

# **The Risk of Hyper-Culture – How To Avoid It and Work With Real Organizational Culture**

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Culture: A system of meanings and symbols shared by members of a collective.

Culture is the creation of meaning through which human beings interpret their experiences and guide their actions (Geertz 1973)

Culture often differs from mission statement, management slogans – emphasis on everyday, practice-related meanings

Culture provides clues for

- Decision-making, identity, commitment, communication, coordination, guidance

But also

- inertia, lack of imagination, low receptivity to new ideas

Culture is at the same time compass (social order, direction) and psychic prison (mental and emotional trap, tunnel vision)

## Working with culture - some difficulties

### Common errors:

#### Hyper culture

4 (+/- 1) standard values  
imitation of others' culture talk  
culture turned into a package  
ceremony

#### Symbolic anorexia

Thin message, limited expressiveness  
Thin message, limited expressiveness

#### Problems with values

Abstract and vague  
Abstract and vague  
Positive sounding (no one disagrees)  
Positive sounding (no one disagrees)

## Grandiosity

In the absence of substantive work/improvements increase status, self-esteem and improve image

In an age of branding, marketing – an economy of persuasion – free floating, nice sounding representations dominate

Powerpoint reality, fantastic plans, empty rhetoric

Hyper-culture rather than culture

OXFORD

*the*  
**triumph of  
emptiness**

*consumption, higher education,  
& work organization*

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Risk of top management/consultants/HRM  
being detached from the large part of the  
organization: ‘another HR thing’

Often (seemingly) good culture message and  
design, but what is the response?

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Halleluja Yes, ok Perhaps ??? Yawn ‘Corporate bullshit’

Case of former R & D unit in large high tech firm becoming an independent firm (subsidiary)

1000 employees

Problems with strong technology orientation , weak & invisible leadership, insufficient teamwork

Change program aiming for cultural change.

New values:

- outstanding customer relations
- Inspirational leadership
- Strong team-work
- First class technology



Top management involved and engaged

Consultants from large consultancy firm, quality check by other consultants

Workshops and investigations

Change program with kick-off, management talks, management club, documents, video, tool kit with exercises, workshops

People positive to the ideas but ....

Confusion around all elements, e.g. "customer-orientation", sounds simple but ...

Junior managers and employees: nothing happened, nothing changed, ‘paper and talk’, ‘bread and spectacle for the people’

Confusion around the basic *image* of the change project:

Transformation or eye-opener

Manager-driven push or wave

Confusion of people involved as change agents:

Top managers: we initiate, HRM and middle managers implement and act as culture carriers

HRM and middle managers: we do as told (tick off tasks), top management is the key driver

## Concepts of culture

Hyperculture    Explicit, for semi-public consumption,  
                         management- driven representation

Experienced corporate culture    Organizational members'  
                         ideas, values and sentiments about organizational  
                         cultural reality

Anthropological organizational culture    The researcher's  
                         'thick description' of in-depth culture meanings,  
                         based on ethnographic work and cultural analysis

Effective cultural change work: some potential insights (rather than simple tricks)

1. See organizational change as self-transformation including all (not just ‘we will change them’)
2. Work with realistic ambition – don’t cover everything
3. Endurance – no quick fixes
4. Don’t start what can’t be followed up
5. Keep culture on the agenda
6. Clarify the image of what it is all this about
7. Work with a strong sense of ‘we’ – reduce the gap between change agents and the rest
8. Avoid hyper culture and focus on practices
9. Pay careful attention to process and reception – combine pushing and dialogue
10. Avoid n-steps thinking – football game rather than relay race

Grand-scale technocratic change, big visions  
and plans

vs

Transforming everyday life,  
Work with practice

## Grand-scale technocracy

- managerialism
- big bites
- quick fix
- \* Heavy on hyper-culture: plans and powerpoints

# Anti-dote to hyper-culture

## Anti stupidity management

Avoid being seduced by nice formulations and fine P & Ps.

Ask for what does this mean?

Raise questions like:

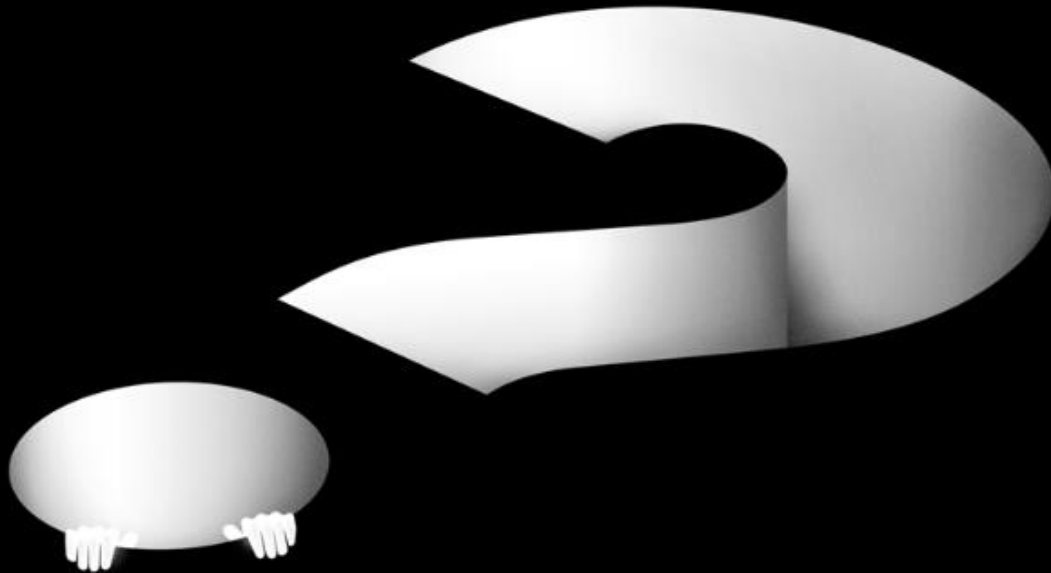
What goes on here? Really?

What do we think we are up to?

What in hell do we think we are up to?



the  
**stupidity**  
paradox



**WHY SMART PEOPLE  
DON'T THINK AT WORK**

Mats Alvesson & André Spicer