

the Art of Crowdshifting



How to change a culture

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If you want to redirect the behavior of a crowd, here's a tip: don't be too idealistic about human nature.

Leon Neyfakh, | Globe Staff September 23, 2012

The Boston University hockey team has a crisis on its hands. Last December, one player was charged with sexual assault; just a few months later, another was charged with rape. And though only two of the team's players have been formally accused of wrongdoing—and the rape charge was dropped in June—there has been a sense ever since the scandal broke that their alleged crimes were not isolated incidents, but symptoms of something deeper.

Then, earlier this month, the task force conducting the investigation confirmed that suspicion. In a disturbing report, it identified a “culture of sexual entitlement”¹ that had taken root among the players. This was not a matter of a few individuals that could simply be kicked off the team: It was something intangible and pervasive. Now, as the university responds to the problem, it faces the challenge of stamping that out. What it needs to do, in other words, is change a culture.

The notion of transforming a culture gets tossed around so frequently — by corporate consultants, political candidates, overexcited entrepreneurs — that it's hard to appreciate just how difficult it can be. Culture, the mix of rituals, values, and traditions that defines a group, is tenacious and sticky. Whether the culture belongs to a sports team, a neighborhood, or a country, it persists because it's one of the main ingredients in the glue that holds the group together—because it exists in the space between people, rather than residing in any one individual. Studies have recently shown that cultures can be almost unimaginably persistent. In Germany, for instance, towns in which Jews were blamed for the Black Plague still exhibited more anti-Semitism than other towns 600 years later.

What researchers have found is that there are techniques for changing a culture that appear to work, but they are not always the obvious ones. Doing so in a way that produces lasting results, but doesn't involve destroying the

¹ tinyurl.com/dygc8wh (BostonGlobe.com)

group entirely, requires finesse, subtlety, and patience. It also requires a certain suspension of optimism about human nature. To really change how a group of people thinks and behaves, it turns out, you don't need to change what's inside of them, or appeal to their inner sense of virtue. You just have to convince them that everybody else is doing it.

“The inner conformist is stronger than the inner activist,” said Michael Morris, a psychologist at Columbia University who studies the role of culture in decision-making.



We want to think of progress as the spread of enlightened thinking and the expansion of morality. We'd like to think that in trying to change the culture of a hockey team, we can just appeal to the players' sense of right and wrong, and awaken their better angels. But in order to actually achieve that kind of progress, we may need to stop trying to tap into people's desire to be good or virtuous, and instead take advantage of something less lofty and, frankly, harder to admire: the powerful drive to be normal.

When a toxic culture takes root—whether it’s a culture of corruption, or domestic violence, or cheating in school—the most simple and dramatic way to deal with the problem is to take the scorched earth approach. In 2005, when the president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, decided to rid his country’s police force of corruption, he fired 30,000 officers and hired new ones. It’s the equivalent of dealing with a bedbug infestation by selling your house, or burning it down.

But starting over is arguably not so much a way to change a culture as to end it. When you take such a radical step, you inevitably throw away the good with the bad — institutional memory and know-how, or the spirit and pride that come with a team tradition. Stopping short of that — saving the house while killing the bedbugs, or saving the system while condemning the behavior it once fostered — is significantly harder.

One straightforward way to bring about that transition is to start monitoring people and punishing them with devastating severity for stepping out of line. That’s what New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg did when he wanted to stop visiting diplomats from taking advantage of their immunity to park illegally all over his city. “Bloomberg [got] permission to remove their plates,” e-mailed Ray Fisman, a professor at Columbia who studied the diplomats’ parking habits as a window into the connection between corruption and culture. “That worked in a hurry.”

But sometimes that simple, blunt tool doesn’t go far enough; you can punish wrongdoers, even expel a handful of players, and still not fix the deeply ingrained attitudes that produced them. Luckily, researchers say there’s a workaround that produces lasting change, but doesn’t call for somehow reprogramming people’s inner values. What it does seem to require is

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changing their perception of what everyone else thinks. A culture of “sexually entitled” hockey players is driven not by bad people, in other words, but by their shared, and likely inaccurate, belief that that’s how all the other guys on the team—as well as the coaching staff—really think a hockey player should behave. By the same token, a culture of respect and kindness isn’t necessarily made up of angels—just people who have come to believe that that’s what everyone else thinks is the right way to act.

The idea that we’re often mistaken about our compatriots’ beliefs and behavior has been deployed in anti-binge-drinking campaigns on college

campuses, which aim to reduce the pressure students feel to drink by showing them that their peers don't drink nearly as much as they assume. A poster campaign at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill presented students with hard data about their classmates: "Whether it's Thursday, Friday, or Saturday night, 2 out of 3 UNC students return home with a .00 blood alcohol concentration." The program worked: After five years, people at the college were drinking less.

That intervention relied on real-world data, which researchers collected by breathalyzing students as they returned to their dorms. But absent such information, how does the would-be reformer go about changing how people perceive the beliefs of others? One thing that has a profound effect is mass media. This was demonstrated vividly by a team of researchers studying the impact of soap operas on social norms in post-genocide Rwanda. Elizabeth Paluck, a psychologist at Princeton, compared two sets of communities — one composed of villages in which people followed a radio drama that revolved around health care and HIV, and the other in which the preferred show featured characters defined by their willingness to rise up against authority. In surveys and experiments, Paluck found that the second group was more willing to voice dissent and express disagreement with one another. "Observing that other people really love this show informed [their] ideas about what is typical," she said. The pressure to conform to what is typical, she added, tends to be stronger than the pressure to follow top-down rules.

That doesn't mean leadership has no role in cultural change — it's just that influence doesn't always come through official channels. Andrew Cruickshank, a researcher at the University of Central Lancashire in the United Kingdom, worked with a colleague to study an English rugby team that was performing unevenly until a team of new managers took over in 2008. The managers wanted to get the players to stop drinking to excess, and become more professional and disciplined about training; a central plank of their plan was to pinpoint a small group of "cultural architects" on the team and use them as a liaison to the rest of the players. It worked. "These guys—they're not necessarily the best performers. They're the people who hold the right social positions," said Cruickshank.

The power of conformity also appears to explain why some well-intentioned campaigns seem to backfire. It might seem like you could urge people to vote, say, by showing them the disappointing statistics about how few of their fellow citizens show up to the polls every election. But a 2009 paper in the *Journal of Politics* found the opposite: When told about low voter turnout and encouraged to "buck the trend," people were actually less likely to vote.

A more effective approach, the study found, was to tell people that turnout had been higher in the previous election than at any in history. In other words, more people were voting — so if they wanted to be normal, they should vote.

There's something a bit circular about the idea that we change people's behavior by tweaking their perceptions about the behavior of others. It's a self-reinforcing process: The more people believe that smoking is atypical, for instance, the less typical it becomes, which in turn provides further evidence that it's atypical. The most challenging part is kicking off the cycle, by convincing enough people that deviating from existing norms will not leave them shunned by the rest of society.

When you do, the results can be dramatic. The improbable speed with which cultural change can occur can be seen in the history of Prohibition, which, according to a paper coauthored by Michael Morris, most Americans supported “because it was socially undesirable to publicly defend alcohol, and few people did.” But when polls revealed that a majority of Americans actually wanted to be allowed to drink — and in fact large numbers of them were drinking, out of public view — more people were emboldened to speak their minds on the subject, and the tide quickly turned against the 18th Amendment.

A similarly rapid shift appears to be underway in the United States on gay marriage: Younger Americans, who grew up in an environment where gay people were more likely to be open about their sexuality and depicted as regular members of society in movies and on TV, are significantly more accepting of the idea than those who grew up with different norms.

Compared to changing the culture of a college hockey team, such grand shifts in values are driven by far more complex forces. But as BU begins the process of making sure that “sexual entitlement” ceases to be part of the Terriers' identity — putting the players through sexual assault prevention training, pairing them with alumni who can serve as role models, trying to make the team less insular in relation to the rest of the student body — it's likely they'll be trying to harness some of the same social pressures that have led to some of this country's most significant steps forward.

Back in February, immediately following the news that a second player had been charged with a sex crime, head coach Jack Parker said in an interview, “You can't change the culture that's evolved here; we're not going

to be able to step into people's lives and change them drastically." The good news is he could turn out to be right about the second part and wrong about the first: The players themselves don't have to change, as long as their beliefs about what their teammates expect of them do.

