

CULTURE CONVERSATIONS

Culture consists of shared thought habits – but you can't see those. What is visible are actions and other manifestations of our collective thinking; the thinking itself is hidden.

This leads to an interesting dynamic in culture change. We don't know the thinking behind why others do the things they do. In fact, when we're swimming in the sea of culture, we may not even may not even consciously have identified why we're doing (or not doing) something. Yet, if you ask me why I did a specific autopilot action – one that as an autopilot action, by definition, I did NOT consciously consider but rather subconsciously proceeded to do – I will probably be able to “off the cuff” offer up a plausible reason why I acted as such. If I am decently self-aware, it will probably line up with my original thinking that created that thought habit. (Although never underestimate the ability of our minds to deceive ourselves to protect our ego! This is especially true if we are not in a healthy state of mind.)

The problem lies in the fact that our minds will also commonly build a back story so that *other's* actions “all makes sense”. Unfortunately, this back story can be – and frequently is – *completely* wrong. This ability/tendency/need to generate a backstory can create powerful blind spots. Thus, inherent in every culture shift is the need to make the hidden visible coupled with each individual's natural tendency to think that it isn't hidden to me – I already see it. An interesting dynamic, indeed!

The way to address these blind spots and misconceptions is through culture conversations. Culture conversations initially help identify the thinking and make it more concrete. They are necessary to create alignment and the clarity needed for change. Later in the process they'll strengthen the new thinking and help make them into habits, a way of being. Culture conversations are so critical this is #1 on our list of Obstacle Avoidance Tips & Tools (OATTs) and even has this separate section on the website. As you'll see, many of the tools and actions provided with the Culture Change Course Map are specifically developed to assist in these conversations. Understanding the nature and importance of culture conversations is therefore key to performing any alterations to the Culture Change Course Map to provide a custom fit for your congregation.

Characteristics of Culture Conversations

Effective culture conversations create open space for thoughts to be shared and the hidden to be made visible. This open space, predicated on psychological safety, is primarily established by three important characteristics that are displayed by the leader in the culture conversations:

- ***Humility & Curiosity.*** Approach culture conversations with humility & curiosity. Because of blind spots and selective perception, no one can initially see the whole culture picture. Enter the conversation assuming you'll discover heaps of insights, and you will. Conversely, lack of humility (i.e., arrogance – “I have the answer, listen to me and do as I say.”) or lack of curiosity

(i.e., judgement – “No, that’s not correct; here’s the right answer.”) will cripple the entire culture change initiative.

- **Ask >> Tell.** Ask way more than you tell. This is a natural product of humility & curiosity, but it still may not be a natural approach for you. If it isn’t, then take some time to figure out how you’ll stay in this lane. Telling people “For these culture conversations I am supposed to ask more than I tell, but I suspect I’ll struggle a bit with that.” and then asking for their help is one lane-assist approach. If Ask >> Tell just isn’t in your wheelhouse and seems like an insurmountable lift for you, **STRONGLY** consider sitting out the structured tone-setting culture conversations (i.e., Every Member Visits and Focus Groups) in the EXPLORE step and allowing someone else with this gift the opportunity to serve in this capacity.
- **Appreciate the gifts.** View every unexpected comment or opinion as a gift that is helping you overcome your blind spots. Recognize the gift of them vocalizing their thoughts – perhaps offered with trepidation, maybe with exasperation, but in either case a gift – and make sure that you voice your appreciation. *Vocalizing* your appreciation of openness in a culture conversation – not just thinking to yourself “Wow! That’s an awesome insight.” – is how you get more of it. As you’ll see below, culture conversations are a key part of and occur throughout the culture change initiative. Recognizing the effort folks expend to share their thoughts openly will promote more of this openness and make the entire journey easier.

The way you go about involving folks in shifting culture and the way you respond to what you hear both say a lot about the type of culture you want to create. Culture conversations with these three characteristics will set the tone for the entire culture change initiative.

Culture Conversations throughout the Culture Change Course Map

REFOCUS Step. REFOCUS is considered a precursor step – one taken if needed to meet the prerequisites for the EXPLORE step. Since the only worthwhile reason to consider shifting your culture is to help you fulfill your congregation’s purpose, clarity & alignment on your purpose is a prerequisite for culture change. Verifying this clarity & alignment, i.e., determining if you’ll need to first do this step – is a “what are they thinking” investigation. For this investigation, you should assume that clarity and alignment are NOT present and see if you can uncover overwhelming evidence to the contrary. In this investigative discussion, all the characteristics of a culture conversation – humility & curiosity, ask>>tell, appreciate the gifts – apply.

EXPLORE Step. Informal discussions, formal leadership discussions, a structured expedition with member visits and perhaps even focus groups – culture conversations abound in the Explore step. Culture conversations are the crucial first step in shifting congregational culture because they:

1. *Make the hidden visible.* Culture consists of shared thought habits – but you can't see those. What is visible are actions and other manifestations of our collective thinking. Culture conversations help identify the thinking and make it more concrete.
2. *Help address your blind spots.* Sitting in a different seat means congregation members can see stuff that we cannot see from the driver's seat! Culture conversations help you find out what they are seeing.
3. *Prepare the congregation for the culture shift.* Talking about culture probably isn't in your congregation's current repertoire, but discussing thinking is critical to shifting it. Initial culture conversations help by
 - Getting folks thinking and talking about culture
 - Sending the message that you want this culture shift to happen WITH them, not TO them. This is a critical point for the elephant! (If the last comment doesn't make sense, please head over to the *Changing the Status Quo* section.)

A special note on framing a possible or proposed culture shift while in Every-Member Visits or Focus Groups. In the framing point, you momentarily flip from inquiry to proposal. This is done after soliciting their insights so as to not bias their comments. However, the timing also means that this is an opportunity for all the culture conversation characteristics (humility & curiosity, ask>>tell, appreciate the gifts) that you have been modelling to be reflected back to you. This is a great feedback moment! If you frequently do not see those reflected back, consider what else you can do or not do to bring those characteristics more to the fore.

The EXPLORE step typically ends with a summary presentation. This gives you an opportunity to share what you heard in all these conversations and can include a final “What do you think...?” culture conversation. This final discussion is a great way to capture folk's thoughts as you transition into the TARGET step and development of a FROM | TO statement.

TARGET Step. In the structure of the *Culture Change Course Map*, the majority of the work in the TARGET step is done by the Congregational Culture Team (CCT), using the insights gathered from the entire congregation during the EXPLORE step. Essentially this step is where you plan the work of the BUILD step. (Just as BUILD is where you work the plan that you created in the TARGET step.)

The CCT has quite a bit to accomplish:

- A finalized list of **FROM | TO** culture shifts.
- An initial set of **Dos for Tos** —concrete behaviors that reflect the “To” side of the shift.
- An **Artifact Action List** (shoot for at least two artifacts for every Dos item on the Dos for Tos list) to introduce new activator triggers and remove or replace anchor triggers.
- A basic **Build Plan** that outlines how you'll communicate the previous items, when the congregation will start individual Dos for Tos, how you'll check progress and reinforce it.

As the CCT goes about creating the items on the above list, all the characteristics of a culture conversation – humility & curiosity, ask>>tell, appreciate the gifts – remain invaluable.

The TARGET step also typically ends with a summary presentation (usually presented to the congregation in the BUILD Kickoff) where the above items are first shared by the CCT. As part of this, there should be culture conversations in smaller groups that allow folks to kick the tires a bit and begin pondering the targeted new To thinking and the Dos for Tos and artifacts that support it. If not done previously, an additional brainstorming on other artifacts or Dos for Tos is another culture conversation to have and a terrific way to expand folk's thoughts as you transition into the BUILD step.

BUILD Step. In the Build step, you are working the plan that you created in the TARGET step, as well as amending and revising it to account for what you learn in the course of your culture build.

This step is most definitely uniquely your own, so the BUILD toolset isn't as chock full of culture conversation items. This doesn't mean culture conversations are less important! Culture conversations are absolutely critical in the BUILD step because they:

1. *Are the first steps toward building a new way of thinking.* If folks haven't previously thought about stuff this way, this is the initial opportunity to develop their new thoughts before acting upon them.
2. *Provide a chance for reflection.* Acting in a new way, consistent with a new way of thinking isn't usually a flip-the-light- switch moment. There will be a series of trials and adjustments as folks become more comfortable with the change; that's the whole idea behind the **Do to Be** principle. Thinking about "What just happened?" when we act in a way consistent with the new thinking is essentially a way to double-dip and get another mental rep from the behavior just undertaken.
3. *Provide a place to voice questions/concerns that will naturally arise.* For most, the new way of thinking will initially feel different, perhaps unnatural. These folks will likely initially describe it as uncomfortable or not easy-flowing for them, or perhaps they'll point to the result and see that it is a bit off-target. Discussions with others are a way for folks to get insights on an aspect of the culture shift with which they are struggling.
4. *Align and synchronize all the individual journeys.* As stated before, culture change is done collectively, one person at a time – these are individual's thought habits. Conversations within the group help build the commonality of the thought habit; its shared aspect.
5. *Cultivate the new thinking through encouragement and appreciation.* (See the sidebar – *Group Conversations in the BUILD Step* in the *5 Principles of Culture Change* of the *Culture Basics* for a detailed discussion of this point.)
6. *Promote Accountability.* Knowing that culture conversations will be ongoing can help folks get out of the puddle and onto the ladder.

It therefore will be key for your congregation's culture journey that you create opportunities in the BUILD step for culture conversations. Small and frequent is the way to approach this. Here are some options:

1. A quick agenda item in a meeting
2. 10 minutes at the beginning or end of a bible study
3. A word of encouragement after service for folks to give a word of encouragement to others on their culture journey.
4. Culture-change partners meeting for coffee or just sharing a challenge, progress, concern, etc.

Since these conversations are where all the individual journeys are aligned and synchronized, your congregation's culture change journey needs to **ENSURE CRITICAL MASS** of culture conversations. Realize that you probably cannot have too many of these conversations. Put another way: no one ever has regrets about over-investing in the effort for the culture shift; but lack of critical mass is a frequent point raised post-mortem for difficult or unsuccessful culture shifts.

Since this is where the shared part of shared thought habits forms – in the Build step you'll want to maximize *group* discussions. A great form for these conversations is a pair share and then a group share, giving everyone a chance to vocalize and thereby strengthen the new thinking and then a group share to synchronize the thinking. If the group is larger than about a dozen, then instead of paired share | group share, use a pair share | small group share | full group share approach.

Conversations That Build Common Ground

Culture conversations – ones oozing humility & curiosity, ask>>tell, appreciate the gifts - are a critical part of any culture change. They make the hidden visible, they set up the psychological safety for change, they develop and reinforce the new thinking and build the commonality – the shared aspect – of the new thought habits. Understanding the nature and importance of culture conversations is key to making your custom alterations to the Culture Change Course Map for your congregation's unique culture change journey.