

## HOW CAN CORPORATE ANTHROPOLOGY PROPEL YOUR BUSINESS THROUGH FAST-CHANGING TIMES?



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When it comes to your business, you've undoubtedly seen that much of what worked yesterday isn't working today. What your customers want has changed. Supply chains have changed. How and where employees want to work has changed. Disruptions are everywhere and they're only accelerating. That's how progress and innovation have always worked.

For business leaders, this serves as a big wakeup call. They cannot cling to the old ways of operating a company. They must now connect with diverse customer bases, recognize and

adapt to changing market trends, and foster an inclusive workplace culture. This is a tall order. To accomplish it, organizations are turning to an increasingly essential ally: [corporate anthropology](#).

## What the heck is corporate anthropology?

People often ask us: “How do you apply anthropology to a company?” They may have learned years ago in school about anthropologists who work with small-scale societies in faraway lands. Our response: We tell them that companies are fundamentally small-scale societies. They may look like more complex organizations with layers of management and roles to be performed. But they are societies, much like those small-scale ones, with social rituals, power structures, conversational protocols and even mating rules. Part of a corporate anthropologist’s expertise is to observe in great detail an organization’s interconnected networks and the way workers get their jobs done every day.

Interestingly, companies have many of the same dynamics as tribal or hunter-gatherer societies. They also have different behaviors which reflect how they evolved into functional, or dysfunctional, organizations. Our job as anthropologists is to help them “see, feel and think” in new ways and implement changes where needed in order to sustain growth during these fast-changing times.

## How do you “do” anthropology in a business setting?

Our answer: Basically, we “hang out.” We become observers and listeners. Why? Because people often don’t see themselves clearly. They live out the habits they have always done. Anthropologists are able to step back and watch what is happening. This outsider’s perspective is captured through observational research, story listening sessions, and participant observations. We at [SAMC](#) specialize in helping organizations adapt to change in order to be more successful and productive, and we have mapped out a proprietary process which we can customize to each business’s particular needs.

## For a deeper understanding, listen to my podcast “[How Anthropology Helps People See Things With Fresh Eyes.](#)”

In this podcast in my “Ask Andi” series, I explain our **3-step process** for applying the principles of corporate anthropology to help an organization identify how they need to change to adapt to today’s rapidly shifting economic climate.

**1. Organizational Culture Discovery Process.** We begin by identifying how an organization’s internal culture is designed today, and how they might want to modify it as they adapt to new business environments. We often use the [Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument](#) (OCAI) to help them assess their company culture and then define how they would like it to change or remain the same. Then we use our [ChangeMap™](#) process to backward plan the steps they will take to change. At the same time, we watch,

listen, and observe how things get done. Remember, the rules for getting things done turn into personal habits that drive behaviors. For any organization, this means we cannot change what has become a habit unless we can pause, step back, and see it in the context of what is happening. Are those behaviors working? Or are they just “the way we have always done things,” and might need to be rethought and redesigned.

**2. Research on Customers and Non-customers.** As we apply the tools of anthropology to a company’s business challenges, we go out in the field with the client or on our own to do anthropological research. Participant observation, observational research, in-depth storytelling, culture probes, photography and videography — core tools and methods of classic anthropology — enable us to better capture what employees *and* customers are doing. We are particularly interested in how consumers are using a company’s products, where there are real opportunities for enhancements, and how we might re-invent the company’s products and services to reach both current users and non-users more effectively.

**3. Listening and Observing Employees.** We particularly love to hang out with an organization’s employees. We tell our clients, “Just listen to their stories, and you will learn a great deal.” A company’s workers, and even their vendors, know a great deal about what is working well and what needs to change. Whether a business is booming or stalled, the people doing the work often have the best insights as to how to rethink the organization’s challenges and find better solutions. They know the customers, what they are asking for, and how the company is, or is not, adapting to changes in its business environment.

## Case studies and key takeaways

Here are some of the most important ways anthropology can help businesses sustain their growth.

### 1. Cultural sensitivity

One of anthropology’s fundamental principles is the appreciation and understanding of different cultures. By applying anthropological methods, businesses can significantly develop their cultural sensitivity, which can translate into increased sales and a positive reputation in the marketplace. Being aware of wide-ranging consumer backgrounds, socioeconomic status, gender identities and preferences, and ethnic affiliations enables companies to tailor their products, marketing strategies and buyers’ experiences to resonate with diverse consumer groups. This is especially relevant in our increasingly globalized world, where businesses often interact with a large variety of cultures and people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

#### Case study: Old vs. new

At [SAMC](#), we once worked with a cement company in Mexico that wanted to [change its culture](#), particularly to respond to changes in its workforce and to allow it to succeed as it

expanded into the US. Using the [Organizational Culture Analysis Instrument](#), we helped them evaluate their current employees in Mexico and those they were hiring here in America. The OCAI is an excellent tool for helping people see their culture more accurately and systematically, rather than merely through individual anecdotes or presumptions. The company's leadership realized that their older employees wanted to retain their highly structured, command-and-control culture ("I will tell you what to do, you go do it"), while their younger employees and those in the US were interested in participating in the decision-making and wanted a more entrepreneurial and team-oriented culture. Not surprisingly, retention was a problem because new hires did not want to play the old guards' game, as they frequently told us.

**Takeaway:**

Carefully examine what your culture believes to be the "best way to do things" and then decide if it is time for a culture change as you respond to new generations of employees and new business environments. The most important part of changing in order to adapt to new environments is not to get wedded to the past. You must use methods that open your mind and those of your staff or customers to what is "really" taking place. Getting stuck is easy. Getting out of that box is challenging.

## 2. Consumer behavior analysis

Engaging anthropologists can connect businesses with the tools they need to delve deep into consumer behavior and preferences. One such tool is ethnographic research, which involves observing and interacting with consumers in their natural settings. This provides rich insights into their needs, desires and pain points that cannot be captured in focus groups. By understanding consumer behavior on a profound level, companies can refine their product offerings, communication strategies and customer experiences to align better with customer expectations.

**Case study: Observational research in healthcare**

In my book, [On the Brink: A Fresh Lens to Take Your Business to New Heights](#), I share the story of a healthcare industry client, a Midwest hospital serving an inner city community. We taught leadership how to experience the hospital experience through the eyes of the patients and their families, as the CEO was committed to building an organization focused on family- and patient-centered care. Our job was to help them truly understand those experiences and how better to align the physicians, nurses and staff so patients could receive the care they needed in a more easily understood, compassionate and practical manner.

**Takeaway:**

One of the critical areas we were able to get leadership to focus on was the complexity which patients and their families encounter when trying to use a healthcare facility and consequently, their need for navigators. For example, mothers of patients would sometimes arrive with their boyfriends, meaning that medical staff had to be socially aware of how to communicate solely with the mother without the boyfriend being part of the conversation.

### 3. Workplace diversity and inclusion

A diverse and inclusive workplace is not only a moral imperative but a business advantage. Corporate anthropology helps organizations recognize the value of diverse perspectives and the importance of fostering an inclusive work culture, thereby tapping into a wider range of ideas and experiences. This leads to greater innovation and increased employee engagement, which can be a competitive advantage. Moreover, a diverse workforce reflects the diversity of your customer base, making it easier to understand and cater to their needs.

#### **Case study: Turning “us” and “you” into “we”**

We had a client in the higher education space that was struggling with recruiting students of diverse backgrounds and getting them to remain at the institution. This was a relatively rural college attracting inner-city African American and Latino students, but the core college community was suburban white students. This was not our first experience in higher education where the administration, primarily white, attempted to better understand how to build a community culture where people of different backgrounds could enjoy each other, find friends, and experience the value of diversity, not just talk about it.

#### **Takeaway:**

From both sides, it was a challenge. The commuter students wanted to find a place on campus to hang out with others who looked and acted like them, not simply pretend to fit in with the on-campus students. As commuters, they were already separated from students living in the dorms. They also had different life experiences, and while they might share a common interest in sports or even play on the football team together, it took deliberate effort to bridge the gaps they felt, and felt very strongly. The dorm students, mainly from the region, needed to figure out how to relate to the commuter students, who had different expectations, conversational skills and experiences.

The administration was stumped. How could they create a more inclusive college campus? We encouraged them to do three things:

1. **Get to know the students in both areas on campus.** We advised the leadership: “Don’t think you know them. Experience them. Go to class with them. Hang out with them afterward. Listen to their conversations. Recognize that you are training them for a future in business or society where differences will define the environments in which they will live.”
2. **Hold mix-and-mingle sessions.** Deliberately bring together people with different backgrounds. Stage a networking experience, training students how to meet with people of different backgrounds and to share common bonds to help them bridge the chasm.
3. **Create a community of influencers or advocates.** As in later life, these skills will serve the students and the faculty exceptionally well. Identify those with potential leadership skills and give them the job of building an inclusive community. Offer

them opportunities to develop their skills in several venues so they, too, grow into bridge-builders.

#### 4. Adapting to change

Most crucially, corporate anthropology equips businesses with the ability to adapt to change, a critical skill in today's business climate. Through the study of cultures and societies, anthropologists can demonstrate to organizations how true change occurs over time and how workers really can adapt to new circumstances.

##### **Takeaway:**

This knowledge can be applied to business strategies, helping companies navigate disruptions, embrace innovation, and remain agile.

#### **As corporate anthropologists, we have built our business over the past two decades helping companies of all sizes adapt to change.**

People hate change, regardless of whether it's forced upon them, as during the pandemic, or whether it becomes necessary and even urgent. Change challenges the status quo of the past. However, change can open the door to new possibilities and unrealized success. Are you experiencing a need for change? Could a little anthropology help you adapt and thrive?

A few tips:

**1. First, stop fearing the unfamiliar and the unknown.** Your brain does this to protect you. A better response: Don't put your head in the ground and pretend the changes will go away. Instead, embrace change and anticipate the good things it might bring.

**2. Second, visualize what you think the future is going to become.** This is often the most challenging part. You need to imagine something new. Craft this new story so that you are a success, and then work with your team and even your clients or vendors to create the new behaviors and habits that will get you there. You must see where you are going, even if it is an illusion. Once you have that visualization, you can begin to put the small wins in place that will move you forward.

**3. Third, accept that change is all around you, always.** Don't fall into the comfort trap where you think the past was good and the future is dangerous. This is all in your mind. Change the story, embrace the unknown, and make it your friend.

#### **Want to know more? Check out these podcasts and blogs**

##### **Podcasts**

- [Gillian Tett—Why Can A Little Anthropology Help You And Your Business Grow?](#)

- [John Curran—How Can Anthropology Help Your Business Soar?](#)
- [Andi Simon—Want Your Company To Not Just Survive But Thrive? Hire Anthropologists.](#)

## Blogs

- [Three Ways Corporate Anthropology Can Help Your Company Change](#)
- [Will You Adapt Or Die? How Cultural Anthropology Can Transform Your Business Strategy](#)
- [Is Your Crisis Coming? Anthropology Can Help You Change To Avoid It.](#)

## Ready to see what anthropology can do for your business?

At [Simon Associates Management Consultants](#), we specialize in helping our clients adapt to fast-changing times. Applying the tools, methods and principles of [anthropology](#) is one of the primary ways we do this. We invite you to [contact us](#) to discuss how our team of specialized [corporate anthropologists](#) and [culture change experts](#) can work with you so that you and your business can overcome today's challenges and boldly embrace the future. We look forward to hearing from you.

## About Andi Simon



[Andrea \(Andi\) Simon, Ph.D.](#), [corporate anthropologist](#), [author](#), and executive coach founded [Simon Associates Management Consultants](#) (SAMC) over two decades ago to bring the unique perspective of anthropology to businesses and organizations that need or want to change. As a [culture change expert](#) and trained practitioner in [Blue Ocean Strategy](#)®, she helps a diverse range of organizations “see, feel and think” in new ways, finding better solutions for their current customers and “big ideas” to attract future ones. [Contact SAMC](#) to find out how Andi and her team can help your organization drive change, overcome challenges and reach your potential for success. Subscribe to Andi’s podcast: [On the Brink with Andi Simon](#) and hear how you can move off the brink and soar!

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Andi has authored two award-winning books: [On the Brink: A Fresh Lens to Take Your Business to New Heights](#) and [Rethink: Smashing the Myths of Women in Business](#). Her third

book, [\*Women Mean Business: Over 500 Insights from Extraordinary Leaders to Spark Your Success\*](#), co-authored with Edie Fraser and Robyn Freedman Spizman, is being called the business book of the decade. To order your copies, click on the images below:

