intensive' programme by having pre-prepared self-disclosure. Managers knew the 'social contract' demanded disclosure and emotional catharsis. They were also quite realistic about what really governed performance in the system (ie. the current organisation). People paid lip-service to the programme, particularly because people were effectively threatened about being negative (to bad-mouth the programme could bring negative consequences for the manager). In this organisation 'already listening' (a new phrase, meaning listening with prejudice) became a racket in itself, a game between people with different agendas and feelings continued with a different language.

These problems occur because on the one hand the programmes are not actually dealing with what's wrong with the system, and on the other hand people are inhibited from contributing precisely because of the system (the way their work is defined, the way measures are used, the way functions, processes and roles are designed). These 'system conditions' are the way they are because of managerial thinking. For example, most Western managers think of their organisations in functional ways, they use functional measures to exert control and so on. It is simply the way they have been trained and socialised.

Managers in 'command and control' cultures recognise that their traditional paradigm is out of date and perhaps this leads them to assume that a 'paradigm-shift' programme will provide the remedy. For many people the effect has been akin to evangelism. Some take the opportunity to try to achieve what they know is best for the organisation, some accept it blindly, some feel threatened and cope by building sophisticated defences.

It is management thinking that establishes and maintains the current system and, therefore, the culture. Culture change is not simply about how you see yourself and others. It is about how the system works, ie. how we do the work together rather than how we work together. Deming showed that changing the system was the key to change. The superordinate paradigm change is to understand how to act on the organisation as a system. Then and

only then will behavioural changes sustain an effective purchase on performance. Only then will the organisation be learning.

Consistent with Covey's approach, the key to change is to remove or modify aspects of the current operating culture and this has to start with 'inquiry' and 'unconcealing'. People don't give up their traditional ways of working unless two conditions are satisfied: They see how current methods produce sub-optimal results (customer dissatisfaction, inefficiency, lost opportunity), and they feel confident about doing things differently - they can see how a different approach will benefit the organisation and its customers. The first condition relies on understanding the organisation as a system which, in turn, leads to good decisions about what to do differently.

The paradox is that changing a culture starts with different thinking about the work. Behavioural logic should be dependent on the task logic (if it would improve performance to do the work differently, how does it mean we should behave?). Focusing on behaviour without embedding it in a work context creates an entirely new pathology - people try to play a new game. By contrast, focusing on how we work anchors improvement in things that are real and opens the door to working on behaviour (or culture) in a way which has relevance and, more importantly, is palpably relevant.

Why do executives buy these programmes? Probably because they have become convinced of the need to release the energies of their people. However, the programmes give people no tools to challenge the system and if they do they are likely to be met with resistance. If we do want our systems to be challenged (and we should) we have to tackle those who maintain them as they are (the managers). Managers who want change should be leading the way by behaving unreasonably about the current system and in so doing they would encourage others to challenge the status quo.

Covey's ideas are being wrongly applied to organisations. Changing an organisation is not simply about changing the people; taking that view might only lead to expensive failure. The 'thinking' tools people need to effect change are system-relevant tools rather than tools that help them look at themselves. In an organisation governed by traditional management thinking (and the majority of ours are), releasing people's energies with Covey's tools may at best produce minimal sustained change and at worst will result in greater cynicism. It is a cost we cannot afford.