

Lessons in agile culture from French bikinis and ritualistic shrines

 By [Douglas Kruger](#)

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"Help, they're trying to break my rules!"... so let them. I studied French bikinis and ritualistic shrines, in order to find ways to create a more agile culture.



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In an unanswered crime against humanity, the inventor of the bikini still hasn't won the Nobel Prize. Nevertheless, his laudable actions had their genesis in rule-breaking and enablement. Frenchman Louis Réard, who worked at his mother's lingerie business, observed women on the beach at St Tropez and noticed that many of them would roll up the ends of their long, traditional swimsuits to get a better tan on their legs, then roll down the top to tan their stomachs.

What if you enabled that behaviour? he thought, *et voilà* – he invented the bikini. Sometimes, invention is the product of rule-breaking.



Your wicked customers are trying to break your rules!

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Similarly, if you build a new office park, it's wise to wait awhile before laying out the pathways. Let people follow the routes that they want to take naturally, and they will wear 'correct' paths into the grass. You can then simply lay the paths according to these routes, and you will avoid the 'rule-breaking' of people ignoring your paths and walking informally across your lawns.

There is often a chasm between our preconceived ideas about how people will do a thing and the way in which they actually do it. Ideally, we don't want to force our people to follow an unnatural path. They will naturally tend towards the quickest, easiest way of doing anything. If our goal is functionality, speed and agility, we want to enable their more natural behaviours. We need to observe how people want to break rules, and see if we can create systems that accommodate these swifter paths.

After all, sometimes the goals are more important than the rules.



Breaking rules takes you from underdog to industry-threat

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So, if your goal is to enable greater agility in your organisation, and to ease the burden of rules, what could you do to ensure that people are willing to take risks? How can you create a culture that celebrates lateral thinking and alternative paths to achievement? Is it possible to encourage greater risk-taking?

It absolutely is. But it requires the courage to praise failure.

Public praise for the heroic fallen

Some organisations are bold enough to reward the willingness to try, regardless of whether or not an idea panned out. At public ceremonies, they hand out 'dared to try' awards. Do it just right and you can make a hero of an individual, despite the fact that their attempt did not work. Imagine a semi-humorous, dramatic speech with utterances like: "You may have crashed and burned, but boy, you went down gloriously! You were willing to try, and that's what matters! That's the stuff real heroes are made of!"

This is a clever way of replacing the penalisation of failure – all too common in the corporate world – with an institutionalised belief in the value of trying. It also socialises the idea that trying is not punished, but openly and publicly valued. And there's more you can do, too...

Shrines to the abolished behaviour

Six hundred people were packed into a church auditorium in Johannesburg when Pastor Tim Healy took to the stage. Before his sermon, he announced the formation of a new youth group. He introduced the name of the new group by saying, "We prayed, and were delivered from the burden of acronyms." The congregation went into fits of hysterics.

You see, in the preceding years, almost every initiative launched in his church had made use of a jaunty little acronym, and so the ladies' action group was WOW, for Women of Warfare, the toddlers' group was PLAY, for Precious Little Angels of Youth, the dishwashing committee was CLEANLINESS, for Christ-Like Eating Always Nurtures Leadership And... um... Oh, I forget. But you get the idea.

Pastor Healy had thus managed to abolish what had become a vaguely annoying institutionalised habit with a simple public joke. It got a good laugh. But it did more than that. From that point on, it became pretty much impossible for any other group in the church to use an acronym, because, through his use of humour, a shrine had been built to the abolition of that

idea.

Shrines can be metaphysical, like a public joke delivered by the leader, but they can be physical, too.

If there is a particular behaviour in your organisation that must go, how about holding a public funeral for it? Then, give it its own little shrine, perhaps a gravestone with candles or a little Viking funeral pyre, where people can go and pay respects to the dead idea.

Again, it's humorous, but that humour can drive cultural change. How can you possibly indulge in that behaviour when everybody in the organisation knows that there is a shrine to its death in the lobby, and will gleefully point this out if you try to resurrect it?

Shrines can even be used like an office shredder for poor behaviours: "Bring a visual representation of your division's outdated behaviour. Place it on the shrine. Kiss its ass goodbye!"

Have your entire division stand around and bow their heads for a moment's silence to commemorate its passing. Thereafter, display the strength of leadership necessary to prevent ghosts from coming back to haunt you. The behaviour is dead – it may not return from the grave.

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