Titantic: Rethinking the Sinking

By

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People bat around the word "culture" as though it were a conversational shuttlecock. When an individual, merger, or organization fails, culture takes the blame. We use the word fairly arbitrarily, citing it to explain why things don't change, won't change, or can't change. It's that subtle yet powerful driver that leaders strive—often futilely—to influence. "Culture" offers a simple defense for just about everything but explains almost nothing important—like its ties to business results. Often when we want to go forward, we benefit from looking back—back to historical tragedies like the sinking of *Titanic*—to understand how a company's culture can cause it to founder.

On April 14, 1912 White Star Line's luxury liner, *Titanic,* the largest ship afloat at the time, sank on her maiden voyage, killing more than 1,500 people. Most blame an iceberg for the tragedy, but a flawed belief system actually started the comedy of errors that caused the deadliest peacetime maritime disaster in modern history.

It all began with hubris. Bruce Ismay, the owner of the White Star Line, had built a ship that "not even God could sink," so he didn't equip the ship with enough life boats for all the passengers. Ismay also had an ego-induced goal to set a new record for an Atlantic crossing, so he disregarded conventional wisdom about speed limits for sailing in adverse weather conditions. Ismay pushed Captain Edward Smith to abandon protocol, sacrificing both safety and good judgment—causing historians to question whether the disaster would have occurred if the ship

had sailed without Ismay aboard. Ismay survived the disaster, but Captain Smith and 1,500 others did not, creating a heartbreaking metaphor for what happens in too many organizations.

The terribly flawed belief system surfaced long before the maiden voyage, however. Decision-makers at the White Star Line knowingly used inferior products in building the ship. Specifically, they decided to use substandard iron for the rivets that held sections of the ship together. Had they valued quality over cost savings, would the ship have sunk? We'll never know.

Continuing to cut costs of production, decision-makers didn't make the walls separating the sections below deck high enough, a singular decision that would have prevented the loss of the entire ship. The walls of the so called "water tight" compartments went about 11 feet above the waterline but not all the way to the top because White Star line didn't want to sacrifice the room this would have taken from the first class section.

We can't ignore a more insidious belief that influenced decision-makers. They considered the lives and comfort of first class passengers more important than the safety of the second and third-class passengers. At least we can infer that since most of those who lost their lives had neither been protected by high walls nor effective escape routes. Additionally, some of the stewards literally blocked the escape of passengers in steerage in the misguided notion that these second and third class passengers must stay out of the first class sections, even if the ship was sinking.

Beliefs reflect those perceptions that leaders consider "correct." Over time, employees learn that certain beliefs work to reduce uncertainty in critical areas of the organization's functioning. As the espoused beliefs continue to work, they gradually transform into an

articulated set of values, norms, and operational rules of behavior—embodying an ideology or organizational philosophy that serves as a guide for dealing with ambiguity and difficult events. The White Star Line didn't create a laudable ideology, so a flawed set of values set the wheels in motion for the fate of the passengers and crew who didn't realize they would sail on a ship of foolish beliefs.

A flawed belief system positioned *Titanic* for failure, but bad decision-making and weak leadership ensured the catastrophe. Days before *Titanic* sailed, ships in the north Atlantic warned of unusual ice conditions. The day of the disaster, three ships, the *Baltic,* the *Amerika,* and the *California* sent warnings to Captain Smith, but he either didn't receive them or ignored them—at least six of them. Data existed, but good judgment took a holiday. Smith simply didn't take in new information that would help him learn as he went. A veteran of the sea, his arrogance caused him to believe that he knew everything there was to know.

A successful culture must contain a core shared assumption that the appropriate way for an organization to improve involves proactive problem-solving and learning. Therefore, leaders must ultimately make the *process* of learning—not any given solution to any specific problem—part of the culture. Once a ship has begun her maiden voyage, evidence of the learning should abound, but in the case of *Titanic*, it didn't. Decisions *not* to learn doomed her.

Because decision-makers considered *Titanic* unsinkable, they developed no contingency plans. The ship didn't offer enough lifeboats for all aboard, but neither did the company train the sailors to handle disaster. Most of the lifeboats left with seats available because crew members erroneously believed that they had to speed away from the ship in order to avoid being sucked down when she sank, and they couldn't deviate from the "women and children first" conviction,

even as husbands and fathers of those on the lifeboats stood helplessly on the decks ready to board but preparing to die.

"Culture" represents that set of beliefs that govern behavior. We create it as we go along, sometimes consciously, often unconsciously, all the while hoping for the results we intend. However, when flawed beliefs and bad judgment combine, unintended consequences abound. When companies embrace a change orientation, they consider innovation as part of the culture, not a process or project that they engage in for a given period of time. People innovate and change when they see a benefit—when they perceive that the change will improve their condition, not when someone else wants it.

Captain Smith and his crew members couldn't respond to unanticipated consequences because they didn't know how. The White Star Line had not created an environment in which problem-solving and innovative solutions had not been rewarded. Indeed, mindless following and conformity had been.

Some historians have called the loss of *Titanic* a "perfect storm" of unfortunate circumstances. It wasn't. Rather, it was a perfect storm of a flawed belief system coupled with ineffective decisions and damaged leadership that caused what others have more accurately referred to as an "event cascade" of mistakes and arrogance. Captain Smith told the media prior to sailing that his career at sea had been "uneventful." Since the maiden voyage of *Titanic* was to be his last—and fate would intervene to make sure it was—he had become complacent in his leadership and decision-making. He capitulated to the demands of line's owner instead of following safety procedures that he knew well. Similarly, he relied on unseasoned sailors with insufficient training to handle communication and rescue.

Ineffective leadership seldom happens because of rusty management skills. Similarly, organizational disasters usually don't occur because of a flawed culture—at least not the traditional definition of culture. Both happen when leaders persist in simplistic approaches and ignore the links among beliefs, decision-making, and results.

Traditionally we defined corporate culture in vast, sweeping generalizations. Now we understand that only some parts of a given organizational culture may be relevant to what the organization needs to do. What are they? And why do leaders continue to fail to do the things that would overcome their followers' natural resistance to change?

It all starts with knowing what to measure. What do we need to do? Why do we want to do that? How will we know we've succeed? And most importantly, what good will it do us? Edgar Schein, the father of organizational culture, taught decades ago that a change-oriented leader cannot produce change without measurement, but a measurement-oriented leader cannot produce change without a strategy that integrates the measurement of the change process. It all relates to performance, but it all starts with organizational judgment. Building success is the voice, avoiding disaster the echo. The two must work in tandem to avoid what author James O'Toole aptly characterizes as "the ideology of comfort and the tyranny of custom."

One decision could have saved *Titanic:* slow the ship. But Smith didn't make that decision. Smith could not have anticipated all the things that would go wrong the night of April 14th any more than leaders in any organization can foresee all the problems they will encounter on a given day. An iceberg didn't sink *Titanic*; a culture of greed, hubris, elitism, and acquiescence to authority did.