



WHY CORPORATE ANTHROPOLOGY IS THE KEY TO BUSINESS SUCCESS

As I travel around the country working with clients or doing workshops or speaking at conferences, I often get asked the same question: “What are corporate anthropologists and how could they help my company do better?”

Since I am a practicing corporate anthropologist, I thought it might be helpful in this white paper if I answered both parts of the question: first, what do corporate anthropologists do, and second, how they can help bring about positive, needed change in a company and ultimately help it perform better.

WHEN AND WHY A BUSINESS HIRES A CORPORATE ANTHROPOLOGIST

To begin, corporate anthropologists begin working with a company to understand and at

times change the company's culture. Our approach from the start assumes nothing, except the fact that people within organizations build cultures. It's what we do as human beings. These company cultures, which differ from organization to organization, embody management and employees' core values, beliefs and behaviors which they share with others in order to get their jobs done.

When anthropologists are working in a business setting, we tend to think of a company as if it was a newly-found country or community in a foreign world. The metaphor is very helpful. Our job is to help that business or organization better see what is all around it by stepping out and observing the marketplace and their own inner workings with fresh eyes.

PEOPLE DO NOT KNOW THEIR OWN CORPORATE CULTURE

Culture is not something people think about as they go about their daily jobs. Their habits take over: those shared values, beliefs and behaviors that reflect their company's culture (and their own personal culture) and drive daily interactions.

Unless there is a crisis, an upheaval of some sort or a leadership change — i.e., a new CEO or manager — most people just go through their work days so they can collect their salary or commission. Their well-honed habits seem to work well, and their brains are quite happy if they don't have to reflect on them. (By the way, employees "living the culture" cannot see what changes are needed because they are certain they are doing the right things now.)

But what a corporate anthropologist wants to know is, what are those cultural attributes? For those working there, a company's culture is typically held to be "true," almost "sacred." It's "the way we do things here." To add value to a business, the anthropologist then sheds light on those implicit habits. He/she is there to see if the culture is an asset or if it has become a liability.

This is particularly important today as companies change, their employees change and their customers change. Those "cultures" suddenly become vital for companies to sustain their growth. Suddenly, they've got to evolve to capture new business opportunities.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL METHODS

So how do anthropologists uncover what's really going on inside a company? Here are some the methods we use:

- 1. Deep Hanging Out.** A corporate anthropologist begins by observing employees' daily habits, at all levels of a company. By literally hanging out and shadowing people going about their jobs, we can then understand the formal rules of the culture and the informal and often innovative ways people get things done. We like to think of this as "spending a day in the life" of a company. At times, we spend many

days really getting to know the staff, what they consider to be the right way to do things and how they interact with others.

2. **Capturing the daily interactions.** We listen to and participate in lunch room conversations. We might even be asked to help do some of the work. We listen in on customer call center interactions between customers and switchboard staff and watch how they get customer questions answered or problems solved, or not. We look at who is invited to which meetings, as well as how meetings are run and how problems are resolved, or not. We observe the gender differences and the status or hierarchy of individuals and their various departments.
3. **Stories reveal the essence of a culture.** Anthropologists cannot simply ask people what they are doing or why, so we listen to staff tell stories about what they are doing. They really cannot tell you. They tell you what they think you want to hear. If you video tape them and show them what they are actually doing at work, they are shocked at how different the “actual” is from their perceptions of their activities.
4. **Follow the threads of their networks and interactions.** We also dive into their interactions with others, typically via their emails. Their emails are rich sources of information about the communication threads and the influencers who drive results. Who do they copy and why? Who don't they share communication with?
5. **Take them out exploring and observing.** Another way anthropologists help companies is by taking employees out exploring to better understand their current and prospective customers. People become far better observers if they get out of their offices and actually watch consumers using their product or buying their services.

THE CHALLENGE OF CULTURE

When trying to change a company's culture, everyone involved needs to realize that culture is not something you wear to work. It becomes **who you are** at work — and in your private life. The core values and beliefs that you share with others are not easily changed because they are not on the surface of who you are. They guide you and your actions because of the ways in which culture and your brain become interwoven in your identity.

Once you grasp this, the next step is understanding that people do not know how to adapt their culture. And on top of this, their brains hate to change.

With this in mind, our job as anthropologists is often to help people who are being asked to change in an organization to see this in a positive light as if they are being asked to play a new role in a performance. In many ways, a business culture is like a play with everyone performing key roles every day. Our job is to help them better see their performance and get the rewards they desire, individually and in concert with the company's set of goals.

SOME CULTURAL TRENDS WE'RE SEEING TODAY

The idea of improving a culture is an important one. What does it mean to have a “better culture?” At [Simon Associates Management Consultants](#) (SAMC), as anthropologists in the field working with businesses, what we are seeing lately is a growing frustration with highly structured, hierarchical companies. The old idea that “you need rules to rule” is fading, as new generations and their style of working begin to take on decision-making roles.

The new culture that is frequently requested today is one that is more empowering and built on collaboration and teamwork. While this sounds great, it is hard to enable more risk-taking and ideation until you've built a culture that embraces those values and behaviors. Too often, people express the desire to work together in an idea free-for-all where everyone's input is valued, but in actuality, they really don't know what this means or how to make it stick.

ARCHETYPES OF BUSINESS OR ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURES

There has been extensive research done by Dr. Kim Cameron and Dr. Robert Quinn at the University of Michigan about the four major archetypes of organizational cultures. At SAMC, we use their tool, the Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument (ocai-online.com) as an effective method for capturing what I've been describing: the core values, strategies, social glue and leadership styles of an organization.

The four types of organizational cultures are:

1. creative innovative companies
2. competitive, market driven companies
3. controlling and hierarchical companies
4. collaborating clan-like companies

While there are no “right” cultures and organizations often have some of each in their culture, the OCAI allows us to help diagnose a company's culture today and see what employees would prefer it to be in the future. Then we help them begin a culture change process to identify and evaluate their aspirations, as well as what they will need to do to thrive as an organization as they embark on this change journey.

TWO CASE STUDIES FROM MY AWARD-WINNING BOOK, *[“On The Brink: A Fresh Lens to Take Your Business to New Heights”](#)*

Here are two illustrative case studies where we used anthropological methods to bring about real and lasting change to companies that were “on the brink.”

CENTENARY COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY

At SAMC, we worked with Centenary College for four years, 2002-2006, helping the administration turn around the organization. The college had stopped growing and had a new president as well as several new executives. They realized that they had not built a brand positioning or a growth strategy to attract new students or retain the ones they had.

Thus, our approach was three-fold:

1. **First, we spent time getting to know the faculty** by observing their classes, sitting in on their staff meetings, and learning more about how they thought they educated their students — particularly what was different in their style of education that might set them apart from other colleges. What we learned was a great deal about what they thought they were doing — namely, teaching students the way they learned, tailoring their education and personalizing their experiences. We sat in on 1:1 counseling sessions and listened to how they engaged with their students.
2. **Next, we spent time with students**, hanging out in the dorms, eating with them, watching them in their extra-curricular activities, and listening to what they thought they were getting out of their Centenary education.
3. **Finally, we worked with administrators** to better capture their style of interacting with faculty, students and prospective students, as well as with influencers such as guidance counselors.

What did we learn? First, regardless of what the faculty thought, students were underwhelmed by the education they were receiving. There was a profound gap between what the college thought it was delivering and what students thought the college and the faculty were actually doing to engage and educate them. The gap was sufficiently serious to warrant deep conversations between SAMC, faculty and college leadership.

There was also a cultural gap between the students who had been raised playing soccer or other team sports and the faculty who wanted students to do independent study and develop their own thinking. Faculty frustration came through in their tone of voice and the way they interacted with students.

There was an issue with “helicopter parents” frequently calling the faculty to discuss their child’s performance.

What also became clear as a significant hindrance was that the administration was unclear what the messaging should be to recruit new students. They didn’t have a clear grasp on what they did well or what would differentiate their college from others. They had adversarial relationships with their faculty. Finally, they had shared governance which had become almost no governance.

How did we help Centenary College overcome all these obstacles?

Together, we worked with them to reposition the institution around the president's deep commitment to build a highly internet-savvy college, which was winning awards for its early adoption of laptops and online learning methods. Then, we helped the faculty actually see what their students saw. They had to step out and watch a class to see what was really going on.

By the time we completed our work with Centenary, it had grown from 750 students to 2500, with a waiting list and improved retention rates. This was not from our work alone but from a realization that 1) their stories that had resonated with students in 2003 were no longer true or relevant, and 2) the culture in place before we began our work together had to change if it was going to mean anything for the students of the future, many of whom were employed adults, not just high school graduates.

MIDWEST MEDICAL CENTER

This next client story also reflects the many ways in which we applied corporate anthropology to help an organization orchestrate a major turnaround. A medical center in the Midwest was losing \$25MM annually. I knew the new CEO from previous jobs and he asked me to come help change the hospital's culture so it could stop the losses and regain new patient growth. As with Centenary College, this was a multi-year process.

First, we had to build confidence among the different stakeholders so that we (strangers, observers) could freely wander around the premises and see what was going on. This meant establishing trust with physicians, nurses, patients, referring physicians, community leaders and administrators. I became the Interim SVP for Branding, Marketing and Culture Change during the three years we worked together, which allowed us to dig deeper into the medical center's story and figure out how to create the right messaging.

We also spent time trying to ascertain how this hospital was viewed by the public. People were afraid of it, did not consider it to be "right for them" and chose other options that better suited their sense of their place in the community's status system. The institution was essentially a safety net hospital with a high percentage of African-American patients on Medicaid or without insurance.

As with Centenary College, we spent time doing observational research, including listening in at meetings and watching care delivery in the emergency room or in doctor's offices, all of which revealed many of the challenges facing the organization.

One thing that became clear was that there were significant tensions between the foreign-born doctors and the American-born nurses, as well as between the doctors and their multi-ethnic patients. Cultures were dramatically different. In one situation, a mother brought in her son to see a doctor. Her boyfriend came with her. The foreign-born doctor spoke to the boyfriend, not to the mother. She was furious and filed a complaint. The doctor

had no idea that he had crossed a cultural divide and that it was inappropriate to direct his conversation to the boyfriend while ignoring the child's mother.

Internally, housekeeping and nursing staff waged an ongoing battle over how quickly a room should be cleaned and prepared for new patients coming from the Emergency Room. Housekeeping was highly controlled and regulated its staff's time by way of very specific rules and policies. Nursing had their own set of policies, with demands on the staff driven by patient care patterns which varied greatly.

When we went into the surrounding communities, we learned a great deal about who thought highly of the hospital and chose to use it. We also uncovered a startling fact, that men in general, and African-American men in particular, did not have personal doctors. If they got sick, they used the ER, a very expensive and inefficient way to deliver their care. The ER was familiar to them, they were comfortable going there and they believed they did not need a primary care physician.

In addition, these men were uncomfortable in a doctor's office. This was corroborated by the doctors themselves, who told us how awkward men felt when they came into their offices for diagnoses or treatment. It was just not the right cultural fit for them. From these insights came a program called the Men's Health Summit which successfully shifted men's healthcare to more appropriate venues and got them involved in their own personal well-being.

In sum, we did a massive amount of work over those three years. We helped the medical center close its budget deficit, improve internal relationships between the different stakeholders, bridge major cultural divides, and engage with its community and also with referring physicians to increase patient flow and patient satisfaction. It was tough but a job well done.

LESSONS LEARNED FOR BUSINESS LEADERS

If you're a business leader, there are several important lessons here for how and why anthropology could really help you run a better business:

1. **Look at your business as if you were just joining it, before you have become part of the culture itself.** Step out. Listen in on incoming customer service calls. Spend a day in the life of one of your staff members or departments. Stay open to your observations, without any theories or assumptions.
2. **Evaluate your company as if you were a consumer or business searching for a solution to a problem that your company might be able to help with.** "Shop" your own company. See what it is like to buy and use your product.
3. **Watch clients buy and use your products or services.** Listen for unmet needs, challenges and pain points. Remember, people cannot tell you why they do what

they do. They just come up with go-arounds and solve their problems somehow — or don't solve them at all.

4. **Generational changes are everywhere.** One generation, the Boomers, are approaching retirement, and another, the Millennials, are coming on strong, approaching 50% of the workforce only two years from now. These workers have very different values, beliefs and behaviors from their older counterparts. They work completely differently, so go hang out with them to see what they are doing and if, and how, you need to build bridges between them and your older employees.
5. **Almost 40% of U.S. businesses are now owned by women.** The cultures they are building are very different from those which men have created for hundreds of years. At SAMC, our research has identified several trends in this area, such as how women intentionally build collaborative cultures that are customer-focused and market-driven. Their staff are empowered to make their own decisions and take risks. But women-led companies also have processes and policies to ensure there are shared values, common beliefs and behaviors that are in step with their organizations.

MAKE NO MISTAKE: CULTURE IS A BIG DEAL

Company culture is not the outfit you wear to the office. It is inextricably linked to who you are and how you interact with others in the workplace. Is your culture doing fine or in dire need of an overall? Either way, one thing is certain — a corporate anthropologist can help you figure that out and fix it.