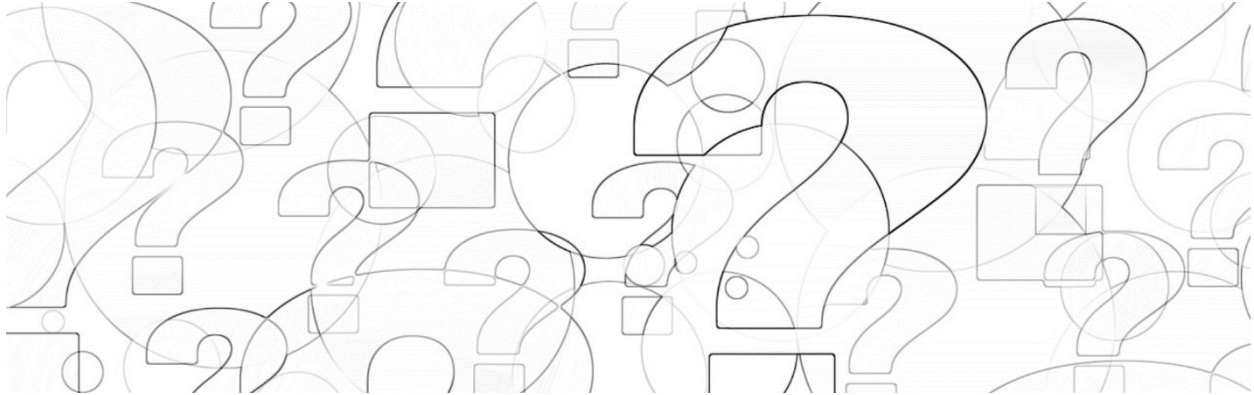# Asking 'How': Drawing the Curtains of 21st Century Organizations

by Hande Hubar

"The most serious mistakes are not being made as a result of wrong answers. The truly dangerous thing is asking the wrong questions."
-Peter Drucker

The dictionary meaning of culture is "the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society" [1]. This applies to organizations as well as societies, in a way the business is conducted, stakeholders are treated, communication is handled and decisions are taken. All these behaviours in organizations don't come out of nothing, there are roots or the DNA that really make the organization and its characteristics. All organizations are born on those essential characteristics, successful ones are able to keep their values that stem from those characteristics throughout the years, such as some Silicon Valley companies that were born on a garage, whilst some others change direction, get disrupted and have to adapt different values. Cultural change is not as easy as maintaining it in organizations because there is more to this than meets the eye: actions, beliefs and experiences of each individual [2]. Actions can be controlled but changing beliefs and impacting experiences of employees is not easy to accomplish.

Lucy started working in the Company A – which ranks top in Fortune list, right after leaving her father's business which gave her a devastating experience right after graduating from one of the top schools in her country on business administration years. Her father thought she could be adding a lot of value to his business because of her education since he never had the chance to go to university but it turned out that her father wasn't ready to transform and modernize his business. Lucy had to start from scratch. After various interviews, she was able to be offered this very exciting position at a top Fortune 100 company. On her first day, she started taking trainings that introduced the products and services of the company and read some onboarding materials that would help her.

Culture starts with the day a candidate goes to job interview and gets more clarity in the first day of the job. In fact, it goes beyond the interview. It starts with experiencing the brand. However, culture is usually undervalued and thought as it belongs to only

HR department. Since this implies the "experience", culture should be managed at a higher level in organizations that closely involves strategy, corporate communications and human resources but the picture is still not complete. It is very essential to think employee experience as a whole. If an organization claims that they are pioneering technology provider but employees are still having issues with the tools and technology they are using in their daily jobs, that culture will collapse. If an organization claims to have a young, energetic spirit because it has very young employees but still using an old-fashioned workplace where everyone is sitting their own rooms, then it needs to be questioned. That's why it is not only the job of HR but also IT, learning & development, facility management and others.

After all was done, she was given her ever first task which lead her to shock and silence. She started to question the purpose of spending her education life around theories, concepts and all those intangible things. Just to get nothing but a degree? It was useful in her father's business to apply many methods she learned at school – as long as her father didn't resist – but this was a complete disappointment! It was such a demotivation for her to come up with suggestions at work every single time with some models she learned at the university and get rejected with "It is not going to work, you are being a nerd. These kind of things only work in the books. What matters is your people skills. Be a good communicator, a good negotiator and this will do the job. If I were you, I would spend my college life going to parties and having fun instead of sitting in my dorm room, memorizing the management theories like you. "Lucy was disappointed. She thought she had already wasted a few years of her life in a family business, get nothing and switch to a company everybody dreamt for and get nothing again.

It is significant for organizations to firstly question if they are sticking into right values and keeping up with the world outside. In other words, is the culture a right representation? As Mark Zuckerberg said during his commencement speech at Harvard University, "The greatest successes come from having the freedom to fail." [3] The world is changing in an increasing speed and university graduates can become irrelevant to industry very quickly. Many people in my country struggled to have a work experience before they graduated from universities because getting those internship opportunities were difficult. When they got into corporate institutions, this time they were doing very-defined box-shaped jobs that it was hard to step out for stretch development. Having the freedom to fail is the biggest learning not only young professionals but also experienced professionals can have. Leaders are not made in one day, they work hard, they learn, they manage people, implement projects, fail, learn, manage, fail and learn – only when they are given the opportunity. Long gone are the days where people are only able to play in their own fields or get ready for the next opportunity only as they grow up. The future lies within new rules: everyone is a leader, careers are in every direction, learning never stops, and credentials don't come from certifications or universities[4]. It is time to re-think the culture for all organizations.

In time, she got used to the way the organization does the things and she began to lose the ambition and courage she had as the first day of her job. As time passed by, the job started to become repetitive and boring. When she tried to invent new ways of doing her job, improve the processes, she was rejected again this time for budgetary reasons and it had to go up 6 levels up in the organization to complete the approval process. One day, she was asked which positions she

was considering after her trainee program as the end was approaching. She said "I don't know" right before she was reminded her interview days when she had said things like "I want to run a business unit". This scene felt like asking a kid who has never seen a sand castle to build one on the beach without allowing him to use bucket, spades or water at all. It is impossible to actually create something because the kid doesn't know how to build it, how to use the tools, even if he knows how to use the tools, he doesn't have access to them because his parents don't have enough money to buy tools. Still, he can grab some sand in his palm but the wind will just blow it away. He will just be blamed to be too young for the next management position.

Lucy decided to leave this company where there was a really friendly environment and it was claimed to have best culture in the world. However, it was too rigid to support her career development. It would be a better decision to work in a company which was more flexible that could allow her to do as many projects as she wanted so she could learn, experience and grow. She left her job being blamed by everybody that it is a wrong decision to quit a top Fortune 100 company 10 years after graduation – not even reaching a senior specialist position. She was too young to receive a promotion, she had to have wrinkles and fair amount of white hair whereas her younger male colleagues were being promoted one by one. After a painful period of searching jobs, the day finally arrived and Lucy started her third job at the Company B. She was responsible from process improvement where she had tremendous opportunity to contribute to every single function of the company. Finally she was going to have the opportunity to shine and become the best version of herself through new challenges.

She started by mapping the entire processes of the company using models she has knowledge about and spotted improvement areas. After some time she realized she could make millions of processes in the organization but this wasn't a good measure of success. It wasn't really the management theories or concepts she learned at school. None of them were working as the way she wanted. Lucy knew that there was something wrong, but what was it? She had been putting all those efforts to improve things, eventually none of them was working. There had to be something but what could she do, when everything else failed? It wasn't either management, strategy or leadership problem. It wasn't just the process, it wasn't about audit. Was it about not having sufficient communication? Because you had to communicate your processes, creating and auditing them weren't enough. Unfortunately, it wasn't also about right channels, right level and right tools of communication.

Organizations stand on a four legged chair: *vision* – reason for existence, *strategy* – actualization of vision, *culture* – the way vision is actualized and *structure* – the way systems, people and processes are set up. The organization is in balance when each leg 1) exists, 2) corresponds with each other and 3) are same length. What does this mean? One without the other would not make an organization sustainable, all of them should translate to each other and having the same length for each leg refers to treating all of the four components at equal importance. Having an advanced strategy but a weak culture probably ends up with a strategy failure and the leaders ask why. The answer is usually searched within the strategy or leadership practices. If the answer is not found, then employees are blamed. Leaders assume that they don't have the right level of talent or skills that can actualize the strategy.

It was all about setting up the right scene, the culture. No matter how hard Lucy tried to understand the entire processes in the company, build new ones, audit if they are running properly, all efforts failed because there was chaos instead of culture. Most interestingly, top management never thought about the root cause of organization performance as it could be a culture problem. Therefore, everybody thought processes weren't managed properly after creating them because you had to discipline people to let them embrace what they have to do. Lucy realized that this was a big shield that each executive was hiding behind to resist change. Through her career, she observed that this protective shield changed shapes as it was about being safe in tried-and-tested methods in her father's business and about being under a super controlled environment in that Fortune 100 company, the last but not least the latest shield she has seen was about just focusing on the business results. Just as each executive in the company were wearing glasses which only showed them the balance sheet but nothing. Employees kept asking for feedback, job rotation, training, raise, promotion, flexibility, opportunities and more. They weren't seen, heard and felt. Finally they stopped asking and tried to find their own ways to survive in the company as there was also no common language. If only the management team could understand why they were so busy dealing with a lot of employee requests during their daily lives. They didn't have enough time to "manage" because of dealing with the work that their subordinates had to deal with. This time they thought it was the skills that employees were lacking but again it all boiled down to culture.

An organization without a strong culture is like a weak building which is about to collapse in a breeze, not to mention what would happen in a storm. Even the most talented people will not be able to survive in those kind of organizations. Lack of a strong culture drags organizations and people down to fully release their potential. This might be one of the biggest issues of today and become even a bigger issue for tomorrow's enterprises.

Leadership concept sells a lot and it is very nice to talk about especially when it comes to personal qualities of a leader. It is not difficult to see that there are a lot of discussion around leadership today; what the ideal leadership is, what ten qualities of every leader should have, three things each leader should avoid and such kind of headlines in magazines, articles and publications. Thus, the best leader in the world still needs a strong culture to move a company forward. As we are approaching post-information era and life changing technologies arrive at even a faster pace, culture will become a bolder question.

As Simon Sinek explains "the golden circle" in his book, majority of people working in organizations know what they are doing, few of them know how they are doing it but very few only know why they are doing what they are doing[5]. The answer of "how" is the culture but in order to get the right answer to this question, the brutal truth must be faced at answering "why". When an organizational issue comes up such as the example stated above and management team thinks the root cause is not culture, asking millions of questions will not work.

When the best CEO, which is a robot, takes over a company in 2030 according to Jack Ma[6], the only question will be the culture when the perfect systems are in place, assuming that there will be still humans in this workplace. Hence, this is another

indication that culture will be a bigger issue in the future than it is today. However, there is one thing that will never change in the future: the human side of us. As humans, we are emotional beings and apart from having whether a high or low level of EQ, emotions are necessary and they trigger us to take action in life. This very specific side of us is the critical fact that bonds us to tribes, families, social circles, institutions, companies, nations, football clubs, music bands etc. Culture is a strong tool to ignite this connection and keep the bonding whether you are managed by a human or a robot.

Many culture change initiatives fail: people resist, management teams try their best to drive change but it fails again. They try to control actions but changing beliefs and impacting experiences are forgotten. The period of handing leaflets over to employees to communicate the "values of our company" as part of a culture change initiative today is debatable but we should let employees sense the culture, feel it in their veins, integrate and internalize with their life purpose and make the work meaningful.

It is true that working on a purpose drives our motivation and that motivation will fuel us to do more which results with high performance. The famous story of janitor carrying a broom in NASA saying "I'm helping put a man on the moon" is a great example of setting the sense of purpose in an organization but more is needed because sense of purpose only answers the questions of "why" and "what"[7]. If we also clarify how things are done in an organization, the piece will be complete – the answer of "how". When we complete this picture, we will start unleashing the true potential of each individual be it a part of a small business or an enormous enterprise.

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Notes

The story represent observations from my personal experience. Names of the characters were changed for this essay.