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If You Want Strategic Change, Don't Forget to Change Your Cultural Artifacts

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ABSTRACT *Strategists must manage a number of factors when executing strategy. One of the most important of these is organizational culture. And to successfully manage organizational culture, strategists must manage cultural artifacts. Cultural artifacts include myths and sagas about company successes and the heroes and heroines within the company; language systems and metaphors; rituals, ceremonies, and symbols; certain physical attributes such as the use of space, interior and exterior design, and equipment; and the defining values and norms. In managing execution by managing culture, strategists usually think in terms of managing values and norms. But as it turns out, if they don't also manage existing cultural artifacts, then they build in barriers to failure. Why? Because existing cultural artifacts support the old strategy not the new one. To be successful, strategists must create new cultural artifacts or modify the existing ones so that they support the new strategy. This article uses the case of the successful turnaround at Continental Airlines to demonstrate precisely how managing cultural artifacts enhances strategy execution.*

KEY WORDS: Strategic change, cultural artifacts, managing change, organizational culture, strategy execution, values and norms, Continental Airlines case study

Newly elected Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Gordon Bethune, and his newly appointed Chief Operating Officer (COO) Greg Brenneman, carried out one of the most successful corporate turnarounds ever when they transformed Continental Airlines from a perennial loser into a profit maker. In less than six months, they inspired Continental's demoralized employees to move the firm from eleventh out of the eleven major U.S. airlines on the Department of Transportation's (DOT) on-time ratings, to fourth. And Continental went from a loss of \$200 million in 1994, to a pretax profit of \$556 million in 1996. Bethune and Brenneman have continued this transformation and the airline usually places in the top five in airline

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performance categories. Only the September 11th disaster that compounded already weak earnings potentials for the industry has marred their success story.

Bethune and Brenneman used a business strategy of superior customer service to achieve competitiveness for Continental. The strategy behind this strategy was to achieve this service by investing in and valuing the employees who had to supply that service. These leaders provided employees with a sense of purpose, rewards for success, and an improved climate within which to work. They showered them with praise, empowered them to solve problems, and built relationships with employees that other top managers had shunned. Their intriguing management style and engaging actions are probably well known to many of you, but you also probably do not have a schema for fully understanding how they were able to successfully lead strategic change when so many other firms have failed at such efforts (O'Reilly, 1999; Puffer, 1999; Brenneman, 1998; Bethune, 1998; Flynn, 1997). An important part of that schema is found in their management of culture and cultural artifacts. As all good strategic managers would, they aligned major strategy execution factors such as organizational structure and systems and processes with the new strategy, but a key ingredient was also aligning relevant parts of the organization's culture—its value systems and norms—with the new strategy. Doing that meant that they also managed cultural artifacts.

Cultural artifacts are those sets of attributes—objects and behaviors—that help definitively characterize one organization as opposed to another. There are at least five primary types of cultural artifacts—key values and norms; myths and sagas; language systems and metaphors; symbols, rituals and ceremonies; and the use of physical surroundings including interior design and equipment (Shrivastava, 1985¹). The latter four of these artifacts can be used to help change the organization's key values and norms, including those that are themselves significant enough to be cultural artifacts.

All too often strategists will introduce a new strategy, and even seek to change organizational culture to some degree without attending to one of the key ingredients of making real changes in the culture—the artifacts which help define the culture. Managers who retain old cultural artifacts that reinforce elements of the old culture they want to change, are leaving in barriers to their success. One of the major reasons that Bethune and Brenneman were so successful in implementing Continental's turnaround was their introduction of new cultural artifacts that reinforced service as a key value and replaced previous artifacts that had reinforced poor levels of service.

For example, a reward system was put into place for improved service. Performance-reward systems themselves are not necessarily cultural artifacts, but this reward system was tied directly to corporate performance, and the financial rewards were paid in a separate check to employees to draw attention to the relationship between performance and rewards. This reward system not only reinforced a new value at Continental, but it also became a symbol to employees of the importance of high levels of performance in the new Continental, as opposed to the acceptance of poor performance in the old Continental. In addition, stories were told throughout Continental about how the new CEO told jokes to employees, answered questions honestly, and was an all around good guy to work for. These and numerous additional artifacts replaced old ones that had reinforced

bureaucracy and the acceptability of poor performance, and that had led to unbelievably low employee morale.

Managing cultural artifacts to help achieve strategic change not only works in turnaround situations such as the one at Continental Airlines, it also works when you want to focus on building your competitiveness through excellence in a primary functional area. Owens & Minor, Inc., headquartered in Richmond, Virginia, is the U.S.'s largest distributor of national brand medical/surgical supplies, with over \$3 billion a year in sales. The company's distribution centers serve hospitals, integrated healthcare systems, and group purchasing organizations nationwide. In the early 1990s, many of their customers wanted to go stockless. To satisfy that need, most distributors, including Owens & Minor, Inc., began trying a number of services to enable this to occur. Therefore, Owens & Minor's top management team determined that it had to change several of the ways that it did business in order to not only improve its customer service, but also to improve its strategic and financial performance.

By integrating activity based management, the Internet, and several new services, along with their already superior customer service, O&M managed to not only maintain its market share, but to increase it. Part of the reason for this successful change in its logistics strategy was that everyone in the company bought into the new system. Achieving this buy-in meant establishing a vision and values that everyone could subscribe to, believing in the team process that was at the core of the change strategy, creating stories about success under the new strategy, and learning to speak the language of successful logistics in the Internet era. For example, O&M created a host of image evoking phrases or service titles such as BusinessIntelligence™, WISDOM, and FOCUS, that helped unify action towards achieving the strategy. All of these actions involved critical cultural artifacts that successful companies manage well (Owens & Minor.com²).

These two strategic change initiatives—a textbook turnaround and a supply chain management redesign—are just two of the thousands of examples of major strategic business success stories in the past few years. What these two strategically successful firms and numerous others have in common is the successful use of cultural artifacts to help reinforce desired changes in behavior so that it supports the new values and norms. When firms formulate a new strategy, they must then make the subsequent accompanying necessary changes in the major strategy execution factors—organizational structure, systems and processes, leadership style, staffing, resources, and shared values (organizational culture). But in addition, successful strategists know, if sometimes only at the intuitive level, that one of the real keys to achieving the sought after strategic performance is the management of the cultural artifacts that relate to the values and norms pertinent to the strategic change. In practical terms, this means changing certain norms and values which themselves are cultural artifacts, and then using the other four cultural artifacts to reinforce the new norms and values that support the sought after change in behavior. This approach also requires eliminating those cultural artifacts that do not support the new strategy. One cannot change an organization's culture totally in any strategic change, but managers must at least try to change those values and norms of the culture that relate to the strategy and its objectives.

Can strategists be successful without managing culture by managing cultural artifacts? Yes, they can be, but often are not. Even if successful, they will not be nearly as successful as they could have been had they managed culture and cultural artifacts. The top managers of Continental Airlines and Owens & Minor changed or eliminated the existing relevant cultural artifacts within their companies to those that supported their new strategies and the key values and norms they needed to change.

Fortunately you do not have to be changing your strategy dramatically to still benefit from the use of new or enhanced cultural artifacts. For example, firms such as 3M simply update their cultural artifacts, for example, their hero and heroine stories, and add different perspectives, or create new stories on the same themes, in order to perpetuate interest in existing strategies, or as they modify their strategies to fit the requirements of a changing environment.

Cultural Artifacts Influence the Success of Both Strategy Formulation and Strategy Execution

It is generally recognized in the strategic literature that if you want to successfully execute strategy, you need to align a number of organizational factors with that strategy. Among these as noted earlier would be organizational structure, systems and processes, leadership style, staffing, resources and organizational culture. Organizational culture is broadly defined as the pattern of shared values and norms that distinguishes one organization from another. These shared values and norms indicate what is believed to be important in the organization—what is of value to organizational members. They also indicate how things are done in the organization—‘We do it this way, not that way.’ These shared values and norms provide direction and meaning for the organization’s members. They also energize organizational members in the pursuit of organizational purpose. The key to understanding an organization’s culture is to examine its cultural artifacts. Cultural artifacts as defined earlier, include the most definitive of the organization’s shared values and norms and other attributes that provide clues as to what makes this organization culturally unique from other organizations. Those unique elements relevant to the change at hand need to be modified to reinforce new values and norms, or eliminated altogether.

Paul Shrivastava has shown that the formulation of strategy is greatly affected by an organization’s culture, and more specifically, its cultural artifacts (Shrivastava, 1985; Johnson, 1992³). Shrivastava suggests that four types of cultural artifacts are extremely beneficial when studying an organization’s culture, its: myths and sagas; language systems and metaphors; symbols, ceremonies, and rituals; and certain identifiable value systems and behavioral norms. He allows that there are more cultural artifacts than these four, but that these four are the most predominant.

Shrivastava makes a strong argument for the impact of these four artifacts on strategy formulation. An organization’s myths and sagas (hero and heroine stories), for example, may lend themselves to broad interpretation by its leaders when trying to determine exactly what the strategic problem is. If a company has a myth of invincibility, as Digital Equipment Corporation had, its leaders may never

see the reality of a strategic threat, such as the PC. With respect to language systems and metaphors, these shape decision alternatives because the very language used in the company constrains thoughts outside of that language. A firm's leaders are not likely to adopt a new system when they speak in the language of another. Or, in the case of symbols, ceremonies and rituals, particularly ritualistic behavior patterns during strategic planning may prevent the formulation of innovative strategies. And in such cases, strategic planning often leads to strategic plans, but not to action. Finally, top management's key values are reflected in any strategic initiative. It is impossible to be totally rational about strategy. Hence, values creep in, and most agree that they should. An organization needs a set of values, but these also constrain strategic decision-making.

We have observed that a fifth type of vital cultural artifact—the physical surroundings characterizing the particular culture, including its facilities, equipment, and interior and exterior design and decoration—play a major role in defining an organization's culture. In innovative firms this fifth cultural artifact is well understood. For example, many organizations have provided open areas where people can meet to share ideas and create new concepts. But any organization is partly defined by its use of space and tools. The Dilbert cartoon series makes this point quite poignantly with its characterization of an office's cubicles as rat like mazes where no one has privacy and where everyone is interrupted by others.

We have also most importantly observed that not only do cultural artifacts affect the formulation of strategy, but also the execution of strategy. As already demonstrated with strategy formulation, organizational culture and strategy are highly interrelated, but they are also interrelated during strategy execution. Once you change strategy, you must align organizational culture with strategy, or face almost certain strategic failure (*Peters & Waterman, 1982*). We believe this means aligning values and norms with the new strategy, and this in turn means aligning cultural artifacts with the new strategy.

We have also discovered through experience that to change the values and norms to those that are embodied in the new strategy, you must use the other four types of cultural artifacts to reinforce these new values and norms. For example, you should modify the performance management system and its accompanying ceremonies to incorporate objectives and performance evaluation criteria and processes related to the new strategy. Or, you should tell new myths and sagas about those who have been successful in pursuing the objectives of the new strategy.

While many top managers would agree that you must align the various strategic execution factors with the new strategy, too few systematically act to achieve this alignment. Furthermore, we have observed that many if not most top managers do not perceive the links between changing strategy, changing culture, and changing cultural artifacts. If strategy and cultural artifacts are not aligned, then employees are uncertain which messages are real—the old familiar, comfortable ones supported by lots of well known cultural artifacts, or the new messages about a new strategy that are in conflict with the old, still in place cultural artifacts. Employees will follow the old engrained and still supported message every time. Changing cultural artifacts is not a luxury but a necessity for the successful

execution of strategy. In the remainder of this article, we describe how Continental Airlines used cultural artifacts to assist its strategy execution effort.

How Continental Airlines used Cultural Artifacts to Successfully Execute a New Strategy: A Case Example

Continental Airlines, a textbook study of how to perform a successful turnaround, has been chosen as the topic of this case analysis because while many may know of this turnaround, there has not until now been an organized treatment of how culture and cultural artifacts were used to make this turnaround successful.

In 1994, Continental Airlines found itself very nearly bankrupt. It had suffered through ten CEOs and two bankruptcies in the past ten years, and the prospects for the future looked grim. Morale and corporate image were so bad that maintenance personnel often cut the Continental name and logo off their uniforms so when eating lunch or getting gas, the public would not know for whom they worked. Pilots, co-pilots and cabin personnel would sit in the back of crew busses so other airlines' personnel would not notice them and start making wise cracks. As mentioned previously, new CEO Gordon Bethune and COO former Bain consultant Greg Brenneman settled on a strategy of service to make the airline competitive. They also decided that destroying the old culture and creating a totally new culture was absolutely necessary to the success of their strategy. Many of you know the story, but what you probably did not recognize until now is how you can systematically describe many of the actions these two leaders took to achieve success by using cultural artifacts as the focal point of their actions (Brenneman, 1998; Bethune, 1998; Flynn, 1997).

Aligning Identifiable Value Systems and Behavioral Norms with the New Business Strategy

We begin our discussion of Continental's cultural artifacts management effort with identifiable value systems and behavioral norms because these are what an organization is ultimately trying to change in order to properly execute its new strategy through the management of organizational culture. Some of these values and norms are so powerful that they are themselves cultural artifacts—objects and behavior that are primary identifiers of the organization's culture. Changes in the remaining four types of cultural artifacts are enablers of the sought after changes in values and norms. For example, at Continental a norm of low productivity had emerged. Bethune and Brenneman announced that this norm had to change. They then used a reward—a bonus check to every employee for corporate performance that met or exceeded DOT ranking expectations—to help change that norm. This reward was a symbol of the newly held value of customer service. Bethune and Brenneman also used the process of delivering this check to assist in changing behavior to the new norm. The bonus check took on more meaning than it might have otherwise because it was delivered separately from the employees' pay checks and no deductions were made from this check. This delivery mechanism was also a cultural artifact as a symbol of how important performance now was, not only to those who received service but also for those who delivered it.

More and more organizations are creating formal value statements that identify core values. But identifiable value systems and behavioral norms are also reflected in an organization's strategy, structure, systems and processes, leadership style, staffing, and resources; and in its rules, policies and procedures. Behavior that reinforces these values and norms can be seen in what is rewarded, and what is not. Norms and values, but especially norms, are often passed on in informal communications, rather than through the formal organization's communication channels. Where poor performance is not punished and good performance is not rewarded, then related norms are often at odds with stated values.

Changing core values is not recommended unless the organization's competitive environment forces a change in vision and mission. If you build your organization on a sound set of core values, you will not need to change that core short of a revolution in what your vision and mission are. But as Continental Airlines discovered, sometimes your house is built on less than a firm foundation, and it is time to change those core values. Non-core values may be changed more frequently. New CEOs often bring new strategies and programs with them, so that every three to five years many organizations adopt a different set of strategy related values.

Bethune and Brenneman recognized that a strategy based on customer service cannot succeed when the corporation accepts poor performance as its norm. By stating their strategy and then taking actions consistent with executing that strategy, Continental's top managers created new, visible value systems that focused on customer service. A major related and new value was that employees themselves were valued. Employees who do not feel valued by their employer are not likely to want to provide good service. Bethune and Brenneman successfully demonstrated that they valued Continental employees in a number of ways, not all of which involved cultural artifacts. For example, the face-to-face communication that Bethune and Brenneman had with front line employees was especially important in communicating these values. They literally walked the talk explaining the new strategy, extolling the virtues of service, and getting employee buy-in to create that service.

They also created new behavioral norms by instituting a bonus-for-performance system related to how the firm performed in the DOTs rankings. Every time Continental placed in the top five of the rankings, each employee received \$65. In a symbolic gesture to show the importance of this effort, a separate check was made out for the \$65 for each employee, rather than including it as part of their regular pay check. Success became valued. The norm was no longer 'just good enough to get by,' but 'excellence.'

Aligning Myths and Sagas with the New Business Strategy

Corporate myths and sagas are stories about the key players and events in the organization's history. These stories relate the exploits of early pioneers and visionaries, those who have transformed the organization, and other significant contributors to the organization. The organization's products and services and its past triumphs and failures are also often the focus of myths and sagas. Myths and sagas are constructed around the organization's shared values and norms, and are

used to reinforce them. Such stories help shape the attitudes and behavior of new as well as veteran employees. When strategy is changed, organizations need to modify old myths and sagas to emphasize the new values and norms that are being stressed at the company now as a result of the new strategy, or they need to create totally new myths and sagas to emphasize the new order of things. New myths and sagas should profile new heroes and heroines and what they did to be successful using the new strategy, or how they made the new strategy successful.

In what started as a symbol, but became a saga of 'the new order of things,' (to show that the old values were gone and that a new set of values were being focused on), the company's human resources director used the employees' immense dislike for the company's policy manual as a focal point. Quite weighty at over 800 pages, employees despised the book that had rules for everything, including the most trivial of events. To make it clear that that kind of bureaucracy had to go, the head of human resources gathered several hundred corporate headquarters employees, including corporate executives, in the corporate headquarters parking lot, and burned the manual. Bethune then commissioned a team of employees to create a new manual. At just about 80 pages, the new manual empowered employees to make good decisions without having to consult the manual for detailed advice. The story of the burning of the policy manual, told over and over throughout the company's various divisions and hubs, demonstrated that a new set of values were indeed in place. This saga, and the many others told about the company, for example, about Bethune's love of salty stories, put a face on the new entity.

Aligning Language Systems and Metaphors with the New Business Strategy

The language systems and metaphors used in organizations portray the organizations' values. Organizations develop their own language for expressing who they are and what they are about. Some companies want to 'kill the competition,' or 'battle the enemy.' Other companies use the language of the technologies they use; for example, software writers sometimes talk about an issue being on their 'heads up display.' Other companies focus on the customer, or on the process of satisfying the customer. At Walt Disney Companies, everyone is a 'member of the cast,' evoking the need to always be, 'on stage,' giving the best 'performance' possible. Organizations should change their language when they employ new strategies.

A lot of what goes on in change is about making interested parties feel better, feel positive regarding what is about to happen to them. The strategy for saving Continental was labeled the 'Go Forward Plan.' As Greg Brenneman wryly observed, 'Did you know there are no rear view mirrors on an airplane. The runway behind is irrelevant.' An airplane metaphor was more than appropriate for what Bethune and Brenneman wanted to accomplish.

- 'Fly to Win,' was the marketing plan. They chose to go after certain markets—both geographic and customer mix—in certain ways. Another positive choice of words, another airplane metaphor.

- 'Fund the Future,' was the financial plan. It was about raising cash, and improving liquidity. A future focus, and a way out of this mess, were portrayed by this choice of words.
- 'Make Reliability a Reality,' was the product/service plan. The team was going to transform the customer's experience with Continental. Alliterations (reliability, reality) are pleasing to the ears, and the words focus on what management wants to do.
- 'Work Together,' was the 'people plan.' Bethune and Brenneman really believed that only through working together could this strategy work. Again, this was an excellent, although common, choice of words. But for workers with their backs to the wall, these words pointed to a way out.

These great titles for various plans were accompanied by the highly motivating slogan, 'From Worst to First.' Much of the success in implementing the new strategy can be attributed to the selection of language and metaphors that motivated the employees.

Aligning Symbols, Ceremonies and Rituals with the New Business Strategy

Symbols, ceremonies and rituals may also be used to demonstrate what is important in a particular organization (Lange, 1991). There are numerous types of symbols. Some symbols are physical in nature, such as a coat of arms or a value statement. Others are behavioral, such as rewarding certain kinds of behaviors. A company's logo, flag, and slogans also convey the importance an organization places on certain values, ideas or events. Ceremonies are also important conveyors of values. Celebrations of successful sales campaigns, for example, are used to reward certain values, and to raise the morale of the sales force. Companies routinely make changes in their performance management systems when they change strategy. Subsequently they have to incorporate the evaluation of related achievements into the primary ritual involved in performance management, that is, the evaluation interview. And they also need to have reward ceremonies for those who achieve the objectives of that new strategy. When employees watched the vice president for human resources burn the much-hated company policy manual in the corporate headquarters parking lot, the symbol was clear—there was a new order of things at Continental.

In another symbolic, as well as service oriented action, top management acted to create a more pleasing aesthetic appeal for the airline. Continental was an airline that had grown through mergers. And many of the planes still had their original colors outside and inside with a Continental logo painted over the top. When a new seat was needed, mechanics simply pulled any available one from inventory, whether it matched those already on the plane or not. So when top management committed to paint all of the airplanes the same color, getting all of the seats the same in each airplane, getting rid of the red logo which had been dubbed rather ignominiously—the meatball—and re-carpeted all of the gate waiting areas, employees knew that there was a new order of things. All of these actions, while having great merit for what they actually did for the company, had an even greater symbolic impact because they revealed top management's willingness to take

action. And in another important and related symbolic action, managers were required to work on holidays, so that they would all 'be in this together.'

Aligning the Physical Surroundings Found in the Culture with the New Business Strategy

Physical surroundings including plant and equipment, and design and decoration convey important messages to those who work in an organization. As a cultural artifact, physical surroundings reveal the values of the organization related to such factors as innovation, the importance of employees, the degree of cost consciousness, and so on. Frugal organizations may use gray-metal desks and open bays where employees work as opposed to wooden desks and closed offices. Buildings with majestic exteriors or free flowing designs may stimulate more innovation than those that are dull and ordinary. Because physical surroundings have been identified as relating to productivity in recent years, organizations have become much more concerned about this cultural artifact.

In many organizations today, this artifact is a question of whether, 'to cubicle or not to cubicle.' Companies may choose to use cubicles due to their relative low cost, revealing a value of cost consciousness. This article has already mentioned some of the critical changes made in this area, which also served as symbols. These include the painting of the planes and the coordination of seat colors. In addition, major improvements were made in the gate facilities at the airline's hubs. Actions taken included replacing seats in the gate areas, and repainting and re-carpeting the gate areas. New super tugs to pull the airplanes to and from the gates also proved immensely important improving performance. Morale became much more positive following these and other physical facility changes.

Aligned Cultural Artifacts Equal Strategic Success

This article examined a comprehensive case study of Continental Airlines that demonstrated that changes in all five types of cultural artifacts help reinforce a new strategy and help make it successful. Aligning cultural artifacts with a new strategy, even if it is your organization's first strategy, cannot guarantee strategic success, but doing so takes an organization a long way towards successful strategy execution. So if you want strategic change, don't forget to change your cultural artifacts.

Endnotes

1. We added the use of physical surroundings to Shrivistava's other four, which included identifiable value systems and behavioral norms.
2. Johnson also talks about the need to consider cultural artifacts in formulating strategy, and in when examining the causes of resistance to change. He offers some advice on how to better manage the strategy formulation process.
3. Qwens(-)Minor.com was the source of most of this information accessed 6 October 2002. Some of the information derives from the author's personal knowledge.

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