

## Here's to Culture

By

Linda D. Henman, Ph.D.

Mention the words “Jeremiah Weed” to a group of veteran Air Force fighter pilots, and they will assure you they have drunk the delightful kerosene-tasting, 100-proof, bourbon-flavored liqueur. At the completion of a long week at the Fighter Weapons School, which is the Air Force equivalent to TOPGUN, or just for any reason at any bar in the Air Force, pilots will join each other in a toast to “fallen comrades.” All know the tradition, yet few can recount the legend of Jeremiah Weed, much less the true story.

The true story involves the ejection from and crash of an F-4 on December 1, 1978 in the desert near Nellis Air Force Base. Maj. Nort Nelson, a student at the Weapons School, responded to instructor Joe Bob Phillips’ scripted attack by putting this plane into a position from which he could not recover—at least in the estimation of his instructor, Dick Anderegg, the author of *Sierra Hotel*, the source of this tale. Anderegg ejected them both safely, but they lost the plane.

A year later Joe Bob, Nort, and another friend returned to the crash site but not before stopping at the Paranaghat Bar, where they met a bearded bartender who eagerly engaged the three pilots in drinking games. The bartender lost.

Joe Bob asked the Grizzly-Adams-looking man whether he knew how to do “afterburners.” He did not. Normally, the pilots explained, this procedure involves lighting a shot of brandy and drinking the flaming liquid. The bartender apologized that the closest thing to brandy he could offer was Jeremiah Weed. The three pilots filled their shot glasses with the

bourbon and demonstrated flawless afterburner technique, all three glasses returning to the bar empty, except for a small blue flame flickering at the bottom of each.

The bartender poured himself a shot and lit it—overlooking a couple of key steps in the procedure and the fact that he had a beard. Apparently, in addition to tasting like kerosene, Jeremiah Weed also has the flame-accelerant properties of it.

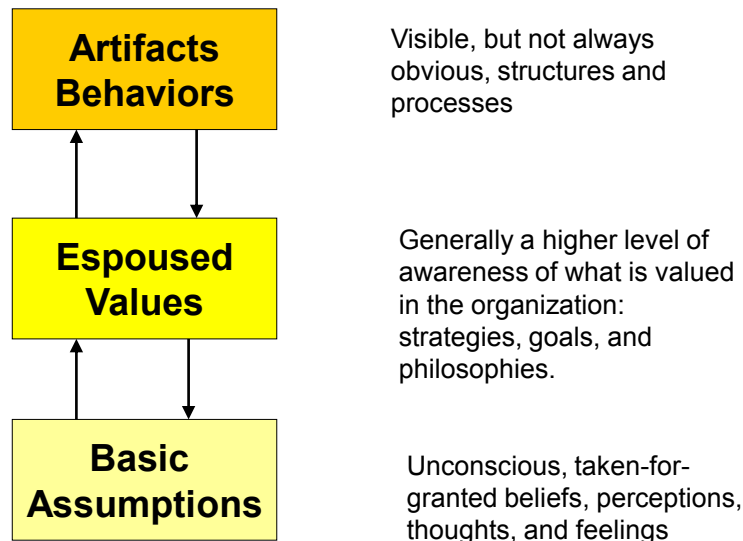
By the time the three pilots could beat out the flames, the bar was filled with the smell of barbecued lips and singed hair. Feeling guilty about winning the bar games and nearly immolating their new friend, the three pilots purchased a bottle of Weed and headed to the crash site.

On their return to Nellis, they showed the bottle to the manager of the Officers' Club and suggested she add it to the bar stock. She did. Soon the Nellis fighter pilots were downing shots of Weed (non-flaming) for no good reason except that drinking it set them apart and gave them an excuse to toast fallen comrades. As scores of other fighter pilots passed through Nellis, they saw the weapons school guys upholding the ritual, so they did too. A legend was born.<sup>3</sup>

Legends tend to have differing adaptations; the truth has no versions. Both influence—either intentionally or unintentionally—the cultures we build. Corporate culture—the pattern of shared assumptions that the group has adopted and adapted over a period of time—develops in much the same way as legends and traditions do.

Organizations learn as they solve their problems and adapt to the world around them. When something works well over a period of time, and leaders consider it valid, members of the organization begin to teach the behavior or idea to new people. Through this process, new

members find out what those around them perceive, think, and feel about issues that touch the organization. Edgar Schein offers this model for understanding the factors that influence culture:



Artifacts include all the phenomena we see, hear, and feel when we encounter a group. They include the visible products of the groups such as the physical environment, language, technology, products, clothing, manner of address, stories, and observed rituals, such as drinking Jeremiah Weed.

Observing artifacts is easier than understanding them, however. The Egyptians and Mayas both built visible pyramids, but the meaning of the pyramids differed in each culture—tombs in the former and temples as well as tombs in the latter. An outsider evaluating artifacts poses myriad problems, because we tend to assess in terms of our own backgrounds—not always seeing what lies in front of us as those in the organization do.

For instance, an informal organization where people wear jeans, call each other by their first names, and walk around frequently, might seem ineffective or nonprofessional to the outsider. On the other hand, a formal organization with everyone wearing business suits, sitting at desks, and not talking to one another may seem to lack innovation. Any observer will see the same artifacts, but attaching the correct judgment to them won't always be accurate or easy.

Espoused values reflect those perceptions that leaders consider "correct." Over time, the group learns that certain values work to reduce uncertainty in critical areas of the organization's functioning. As the espoused values continue to work, they gradually transform into an articulated set of beliefs, norms, and operational rules of behavior. Eventually these values become embodied in an ideology or organizational philosophy that serves as a guide for dealing with ambiguity or difficult events.

When a solution to a problem works repeatedly, people start to take it for granted. What was once a hypothesis, supported only by a hunch, comes gradually to be treated as a reality. Basic assumptions become so taken-for-granted that no one challenges them. Therefore, they influence behavior, even when people don't mention them.

Learning all these nuances doesn't happen automatically. Sometimes organizations engage in "on boarding" in an attempt to teach newcomers these inter-workings of the company. More often, however, that which defines the heart of the culture will not be revealed. Only as the new people gain permanent status will they be allowed to enter the inner sanctum and share the secrets.

Two problems. First, some people never navigate to the inner sanctum, and second, the journey takes too long. Top performers tend toward impatience. They want to know immediately

what will be expected of them, by whom, and under what conditions. They will want to hit your door running, eager to do a great job. Distractions related to navigation to the inner sanctum will just annoy and de-motivate them. (Distractions annoy and de-motivate everyone, for that matter).

Learning corporate culture doesn't involve drinking the Kool-Aid, or even the Kentucky bourbon. It's more about knowing when to raise a glass and to whom. But two components characterize all successful corporate cultures: a culture of change and a commitment to learning. When you have these in place, you can more effectively address the direction the company needs to take.