



One of the main problems organisations face in managing strategic change is effecting changes in organisational culture. We have used our powerful tool – the Cultural Web – to help managers address the challenge of strategy driven cultural change. Our Cultural Web was originated by Gerry Johnson and it is explained in several of his publications. This has been used by us with organizations as diverse as Shell, KPMG, Castrol, the NHS, the UK Labour Party and as part of high profile executive education programmes at Manchester Business School, Cranfield School of Management, Strathclyde Business School and Lancaster University Management School. What follows is an edited version of a chapter that explains its use from Exploring Public Sector strategy, edited by Gerry Johnson and Kevan Scholes (Prentice Hall, 2001)

## MAPPING AND RE-MAPPING ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE: A LOCAL GOVERNMENT EXAMPLE \*

by Gerry Johnson

### Introduction

There is a tendency for organisations' strategies to persist because they are configured within that which is taken for granted in the organisation - assumptions about the nature of the organisation, its environment and the way things are done in the organisation. Even when a strategy is formulated, perhaps based on sound rational argument, organisations often find that achieving significant change to current strategy is difficult.

This paper builds on the idea of the cultural web to show how mapping culture can provide an understanding of barriers to change; and how re-mapping on the basis of the culture needed to deliver the strategy can help identify means of managing strategic change. It uses a case example to illustrate this.

### The Concept of Culture and the Cultural Web

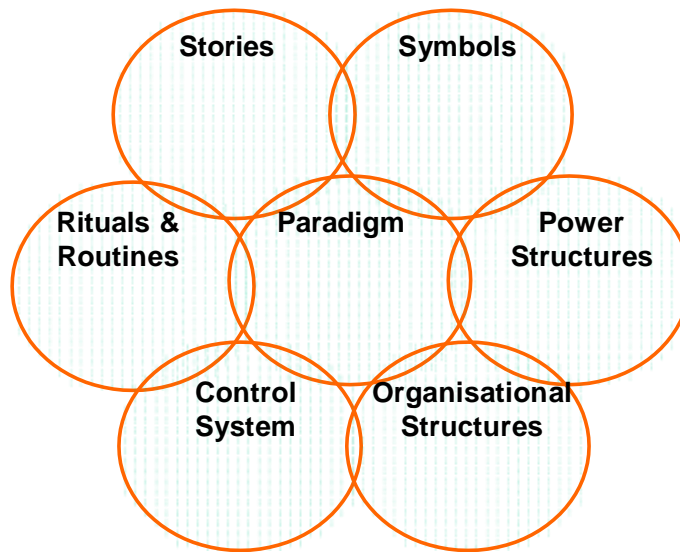
Culture is often explained as that which is taken for granted in a society or organisation. At its most basic this might be assumptions about what the organisation is there to do, or the reasons for its success historically. Culture can also be thought of as the 'artefacts' of the organisation - such as organisational routines, systems and structures. Again these are likely to be taken for

---

\* The illustrative example used in this chapter, whilst based on actual events, is anonymized and disguised.

granted as the 'way we do things around here'. These are the components of the cultural web (see Exhibit 1).

### Exhibit 1: The cultural web of an organisation



This 'taken for grantedness' tends to act as a 'filter' through which people in an organisation make sense of their world internally and externally. This can be very helpful for at least two reasons. First, it provides a 'shorthand' way of understanding often complex situations; second, it may be the basis of the organisation's success, providing competitive advantage because the culture itself is difficult to imitate. However it can also be problematic because new ideas may be 'filtered out' and because the culture is likely to be very difficult to change, particularly if the success of the organisation has been based upon it in the past. (For a fuller explanation of the role of culture in strategy development see section 5.4.5 in chapter 5 of Exploring Corporate Strategy, 8th edition).

## The Value of Culture Mapping

There are three main benefits to mapping organisational culture:

- Surfacing that which is taken for granted can be a useful way of questioning what is normally rarely questioned. If no one ever questions what is taken for granted then, inevitably, change will be difficult.
- By mapping aspects of organisational culture it may be possible to see where barriers to change exist and also what aspects of the existing culture are in line with the desired future strategy.
- A map of organisational culture can also provide a basis for examining what changes need to occur to deliver a new strategy and how such changes can be managed. So practical ideas for implementing strategic change can be developed.

## How to Map Organisational Culture

The cultural web can be used as a device for mapping organisational culture. It has been used effectively in many management workshops. How this is done is now described.

### The Aim

The aim is to generate managers' own perceptions of the cultural aspects of their organisations using the cultural web as a tool.

## The Setting

The setting may vary; but the approach described here has been used most effectively in groups of 12 -15 managers from the same organisation. They have usually been part of a strategy workshop for their organisation. The process is most effective when they have an understanding of the strategic issues faced by the organisation, and ideally, some responsibility for implementing strategy. In the example used here the workshop was for three departments of a UK local government authority; each department was represented by four or five managers.

## Originating a Cultural Web

It is necessary for those taking part to understand the conceptual basis of the cultural web and its links to strategy development in the organisation. We typically start the session with a review of such concepts and how they link to the strategy of their organisation.

We then explain the elements of the cultural web as shown in Exhibit 2. As this is done, members of the workshop can be asked to note down examples of each of the aspects of the web as they see it for their own organisation. Individuals can usually do this fairly easily for most aspects of the web though there may be difficulties with routines, symbols and stories coming to mind as easily as other aspects. This is simply because they are so 'everyday'; so taken for granted.

## Exhibit 2

### ELEMENTS OF THE CULTURAL WEB

- The *paradigm* is the set of assumptions about the organisation which is held in common and taken for granted in the organisation
- The *routine* ways that members of the organisation behave towards each other, and that link different parts of the organisation. These are the "way we do things around here" which at their best lubricate the working of the organisation, and may provide a distinctive and beneficial organisational competency. However they can also represent a taken-for-grantedness about how things should happen which is extremely difficult to change and highly protective of core assumptions in the paradigm.
- The *rituals* of organisational life, such as training programmes, promotion and assessment point to what is important in the organisation, reinforce "the way we do things around here" and signal what is especially valued
- The *stories* told by members of the organisation to each other, to outsiders, to new recruits and so on, embed the present in its organisational history and flag up important events and personalities, as well as mavericks who "deviate from the norm".
- Other *symbolic aspects* of organisations such as logos, offices, cars and titles; or the type of language and terminology commonly used: these symbols become a short-hand representation of the nature of the organisation.
- The formalised *control systems*, measurements and reward systems that monitor and therefore emphasise what is important in the organisation, and focus attention and activity.
- *Power structures* are also likely to be associated with the key constructs of the paradigm. The most powerful managerial groupings in the organisation are likely to be the ones most associated with core assumptions and beliefs about what is important.
- In turn the formal *organisational structure*, or the more informal ways in which the organisations work are likely to reflect power structures and, again, delineate important relationships and emphasise what is important in the organisation.

The other aspect of the web which is difficult for managers to conceptualise is the paradigm itself. This is hardly surprising since it is the assumptions that they live with everyday. Most usually these are not regarded as problematic, are hardly ever discussed; indeed are self evident. This is probably better done in the group work that follows; and some guidance is given on this.

After the individuals have noted down their views individually the workshop can be split into groups. The managers are asked to compare their individual views and discuss the extent to which they are similar or different. Sometimes there will be considerable similarity. Sometime there will be differences which might reflect the fact the managers have different experience or have been with the organisation for different lengths of time. However, the aim is to find the common aspects of organisational culture rather than to expect that everyone will see everything the same. So the task is for the managers to discuss that which is most held in common.

It is worth noting the following:

- Identification of the paradigm is usually the most difficult task. The reasons are explained above. Managers may try to over-intellectualise this and slip into substituting the notion of strategy for paradigm. They start discussing what the organisation should take for granted or what it should do rather than what it does take for granted. Or they list organisational values rather than that taken for granted assumptions. Understanding the difference is important and we often spend time addressing this.
- Remember that which is taken for granted may be very simple and apparently straightforward. Nurses, for example, tend to take for granted the importance of professional healthcare; professors in universities take for granted the importance of research; police take for granted the importance of social order. None of these are surprising and should not be. The point is that they are likely to be very embedded and changing them, if change is required, is extremely difficult. So the managers should be advised to look for that which is so obvious they would rarely debate or discuss it.

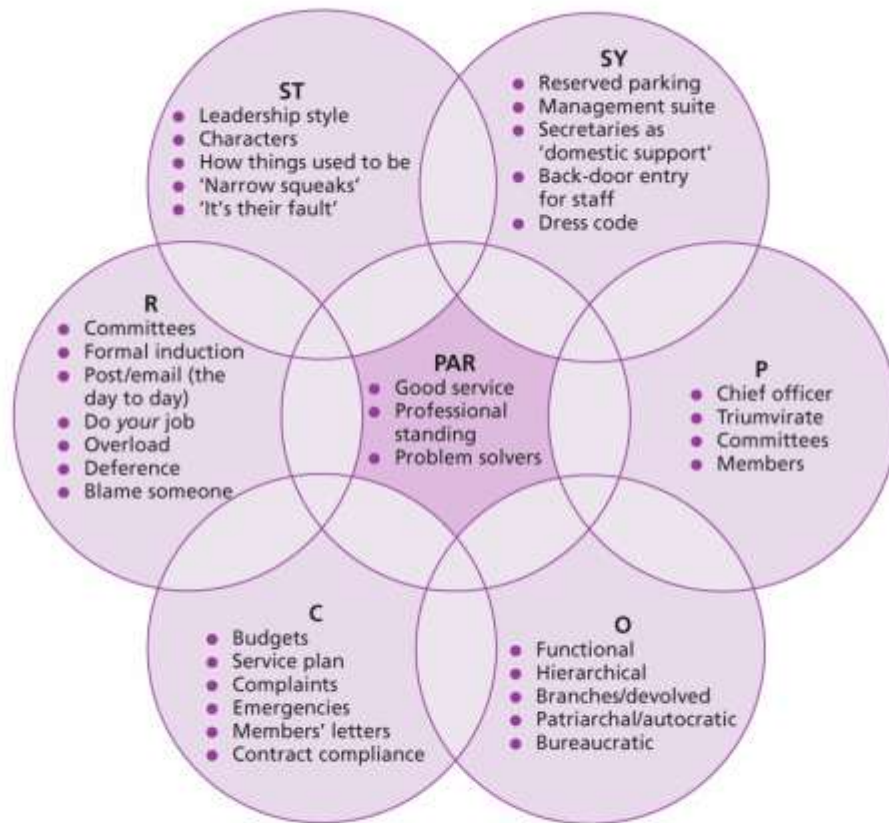
- The managers may also seek for a whole catalogue of constructs to do with the paradigm. This may not be very helpful. It may be that there are very few constructs taken for granted and held in common.

### Discussing the Cultural Webs

The groups can present their webs to each other interpret their significance. The session facilitator should avoid the temptation to over-interpret the web as a whole or parts of it since he or she cannot be expected to know as much about the organisation as the managers themselves; and very likely the managers will raise aspects of the organisation that may be meaningful to them but not to the facilitator.

Exhibit 3 shows the cultural web drawn up by managers in the Surveying Department of a local government authority and will be used as an example in what follows. It is now used to illustrate the sort of issues that could be surfaced.





**Exhibit 3** Local Government Technical Services Current Culture

- What does the web say about the organisational culture as a whole; for example how much is the culture linked to the organisation's heritage; how uniform is it; how long has it been like this; is it a culture of challenge and questioning or constraint and convention? In the case of the surveyors and the webs of the other local government departments, what emerged was a strong belief about high quality service. However the emphasis was on professional standards, with service being defined in these terms rather than necessarily as satisfying users of the service. In turn this professional legitimacy was linked to the departmental structure. Departments tended to be organisational silos within which services were delivered and the conventions of service reserved. These departments were headed by chief officers who tended to control access to and influence by elected members of local government and, inevitably, filter or translate elements of overall strategy to determine departmental response. The organisation was also characterised, both within surveying, but also in other departments by an hierarchical and mechanistic approach to management with a strong emphasis on structuring, budgeting and bureaucracy. Of course in some respects this should be of no surprise in a large and complex organisation, inevitably governed by statute to a great extent.

In the surveying department there was also an emphasis on being reactive rather than proactive. Managers saw themselves as problem solvers - indeed overloaded problem solvers - re-acting to the wishes of elected members, or to complaints; attempting to avoid mistakes and often only doing so narrowly. The way of dealing with this was to "get your head down and get on with the job"; and if anything did go wrong, try to blame someone else.

- Is the culture compatible with the strategy being followed by the organisation and with the strategy being advocated for the organisation? It might be that the managers see that the strategy and the culture are closely aligned. Indeed in some organisations they might come to see that the strategy is, in effect, a product of the culture; that the culture is

'managing' the strategy rather than the managers. In this local government authority, the chief executive was keen to develop a strategy focussing on major local issues which crossed department responsibilities and therefore required co-operation across departments. The problem with the culture described above was that it was, not only inherently departmental and functional, but that functionalism was preserved and legitimated by a professional ethos, protected by powerful departmental heads. These departmental heads took part in discussions on overall strategy, even agreed to its logic, but back in their departments their focus was on preserving service standards strongly influenced by professional norms and established procedures. The danger was an overall strategy on paper only and a continuation of departmental strategies driven by the long established culture and powerful individuals dedicated to its preservation.

- Why might the organisational culture be difficult to change? Some generalised explanations which have emerged as managers have discussed cultural webs in such workshops are these:
  - Taken for grantedness: the most fundamental reason is, of course, that these aspects of the web are taken for granted. They are not the sort of things that people question. Or as one manager on a workshop put it: "They are the sort of things we may talk about in the pub; but they are not on the agenda in the office."
  - Linkages throughout the web. For example powerful individuals or groups are closely associated with organisational structures that preserve power bases, with dominant routines which tend to persist; with symbols of hierarchy or authority and with stories about their power or the origins of their power In the Surveying department the dominant influence of the chief officer was preserved in an essentially hierarchical structure, formal committees for decision making, control

- over budgets (in formal terms); but more informally this took form in symbols of hierarchy such as privileges for senior managers (eg parking, offices and secretarial services). On the other hand more junior staff, entered offices through a different door and from their early induction understood the importance of deferring to senior personnel and focussing on their responsibilities.

In the case of local government departments networks at a professional level across departments or functions between different local government authorities were also important. Surveyors identified with surveyors from other local government authorities; social workers would network with other social workers; and it was the same for teachers, library staff and so on.

- Aspects of the culture web may be associated with the power of individuals or groups. For example the power of departmental heads was, in part the result of their standing in terms of their professional networks. This further reinforced the significance of departmental silos.
- The importance of the everyday in relation to strategy. The cultural web may prompt discussion about the nature of the organisation as everyday reality and how changing that everyday reality becomes crucially important in changing strategy. For the surveyors, for example, the day to day routines of their work were a good deal more "real" than concepts of strategy in the organisation. They were overloaded; they were responding to issues that came up on a day to day basis; they were coping with this by getting on with their jobs and blaming someone else if something went wrong. Clearly this set of coping routines was a long way away from what was envisaged in a strategy of proactively focussing on local needs in co-operation with other departments.

Discussion of these sorts of issues can help sensitize managers to the need to recognise the importance of cultural aspects of organisations. However, leading on from this, the cultural web can be used in more organisationally specific ways to think about the problems and means of managing change.

### Identifying Blockages to Change

The cultural web can be used to identify more specifically blockages to change. For example the managers who drew up the cultural web for the Surveying Department knew about the espoused strategy for the organisation and, at least intellectually, largely agreed with it. However they could also see that the sort of culture described in exhibit 3 was unlikely to deliver this strategy. Moreover they could identify some quite specific blockages as to why this would be so. The preservation of standards within organisational silos by the chief officers but also by institutionalized professional norms reinforced by the structure of the organisation and the deferential attitude of staff. In turn this was embodied in the formality, not only of committees and plans but, also for example, in dress code. Moreover individuals focussed on getting on with their own jobs; and if something went wrong there was always a way of finding someone else to blame. This was not a culture of co-operation.

It might be, of course, that aspects of the culture might also facilitate change. Here the managers saw the dedication to good service, the ethos of hard work and the flexibility in service delivery that had developed as potentially positive, if only some of the blockages could be overcome. Moreover the devolved nature of some services (to local offices) might be harnessed positively in a different culture.

## Re-Mapping Organisational Culture

Conceiving of what the culture needs to look like if a different strategy is to be followed is useful for two main reasons:

- Conceptually it gives an idea of the extent to which the present culture is an impediment and the extent to which change is required.
- Traditional notions of managing strategic change suggest that organisations will change if people can be persuaded to change their views about what makes for success in the organisation. In effect, if they can be persuaded to change their taken for granted assumptions - the paradigm. This is a worthy aim, perhaps, but difficult to achieve. An alternative or complimentary approach is to develop a work environment and ways of doing things in line with the desired strategy; and in so doing create a context in which people can experience change and see its benefits. Mapping the sort of structure, systems, routines, rituals and symbols which, desirably, would support a new strategy can give clues to what it might be helpful to change. It can of course also give further insights in to the difficulties of managing strategic change and therefore give insights into what can and cannot be managed in culture change.

The approach to re-mapping using the cultural web is similar to that described above.

### The Aim

The aim is to re-map the web but this time to represent how culture would be if the strategy which has been developed was working successfully.

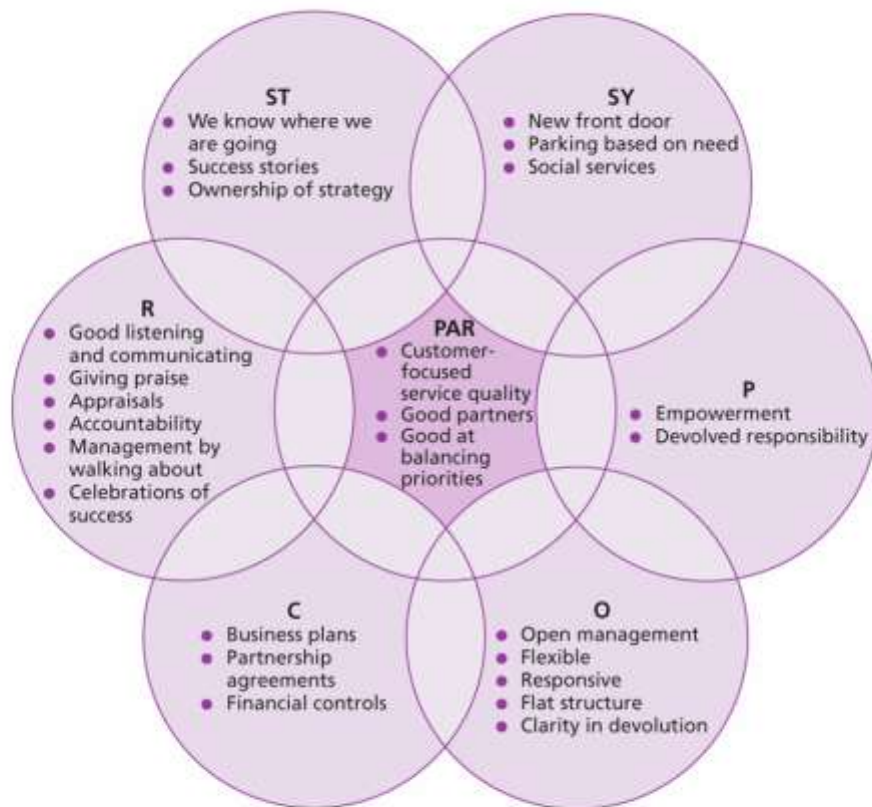
## The Setting

The setting may be the same sort of event as described above: indeed it might be the same group of managers following on from the previous exercise.

## The Approach

The approach is also similar to that described above too. The workshop itself may have developed its own strategy for the organisation; or it may be that they or others have done so previously. But the starting point should be a clear statement of the desired strategy for the organisation.

The next step is to ask the managers to repeat the exercise but this time for how the organisation would be if the strategy was working effectively. Again, this should be done individually, then in groups and then by the groups reporting back to each other. Exhibit 4 shows what this looked like when the Surveyors did it.



**Exhibit 4** Local Government Technical Services Future Culture

It is likely that the following will be observed:

- The managers may find it relatively easy to describe the desirable paradigm that would be in place given the new strategy. It is likely to be a reflection of the intended strategy. For example the surveyors recognised there would be a need for a greater focus on what they called “the customer” rather than just a professional definition of good service; and much more emphasis on being partners across departments.



- Especially where senior managers are concerned, they are also likely to find it easy to spell out the sorts of structural and systemic aspects of the organisation. Senior managers in particular often see strategy implementation in these terms; change the structure, the measurements and control systems and how people are rewarded and people will behave differently. To some extent this is just what had been happening at the most senior levels in this local government authority; having drawn up a strategic plan the initial debates had mainly been about organisational structure, more effective control systems and, to some extent, changes in personnel. These are important aspects of managing change, but they could well be insufficient because they may not address the day to day realities of those responsible for 'delivering' the strategy; and may not overcome many of the more day to day blockages of change.
- Managers may also be able to identify changes in the political structure and influence systems in the organisation in line with the required strategy. They might identify elements within the organisation that need to be removed or whose power needs to be reduced if the strategy is to work. One of the issues that was raised by the surveyors was the very powerful influence of chief officers of departments. It was of course a highly sensitive issue; but this raises an important point. Without such a workshop the centrality of this issue may not have surfaced.
- It is less usual for managers - particularly senior managers - to be able to conceive of the day to day aspects of organisational culture and what they would need to be like if the strategy were to be effective. Such day to day aspects of culture are more represented by the organisational routines, symbols and stories that exist. If these aspects of culture are not in line with the strategy to be followed, very likely it will be aspects of the existing or past culture that will be drawn upon.

The managers who took part in these workshops, however, were able to identify several possibilities of changes of a symbolic, ritual or routine nature. There should be a good deal more emphasis on project or task groups which would be transient; more social events which brought together different levels of managers; more direct exposure to "customers"; direct feedback from customers, not just in the form of complaints but by more systematic surveys. Letters of thanks should be shared and circulated. Senior executives, in particular, needed to have much more exposure to staff and be prepared to listen to them in informal gatherings. The chief executive in particular needed to come across as more friendly, outgoing and in touch with the day to day concerns and problems of staff. There needed to be much more giving of praise, rather than blame and willingness to talk about successes rather than near failures. It ought to be normal to question and challenge ways of doing things.

## Managing Strategic Change

The re-webbing exercise can be especially useful in getting managers to think what can be managed in effecting change in the culture of the organisation. The managers have two maps. One represents the organisation as it is; the other the organisation as they would wish it to be.

Useful questions are:

- What is the extent of change required? It could be relatively small scale or very considerable. It is likely that the greater the change, the more there is a need for comprehensive change in aspects of the web. The more fundamental, or transformational, the change the more it is likely that it needs to be managed by making multiple changes throughout the different aspects of culture described in the web. The local government example here makes an important point. It is quite likely that, technically, the services provided by, for example, the Surveying Department, would change very little. However culturally the change would be fundamental if the new strategy was to work.

- Which aspects of change are relatively straightforward to manage and which are difficult? For example, managers may conclude that the ones which are most likely to be straightforward are those to do with structure and systems and the more difficult are the symbolic and routine aspects of the organisation which are embedded in years of organisational history.
- Are there any changes which would have particularly high impact? This might be because they especially symbolise significant change or some aspect of the strategy to be followed. Or it could be that such a change would have a 'knock on' effect. For example the removal of powerful blockages to change could itself become a story and a symbol of change. The difficulty in the local government example was that one of the major blockages was the power of a number of senior individuals whose expertise was undeniable. However, as was pointed out by one of the workshop groups, the “conversion” of one or two of these individuals to commitment and role modelling of the new strategy would certainly have a major effect. It was a point not lost on the chief executive.

The management of strategic change through the various aspects of organisational culture and systems are described more fully in chapters 9, 10 and 11 of Exploring Corporate Strategy (5th edition).

## Summary

'Culture' is often seen as a barrier to change, the more so because it is difficult to be clear about what is meant by it or if anything can be done to change it. The Cultural Web has proved to be a useful device for achieving some clarity on what constitutes the culture of an organisation, why this is significant on strategy development and the ways it might be possible to manage change.

In particular it highlights the importance of that which is taken for granted in an organisation in influencing the persistence of existing strategies, acting to prevent change but, potentially, giving clues as to important levers and mechanisms of achieving change.

## Exhibit 2

### ELEMENTS OF THE CULTURAL WEB

- The paradigm is the set of assumptions about the organisation which is held in common and taken for granted in the organisation
- The routine ways that members of the organisation behave towards each other, and that link different parts of the organisation. These are the "way we do things around here" which at their best lubricate the working of the organisation, and may provide a distinctive and beneficial organisational competency. However they can also represent a taken-for-grantedness about how things should happen which is extremely difficult to change and highly protective of core assumptions in the paradigm.
- The rituals of organisational life, such as training programmes, promotion and assessment point to what is important in the organisation, reinforce "the way we do things around here" and signal what is especially valued
- The stories told by members of the organisation to each other, to outsiders, to new recruits and so on, embed the present in its organisational history and flag up important events and personalities, as well as mavericks who "deviate from the norm".

- Other symbolic aspects of organisations such as logos, offices, cars and titles; or the type of language and terminology commonly used: these symbols become a short-hand representation of the nature of the organisation.
- The formalised control systems, measurements and reward systems that monitor and therefore emphasise what is important in the organisation, and focus attention and activity.
- Power structures are also likely to be associated with the key constructs of the paradigm. The most powerful managerial groupings in the organisation are likely to be the ones most associated with core assumptions and beliefs about what is important.
- In turn the formal organisational structure, or the more informal ways in which the organisations work are likely to reflect power structures and, again, delineate important relationships and emphasise what is important in the organisation.



To find out more about Culture Change & our Culture Web call us on 01436 670 195.