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MARY-ANNE PRICE
HR DIRECTOR
ENGLAND GOLF





ARTICLE BY DR LEANDRO HERRERO, AUTHOR & INTERNATIONAL SPEAKER,
CHIEF ORGANISATIONAL ARCHITECT & FOUNDER - THE CHALFONT PROJECT AND THE LEANDRO HERRERO INSTITUTE

THE WRONG QUESTION

"CULTURE IS THE ORGANISATION'S PETRI DISH, IN WHICH THINGS GROW, GOOD OR BAD. IF YOU THROW IN BAD HABITS AND BEHAVIOURS, THEY WILL GROW. THE SAME FOR POSITIVE INPUTS"

Hybrid or not hybrid? That is not the question. The discussion on the type of workplace - home/office/hybrid/remote and the suitable number of days and hours - is a discussion that starts with the wrong question. Of course, it is an attractive discussion that still generates emotions and tribes of detractors and supporters. It makes people feel that they have hit the real philosophical, foundational and almost metaphysical question. It also feels that there must be a rational answer somewhere, maybe.

The fact is, hybrid or not, is really a question that is only relevant for a tiny part of the working population, that which has the luxury of choosing. That leaves aside quite a lot of people, from electrical engineers to brain surgeons, from those who work in a factory to hospitality workers who service clients or NGO workers in the field. Carrying out a knee operation, managing a filling machine in a factory, running a restaurant, driving a bus, building a house, changing a gas pipe in the street, working in a chemistry lab or fishing cannot be done 'working from home'. 'It seems like a knowledge worker conspiracy', as somebody once said to me. It also contains an important confusion, that not many people seem

to pay attention to. It mistakes the job for the task. Sure, if your job is a simple aggregation of tasks that can be done in isolation and in the comfort of a screen, it can be done. That many things can be done 'from home' or 'from anywhere' including the office, is not a great argument in favour of that being the best way. The real overriding 'right question' is what kind of culture you want to have, change, reshape or build. How you answer that question will determine the kitchen, the ingredients, the cooks and the days here or there. Post-pandemic - and all the associated learnings - should have made it clear that 'the new workplace' is called culture. We work in a culture - and culture is the organisation's Petri dish, in which things

grow, good or bad. If you throw in bad habits and behaviours, they will grow. The same for positive inputs. Focusing on culture first will facilitate many other discussions. Let us unpack a few of these topics. People say that workplaces have their cultures. Sure, they mean styles, ways of working - free floating conversations or rigid fixed times - or both. A first day in an office, when you walk in, you can smell the place. The late, great C. K. Prahalad, Indian-American entrepreneur and author, used to say that some workplaces felt like Calcutta in summer and it was more than heat that he was referring to. We feel it in the air, in the receptionist, maybe not even looking at you and giving the feeling that you have been invited to a funeral.

The discourse becomes more problematic, as soon as we acknowledge that there are also Cultures with a capital 'C'; national cultures, subcultures and so on. If you keep going, the concept of culture becomes increasingly tricky. We have, for example, an 'R&D culture', that is always supposed to be different from a 'commercial culture'. Then we have 'start up cultures' and 'service cultures', it is as if we add 'culture' to anything we want to make descriptive of a particular identity, whether good or bad.

Pointing to 'the culture' is of course legitimate. But inevitably, we are then keen to attach a label - a culture of accountability, of ownership, of innovation, an entrepreneurial culture - and so on. Soon, labelling will have taken over so we then discuss the merits of labels A, B and C. But this is a language trap, unless we go down to some level of granularity, the discussion will remain conceptual, good for a conversation, but not so good as to do something concrete about it. A different and more successful entry into the discussion is to consider what the role of behaviours is. Many people adhere to the idea that behaviours are the result of cultures. It assumes there is something called 'culture' - usually elusive to description - and that behaviours are the by-product of 'that thing'. I subscribe to the opposite view. Behaviours, individually and of course collectively, create culture, not the other way. Therefore, I am not terribly interested in defining what a culture of accountability or of anything else 'is'. Many traditional answers to this type of question have some sort of circular thinking embedded. For example, with a culture of accountability, some people may say it is one that has ownership and one where people are responsible and trustworthy. With this, we are passing the problem down the Thesaurus list, but it is still impossible to grab reality. I am far more interested in knowing and describing what we want to see or not - what people do or don't do in daily life in the organisation - which then one could say, "ah... this sounds like a culture of accountability"! Somebody else listening

says, "oh no... this is a culture of ownership", or a third one may say, "not really... it sounds like teamwork and collaboration". The labels matter less and less, so long as we have shared clarity of what we want to see in people's behaviours. For me, the label is the end of the discussion, never the beginning and, by the way, an end to dwell on as little as possible, so we can make a fast return to the granularity of behaviours.

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Descending to the behavioural side of culture, implies a change in perspective, one in which there are some inconvenient truths that rule. Communication, per se, is not change, there is no change unless there is behavioural change. Change does not start with 'changing mindsets'. Mindsets are not a ghost inside the brain directing behaviours. There must be focus on behaviours or you will be running in circles all the time, in search of the mindset. Behaviours create culture. But cultures are not created by training, no revolution ever started in a classroom. Passion, as an all-things solution per se, is overrated and it's incredible how much damage a group of highly-passionate people can do. Culture is not a destination, it's the journey and on this journey, the hardest part is sustaining it. Triggering new behaviours and habits is the easy part - people are not resistant to change - it is managers that are resistant to accepting that people are not resistant

to change. The informal organisation is the culture oxygen and so suffocating it is a bad idea. The whole management theory is, however, largely focused on the formal organisation, but the shaping of a culture is an encounter between top-down formal mechanisms of information and grassroots, bottom-up change. It won't happen by talking about it and it will need a people mobilising platform.

Culture has always been a topic on the table, but how much importance has been given to it historically, has varied enormously. There were times when one felt the topic had disappeared or had been taken over by the latest trends, such as digital transformation or certainly all-things-AI. But I can see it is back and strong and in need of a fresh look. The behavioural fabric of the organisation, what sits underneath, is a fundamental question today, more than ever before. If we want to create new, attractive places - magnets for people - we need to rekindle a culture discussion. The post-pandemic changes, in terms of ways of working and mutual expectations, have created a new launchpad and it will be up to us to use it with fresh new or we will simply be replicating old models and habits. To paraphrase the famous Clintonian line, "it's behaviours, stupid"!