

Tea & Toast: Recognising cultures in managing change

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We work with clients experiencing change. Our clients are in New Zealand businesses and organisations, managed and staffed by people working in a Kiwi context.

Clients tell us what the change is. It could be a new structure or technology, a way of working. Or a culture change.

We use a range of models to help people understand their own responses to change, and to help people lead others through change.

Broadly, we look at change as a process, with specific stages or milestones. We look at the ways leaders can identify those stages and support people through them.

We also look at the emotional and cognitive stages people go through in response to change – and focus on how change is experienced.

What I've realised is that we come to change – understandably I guess – mostly from a linear Western perspective.

A couple of questions have occurred to me as I'm doing this:

1. What is the impact of regional and national culture on the way organisations manage change?
2. What are the opportunities for organisations that are striving to be more diverse and inclusive?
3. How can I better serve clients who want support with change?

Over the next 30 or so minutes – I'm going to look at some research of organisational, regional, and national culture to see the differences and similarities in approach to change. I've got a grab-bag of material – European research, Japanese experience, Thai experience, an overview of Africa, and a te ao Māori perspective.

What I realised was how much you end up thinking about power and purpose when you are thinking about culture and change.

Definition

What is culture? Hofstede: *a collective mental programme shared among members of a country, a region, or a group.*

Trompenaars and Woolliams: *a series of rules and methods which a society or organisation has evolved to deal with regular problems that face it.*

PART ONE –culture change

The first thing I need to say is:

You can't change a culture.

This view is paraphrased from work by Fons Trompenaars and Peter Woolliams looking at changing corporate culture. They argue that cultures are living things that seek to protect their existence.

They make the point in the context of organisational culture, and it is interesting to apply more broadly.

This view – that you can't change a culture – means a mindset shift.

Instead of thinking about the change as a **thing** that disrupts continuity – what happens if you think about it as a *difference* that avoids change to the desired state?

If an organisation wants to remain viable – to preserve function, purpose, and profitability – it needs to do some things differently.

Bit of a mind game – but it does put the emphasis on what you want to have stay the same as well as what might be different.

I'm going to use the home renovations as a metaphor: I'm changing the configuration of my house because I want to stay there. So the disruption of renovation is actually enabling me to preserve my sense of home.

Trompenaars and Woolliams also issue two warnings:

- don't underestimate the difficulty of achieving and sustaining change
- don't discard what is good for what is new

Which leads to the question of how can you use the best of what is already there to get to the outcomes you want to achieve?

PART TWO – who says culture impacts change?

One of the models we use is from Prosci: it is called ADKAR. The model says that for people to change they must have five things in this order.

1. awareness of the need for change
2. desire to take part
3. knowledge of what to do differently
4. ability to do what is required
5. reinforcement for the new ways of doing things.

The model is firmly in the linear Western tradition. It reflects the idea of change as movement from point a to point b in pursuit of greater efficiency.

It holds up well in various contexts. We have participants identify where they and their teams are in the process. It helps change managers or leaders to focus their efforts.

Prosci has also identified cultural differences in reactions to change in different regions of the world. And created a 'scorecard' of awareness of change across regional cultures, focusing on tasks, communications, and training. For example, they've identified a preference for procedures and rules in America and Germany. In Italy, Spain and Turkey, people want to know the motivation for change.

- The universal factors that motivated change across all cultures were:
- Understanding change
- Creating safety
- Allowing people to add value
- Creating aspirations for individuals and organisations

These go with what people want from leaders: trust, compassion, stability and hope.

Prosci also identifies six cultural dimensions that contribute to different responses to change – that show up to varying degrees in different cultures:

1. Assertiveness – how much do people speak for themselves?
2. Individualism vs collectivism – are actions motivated by group or individual benefit?
3. Emotional expressiveness – how much emotion is acceptably expressed in business?
4. Power distance – how evenly is power distributed?
5. Performance orientation – how is high performance rewarded?
6. Uncertainty avoidance – how much uncertainty is mitigated?

I'm more comfortable thinking about these dimensions in an organisational context. I can draw on direct experience to identify workplaces I've been part of where these dimensions were more or less in play.

Applying them to regional or national cultures gets less comfortable – it feels like a push to cliché or bias. So I'm going to use top-of-mind examples:

Responding to the Covid-19 pandemic could be seen as a change. We had to respond.

Using Trompenaars and Woolliams approach – we had to do things differently to preserve what we wanted to keep. In New Zealand, we chose to preserve a Covid-free status and the things that went with that, including a functioning health system.

Using Prosci's cultural dimensions, New Zealand's response suggests a culture that favours collectivism over individualism, that seeks to minimise uncertainty, and tolerance for uneven distribution of power – i.e. we accepted centralisation of power (see slide).

By contrast, the US response suggests favouring individualism over collectivism, a high degree of assertiveness, and low tolerance for unequal distribution of power (see slide).

The UK's response is interesting – under Boris Johnson's leadership, the UK appears to have flip flopped in and out of lockdown. The famed British aversion to emotional expressiveness has been tested. They even punctuate their protest signs (see slide).

I'd say the criticism of the response has centred on the high-performance orientation – found wanting in the lockdown phase, but being satisfied in the vaccine roll-out campaign.

PART THREE – culture examples

I've got a couple of more general examples of change from around the world now. I'll make connections to those six cultural dimensions.

Japan

Inevitably this example is also linked to the pandemic response. In a piece for *The Japan Times*, Yoko Ishikura suggests that Japan is staying in its comfort zone and failing to make the changes that are necessary to achieve digital transformation. Ishikura is an emeritus professor and World Economic Forum's expert network.

She describes business reluctance to continue working from home outside the necessity of the pandemic because of poor technology infrastructure, lack of digitized data, and poorly defined job roles. The lockdown period did accelerate the move to online shopping in Japan, but she frames this as playing catch-up to other Asian economies.

Ishikura says the drastic recovery plans she's heard are simply a stretch of the same old business practice. And happening in the absence of transformational plans.

She describes the disconnect between business's stated intentions to transform and the obstacles they put in the way of transformation.

These include:

- reconciling hiring people who fit the corporate culture while also looking to hire different and innovative people
- developing innovative and creative people when the focus is on short-term profit and there is no tolerance for mistakes

These obstacles reflect two of Prosci's cultural dimensions – performance orientation and uncertainty avoidance. Whether those are operating at a national or organisation level, I'm not qualified to say. Ishikura's critique is aimed at Japan as a country.

Another example in a Japanese context is from Chapman Consulting Group. This is a report on HR Transformation and Change Management seminars.

Two success factors emerged: Storytelling and repetition.

This picks up on an element of many of our change leadership workshops. We emphasise the power of stories as a means of communicating change – the more personal and specific the better. The report notes that this type of personalised story telling is not particularly encouraged in Japan, so people need support to use it effectively. This is in line with the cultural dimension of emotional expressiveness.

Thailand

I'm drawing from a research paper on the implementation of an IT system in Thailand. The researchers wanted to see what affected the implementation of this Western system into a business shaped by Thai Buddhist culture.

The IT system came with the promise of improved performance – a symbol of western managerial practice. And it was being put into a place with very different values and assumptions to those where it was produced.

The researchers identified two key elements of Thai culture that affected the project.

First element: Thai commitment to deference, respect, and saving face. This shows up as aversion to conflict. But in a western context, conflict is seen as a necessary and useful part of implementation. It highlights problems and clears the air.

The researchers saw that the order of implementation had to change so that resistance was managed earlier in a project. They also saw that the Thai horizon was longer, with an emphasis on social and interpersonal harmony.

These observations speak to the dimension of emotional expressiveness – Thai culture expects careful control of emotion.

Second element: Thai emphasis on gratitude to family, elders, and teachers. This shows up as mutual obligations to offer and accept assistance, honouring hierarchies. This disrupted the convention of using key users for project implementation. In a western implementation, these might be up and coming managers or younger staff members. In the Thai project, it was better to find senior staff to legitimise the project and demonstrate continuity within the business.

These observations speak to the dimension of power distance – Thai culture accepts that power sits with superiors and elders.

Africa

Another example involving changing technology – this time the broad sweep of Africa.

I've looked at a paper from the Africa Journal of Management by Ndemo and Weiss that tries to make sense of Africa's digital transformation.

The thing I took from this article was a reminder that adoption of technology alone does not mean change.

Across Africa, ownership and use of mobile phones, data, and apps is rocketing. But are they doing what they always did – just using a different mechanism?

Are all the African people (or everyone) using mobile phones to preserve what they have? Or to create something new?

If the goal of change is to get a different result – you need to look at motivation.

It seems a good question to ask with the implementation of any technology: is it a different way of achieving the same thing? Or does it a way of achieving something different?

The paper breaks down Africa's transformation into organisational, political, and social environments. I focused on the cultural environment – because of this: 'new ways of doing things interact with established guidelines of how to become successful and [...] give rise to tensions.'

The example is the tension that tech start-ups face: will they follow the template for exponential growth that is typical for technology ventures in global markets, or will they follow a domestic template that anticipates organic growth?

Going back to those 6 cultural dimensions – collectivism, the good of the community, is in conflict with the possibility of individual fortune.

Remember Trompenaars and Woolliams? The people who say you can't change a culture.

They also note how change management is skewed towards tasks, and the idea that traditions need to be forgotten. And they warn against discarding what is good for what is new. Their model is of evolutionary change that preserves what is good.

Which lines up beautifully with the conclusion that Ndemo and Weiss come to in their paper. They identify three possibilities:

- That technology will allow Africa to reconnect to pre-colonial achievements and that the future is African (so going back a long way to find the good to be preserved)
- That technology doesn't make any difference – that global power imbalances remain – and Africa's future is like its immediate past (colonising powers continuing to dictate what is good and should be preserved)
- That technology will democratize information, and that Africa's future is part of a global future. (a different kind of good)

Te ao Māori

I want to come back to New Zealand now, specifically to te ao Māori.

I'm using work by Chellie Spiller and Monica Stockdale – their paper from 2012 'Managing and leading from a Māori perspective: Bringing new life and energy to organisations'.

The work is not specifically about change – it focuses on the life energy of an organisation, and how that life energy can be sustained and shaped. And it provides overlap with something that comes up in almost every change workshop we do: resilience and wellbeing.

I'm using this definition of culture: a series of rules and methods which a society or organisation has evolved to deal with regular problems that face it

The perspective fits in here because:

- change is experienced as a problem for organisations – that often drains energy
- Spiller and Stockdale offer a method to deal with it that feeds life energy.

Spiller and Stockdale outline what they see as the comparative advantage enjoyed by Māori organisations. And that comes from the relationships between people, products and processes. They say these relationships must be maintained so people can fully contribute at work. When they are maintained, they create wellbeing that becomes a source of life energy for the organisation.

This is groundwork that means an organisation can evolve when necessary because it has a spring of wellbeing to draw from.

Spiller and Stockdale have identified five sources of energy in the spring.

- Whakapapa – genealogy
- Wairua – spirituality
- Mana – authority
- Mauri – life-force
- Hau – reciprocity

What can you do to use these to feed the life energy of an organisation? And what do they say about responses to change?

Whakapapa – genealogy: this is about belonging, that is central to the Māori worldview. Relationships and connections are the foundation on which all else is built. That means honouring the networks that people bring with them, and including their whānau. Spiller and Stockdale say this should also prompt sharing the kaupapa or purpose of work. Which takes us back to: what do you want to preserve?

Wairua – spirituality: for leaders, this means creating space for spiritual reflection, and for people to express their convictions, to contribute in a way that is meaningful for them.

Mana – authority: mana grows through generosity, wisdom, calm, and compassion. Leaders nurture their mana by developing others and thinking of the collective good. There is a strong connection here to the cultural dimension of individualism vs collectivism.

Mauri – life-force: mauri is nurtured by integrity, honesty, warmth and compassion – and eroded by the lack of these things. Gossip and complaints erode mauri. This is something we hear about in change processes – where there is not a good flow of trusted information, other stories fill the space. In a western or Pākeha view, this is a communications issue to be managed – in this view, it is a wellbeing issue.

Hau – reciprocity: this is the principle of exchange, achieved by sharing and contributing. For leaders to make hau real, they need to value the unique gifts of each employee

In writing this paper, Spiller and Stockdale are setting up a paradox. For non-Maori businesses, applying this approach likely represents change. From a Maori perspective, it represents continuity.

Which neatly captures the overlaps between corporate and national cultures.

What are the answers?

1. What is the impact of regional and national culture on the way organisations manage change? Potentially significant – they raise behaviours and responses that need to be considered in the way you lead every day – and how change is planned, executed, and communicated.
2. What are the opportunities for organisations that are striving to be more diverse and inclusive? Enormous! By paying attention to different cultural dimensions, you'll get the chance to understand the range of responses.
3. How can I better serve clients who want support with change? Keep paying attention, reading and asking questions.

What action can you take?

- Accept that you are getting ready for change every day.
- Recognise your corporate culture – what are the unifying themes? Collective mental programme, rules and methods
- Find out about what cultural perspectives exist in your workplace. Take action to make them more visible.
- Identify what you want to preserve in your workplace.
- Identify what needs to evolve in order to preserve what you want.

References

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