

MIND-SET



What we often call corporate culture is the sum total of behaviors stemming from a collective 'mind-print' that makes each company unique. A growing sense that the name of a company no longer fits sometimes indicates need for an internal shift, a change in mind-set.

Got to have that skinny double latte before work? Can you spot the Starbucks logo at 500 meters? Do your feet veer across the street to your favorite barista, no matter how inclement the weather, how urgent the phone call, how late the time?

Bob once had a boss whom people called “Captain Starbucks,” not always kindly. Some mornings, he’d order two double vente grande lattes, one for the car and one for later. His coffee habit was such a deep part of his character that if you needed 15 minutes of face time, the best way to get it was by inviting him to the Starbucks on the corner. Yet when Bob asked him, “When did you become so attached to coffee?” he could not answer the question. “Coffee” had become so embedded in the stream of his consciousness that he could no longer stand apart from this aspect of his personality.

But this attachment, so strongly experienced, was still largely an illusion. It was a recurring thought pattern, happening again and again in the boss’s mind. Neural impulses had, over time, carved a deep channel in his brain – compelling him to act whenever he saw, heard, or thought about the word “coffee.”

Scientists are rapidly mapping such mental processes. Recently, The New York Times reported that MRI images can show which parts of the brain are activated when someone looks at pictures of celebrities. Scientists have discovered that neurons fire in consistently different patterns at specific locations when people look at a photo of, say, Jennifer Lopez, versus Halle Barry or Brooke Shields. Just as our thumbs and fingers have distinctive whorls, it seems that our brains may have “mind-prints.”

In one sense, each of us is the manifestation of the sum total of the neural connections that evoke our personal feelings and cause actions. We take on personality characteristics that are a subtle and ever-modulating blend of what we think and experience. Like fingerprints, these traits instantly identify us.

Institutions exhibit personality characteristics, too. What we often call corporate culture is the sum total of behaviors stemming from a collective “mind-print” that makes each company unique. It begins innocently enough with commonplace routines and norms.

The annual budget cycle, initially developed to inform the bankers; a bias for action, possibly typifying the founder’s restless ambition; a decentralized structure, enacted to

encourage delegation of authority. Soon, people associate feelings and sensations with these norms, giving them attributes conditioned by experience and association. “The budget process is way too painful,” complains a line manager. “I enjoy making things happen without anyone looking over my shoulder,” boasts a district sales manager. “I am proud that my unit is completely self-sufficient,” announces a plant manager. Each person’s thoughts trigger emotional attachments – positive, neutral, negative.

Each event, each cycle is added to the mental conditioning of past experiences. Mindsets shape word and action, direction and deed. With repetition, neurons in our brains connect ever more strongly; channels of consciousness are dug more deeply. Similarly, the company takes on an identity. Newcomers quickly discover “the way things work around here.” And it becomes more difficult to change patterns.

The process of carrying such collective associations and conditioning deep into the organization begins when we name them. Words are powerful; they trigger instinctive, gut-level reactions conditioned by habits of “liking or disliking” built up over the years. We may, for example, willingly throw ourselves into week after week of late nights seeking the gratification of basking in a state of “happy exhaustion” when we hear “budget approved.” Meanwhile, others groan about “burn out” following futile “number-crunching.” By the words that they use, leaders and followers alike shape institutional culture until it seems inevitable.

But an appreciation of life allows us to see that culture, mindset, personality, character, brand – call it what you will – is transitory. No matter how hard we insist that certain factors are essential, we cannot ignore the fact that life is always in flux. No matter how compelling our experiences appear, how certain we are about someone’s personality, how tangible a company’s culture, how detailed the budget process, we sense that the universal energy field we call life keeps moving on, passing us by unless we flow with its current.

Sometimes, the very name of the company makes such adjustments harder. Given the power of words to shape mindset, it’s no wonder that companies often spend tremendous amounts of time and money in choosing and developing a name. It translates to a short-hand description of behavior and context, two tools that leaders ply to get the results they seek. A company’s name starts as an empty vessel but, over time, is infused with meaning. “Conjure up an image of an Armani customer or a Porsche driver and it will evoke a set of personality characteristics as much as it evokes a product preference,” Business Week noted in its annual ranking of brand values last year (Aug. 9-16, 2004).

Sometimes brand names become like a favorite pair of shoes: we keep wearing them when they no longer fit. We may cling to our familiar identity even when it no longer reflects our services, or a new generation of clients don’t relate to it. Loyalty to an outworn name is no different from outmoded business practices – for example, refusing to meet a customer request for one contact/one invoice “because our culture has always been based on divisional autonomy.”

Whenever we try to hold a mindset in the same manner that a mason sets a stone in a wall, then we stop changing, stop growing. We get out of step. We no longer fit. Sooner or later Starbucks won't be a cultural status symbol, and Bob's former boss -- Captain Starbucks' – will seem antiquated.

Of course, many companies evolve their names along with their offerings. As it moved into electronic business machines, National Cash Register became NCR; underscoring global expansion, Federal Express switched to FedEx; and masking tape and "Post-Its" are two of the office products innovations that inspired a company formed to mine a mineral deposit for grinding-wheel abrasives to morph from Minnesota Mining & Manufacturing into 3M.

Such changes are made easier by an understanding of what happens in the deeper recesses of our minds. When we turn our attention inward, we sense a transcendent awareness. We intuit an inner authenticity that goes beyond personality, acquired patterns of behaviors. Operating from a deeper mental state enables us to make adjustments easily because we are free from the blind influence of ego, habit, culture. We become completely attentive to the moment, able to bring our own and others' sentient faculties to bear on today's opportunity. Thus, processes – such as budgeting – stay responsive; the culture reflects the dynamism of growth; the brand name remains relevant.

"Mindset" takes on new meaning. It reflects a way of thinking, an attitude, a state of mind that enables us to lead our companies responsively in the moment. We learn that we can "set our mind" in much the same way as we tune a radio. The signal that best serves this moment manifests with clarity and fidelity.

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