

# Culture: to Change or Not to Change

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Something intriguing happened to me the other day, while I was browsing the Internet I saw the huge void between the Western and Middle Eastern cultures. I was browsing cbsnews.com, an American news Website, and my eyes were glued to the streaming video of the Iranian president's interview on "60 Minutes<sup>1</sup>," a television newsmagazine. The interview was filled with political rhetoric, though behind all of that was the void. In the right hand corner was the CBS reporter grilling the Iranian president with his American style investigative journalism. In the left hand corner was the Iranian president starting his interview with a Persian poetic tone by saying: "It's in the afternoon of an autumn day. We're in the

open air in a garden. And the air is pleasant. And fall, little by little, is settling in, mixing with the summer breeze." Both the president and the reporter were a perversion of two distinct cultures that when put together only differences could be noticed. From our reading material, one can say that the interview would have had less of a sparring tone had both sides been close to agreement or one of the sides crossed over and behaved in accordance to the other side's culture.

Can one easily change cultures? Can culture be situational where a person can switch to another culture in an instance? In this paper, we will explore these questions and more in a context of an organization and learn more about culture and when to change it.

## What is Culture?

From our readings we learn that culture is so complex that no one sentence can clearly define it. Instead culture can be illustrated as an onion where the more layers are peeled the more we get to the core of it. Authors Edgar Schein agrees that culture has three layers which are: artifacts, espoused values and basic underlying assumptions. At the deepest layer, "basic underlying assumptions", are the core players with the biggest influence and key players: the founder and key leaders. According to Schein organization's culture is dictated by the values, beliefs and assumptions of an organization's founders. These key players dictate what a person sees, hears and feels in an organization's corridors and meeting rooms.

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<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/09/20/60minutes/main3282230.shtml>

## When Should Culture be Changed?

The phrase “change is good” gets used often. Though is change really good for an organization? Author Schein Edgar believes that culture should only be changed when it becomes a dysfunctional element of a failing organization. At that moment in time the existing culture no longer is the “right” culture for the organization to succeed in its primary tasks. In other words, culture should not be changed for the sake of bringing in something new. Instead, it should be changed to tackle a failure in the organization.

Furthermore, cultural change comes at an expensive price. Before an organization changes its culture its employees have to shed their existing culture before learning or embracing a new culture. This step creates what Schein calls “learning anxiety.” Learning anxiety acts as a hurdle that hinders cultural change from occurring. The only way an organization can overcome this hurdle is when “survival anxiety” is “greater than “learning anxiety”.

A good example of a failing organization that requires cultural change to rectify its failure is demonstrated in the case “Optivus Technology.” On the other hand, the case “Organizational Transformation in a Taiwanese Company” illustrates an example of an organization that is seeking cultural change for the wrong reasons.

The case for the need of cultural change at Optivus Technology is not only clear, but also its attributes and environment play in its favor. First, Optivus Technology is failing. Optivus Technology has attempted to sell

its proton treatment center to hospitals since 1993. Seven years onwards, we learn that Optivus has still not sold a single proton treatment center. Second, at stake is Optivus existence and Jon Slates credibility. If Optivus Technology does not deliver a proton treatment center it will not be able to sustain itself for a long time. Furthermore, after several premature public announcements of impending contracts newspapers concluded that Jon slate was “either a scan artist or an incompetent businessman.” Third, Optivus’ founder Jon Slate realizes that cultural change has to occur for Optivus to succeed. I have previously mentioned that culture in an organization is predominantly influenced by its inner most layer: its founders. For an organization’s culture to change, the change has to be supported by the organization’s top most levels. Optivus founder Jon Slate recognizes that in order to grow and stay afloat Optivus’ culture has to change. Jon Slate “recognized that he had to accept some level of bureaucratic structure in order to position the company for growth.” The correct type of change at the core layer of culture will infuse itself into the other layers ultimately creating a change in employees’ behaviors and actions thus propelling Optivus back on a successful track.

On the other hand, the case for the YUAN Group to introduce change is not that obvious. First, there is no indication of the YUAN Group failing. While the case does not give any financial figures, there is no reason to believe that the company is a failing company. Second, the company’s existence is not at stake. Eva, the head of human resources, believes that the World

Trade Organization will bring in global competitors, but this does not make a compelling case for a bleak future. Third, the agent of change is part of the human resources department and not the company's founder. The "father" of the company, Mr. Pan, is not involved in this change at any capacity. As a matter of fact, Eva, the human resources director, seems to be the only person that believes that changing the organization's culture is important. Eva is on a mission to change the organization's culture without the buy in of its founder. Moreover, the change that is suggested is too far apart from the existing culture. This in effect creates a huge learning anxiety that is far larger than the organization's survival anxiety, if there is any.

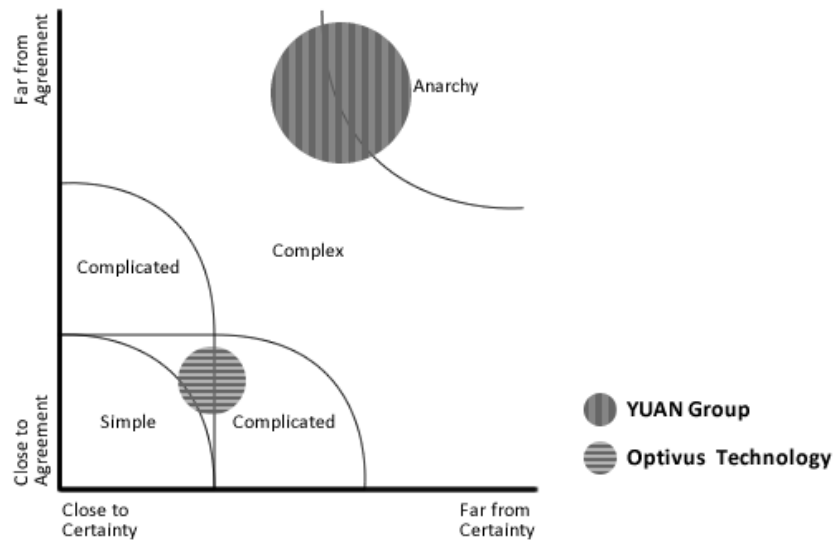
the supervisor taking charge of writing a clear development plan with employees. Instead, Eva found out that employees were writing their own development plans and that the objectives were very general. Second, Eva believed in training and developing managers, while Mr. Pan, the CEO of the group, believed that leadership styles of an individual are innate and cannot be learned. Furthermore, the effects of the imposed change were far from certain. Last but not least, the individualistic change proposed is far from agreement with the Taiwanese communal culture. Who knows how a Taiwanese corporation would behave with an external Western management style superimposed on it. For these reasons YUAN Group change falls under "Anarchy" or "Complex" at best when plotted on Stacey's Agreement & Certainty Matrix.

### Is the Change Simple, Complicated or Complex?

If we were to plot Optivus' and YUAN Group's case for change on Ralph Stacey's Agreement & Certainty Matrix, we will notice that change at Optivus is much easier than that of YUAN Group.

There were several instances in the case of YUAN Group that shows that Eva and the rest of the group were far from agreement on what needs to be changed. First, when it came to forming development plans Eva envisioned

Both agreement and certainty about the change that needs to happen and its result can be inferred from the Optivus



Technology case. "There was no doubting that the impending expansion of the organization that would be required to go

into production of one, then two, and then still more proton centers would, if Optivus was to succeed, mandate greater structure and standardization.” This shows that Optivus Technology cultural change will lay closer the corner of Stacey's Agreement & Certainty Matrix under and can be described by “Simple” and utmost as “Complicated”.

### **Can Culture be altered?**

Yes, culture can be altered, though the reasons for this alteration have to be compelling. Furthermore, for cultural change to succeed survival anxiety must be greater than learning anxiety and the change must also be championed and supported by the leaders of the organization.

Culture is innate and a person cannot switch readily between cultures. As Schein says “you have to unlearn something before you can learn something new.” This action is not only painful, but also requires time and patience.