

Rules eat culture for breakfast

 By Sid Peimer

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In 1823, William Webb Ellis of the Rugby School picked up a round soccer ball and ran with it. This (probable urban legend) has persisted as the origin of rugby. Okay, so here we go - we now have the basics of rugby happening that has culminated in such feats as Japan beating Ireland in the World Cup. I know they beat South Africa before, but we were having an off day, which happens to the best of them. We did not have an off day when we played them on their home turf in 2019. But I digress.



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Back to William the Ball Carrier. Imagine if he decided that the ball can't be passed forwards and like any English gentleman would pass on the 'culture' of not passing forward. Passing forward was just not cricket. This may have worked at the School of Rugby in 1823, but the game would have grown very slowly requiring this 'cultural change'. Instead, we introduced a rule – pass the ball forward during the game and there will be immediate repercussions. Today we call it Rule 12, and if you transgress, there is an immediate penalty against you, which can be highly embarrassing or even worse, lose you the game. Therefore, with so much at risk, forward passes are rare.

There's the saying that culture eats strategy for breakfast. Cute, but from my experience, totally incorrect – it's like blaming the ref for the forward pass. They are involved but not causal. There's all this talk about changing the culture of the organisation to meet your strategic imperatives, but to be quite honest (or quite opinionated), this is nothing more than an urban legend perpetuated by authors of management theory that see corporations not reaching their goals, because the people (or their attitude) aren't 'right'. Oh really? And since when have human beings always been logical, positive, trusting and reliably informed so the actions they take are optimal for themselves or their employer? Then explain to me why someone would drive five kilometers further to save 10 cents on a tub of margarine?

You can't fine tune people like you can a robot, where the latter will give you much better productivity if adjusted correctly. Let's be practical. If I wanted everyone at work at a fixed time, then I could encourage a culture of punctuality. Good luck. You could get someone to jump out with a monster mask giving you heart failure if you arrive after the 'agreed' time or installing a time-controlled lock for the door that allows no one in after the allotted time. Both involve a penalty – in the first instance you'll get heart failure and in the second you have to take a day of unpaid leave. I wouldn't suggest either if you wanted to avert conflict with the union, but then I'm just making a point.

And then there's this recent trend of 'finding purpose'. I know this is shocking news for many employers, but the purpose most staff come to work is to survive. Granted, your purpose can't be in conflict with the organisation – if you are a priest you must believe in God, and if you work for a cigarette company you must believe that people have the right to choose to smoke. The vast majority of us have a job that has a purpose we can support, and we might have a lovely job, but we still have to write reports and deal with conflict and the myriad of other things that come with working life. I don't want you to love your job, as I have informed my staff, I want you to like who you are and where you are. Or rather the rules of where you are.

Mothers knew this ages ago, which is why they say things like 'Eat your vegetables or I'm taking your cellphone away'. A loving rule, but a rule nonetheless.

ABOUT SID PEIMER

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