

Adjacent opportunities (8.2)

In service

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Shifting cultural behaviors toward healthier practices is not about creating a giant cataclysmic event that redirects the flow of process. It is a series of small nudges leveraging adjacent opportunities, creating a new level of opportunities that when nudged, open the next level to greater opportunities, and as they say, "Shift happens." Jennifer Anastasoff and her organization Building Blocks International is in the business of nudging and the impact of her work is being felt around the world.

Building Blocks International works with existing corporate service fellowships, those programs begun by corporations that offer four-week to full-year opportunities for employees to take a sabbatical from the corporation and apply their skills within struggling communities around the world to help them address their social issues and needs. According to Anastasoff, an effervescent, energetic and fast-talking thirty-something from San Francisco, the corporations with whom she works offer these corporate service fellowships for a variety of reasons.

Wells Fargo does it to be diverse and inclusive, Pfizer does it to increase global experiences for their employees and to have a social impact, and PriceWaterhouseCoopers does it to build leaders, and UPS does it to help its executives strengthen their skills through full-time community service. Building Blocks has been working with these and other companies to learn their best and worst practices when their folks are out in the field. Building Blocks can then help initiate and advise other corporations starting corporate service fellowship programs so that they can employ the best and avoid the worst practices when starting their own programs.

What impact can this form of conscious instigation have on shifting cultural behaviors? My late colleague Howard Sherman introduced a dynamic way of looking at this issue. Howard identified four principle factors upon which organizations functioned: Principles, Models, Rules, and Behaviors.

Principles were the abstract essence — what the organization wanted to accomplish such as to create a healthy and sustainable culture. We then build models to approximate ways of accomplishing this principle. Our behaviors are designed to actualize the model and rules are imposed to make sure the behaviors conform to the model. The issue here of course, is that when the model changes, since it is always only an approximation of the principle, to better reach its goal of attaining the principle, behaviors need to shift and rules need to be redrawn. What often happens is that organizations change the models and initially expect to achieve the new models, while continuing behaviors designed to support the old model. They do this not because they necessary want to be obstinate, but because the rules that were designed for the old models are still in place and won't allow for a change in behavior.

When we apply this to culture and finding the leverage points that will shift them into a better approximation of the principles upon which their cultures are based, we tend to forget that the behaviors have to change and the rules that govern those behaviors have to be let go and new ones devised. The mistakes organizations often make when they are attempting to remodel and shift cultures is that it's real easy to come up with a new model, but it's much more difficult to shift behaviors and disastrous when we allow the old rules governing old behaviors for old models to prevail.

Building Blocks International's directive is aimed at the interactions on the corporate behaviors and traditional rules that have limited past operations. The corporate models establishing these corporate service fellowships provide the employees with a whole new way of acting to achieve their principle effort. It forces them out of their old ways of doing things and makes them reapplying very new behaviors in cultures that may be 180 degrees away from the corporate perspective.

The historical data on the success of culture change within the corporate structure shows the ineffectiveness of traditional change efforts. If the corporation can take their employees out into the 'real' macro world and give them experiences in shifting 'real life' community cultures, they are far better prepared to return to the micro corporate environment to affect real change there. These corporate fellowship service programs begin as a way of serving the world's non-profit community, but ultimately have the effect, if the service fellows are conscious of their actions, of shifting the internal culture and models of the service employee him or herself. It gives them a living demonstration of cultural shift that requires them to alter their own behaviors and the rules that they have created and often held onto that support them. Armed with this understanding, they can then return into the corporate environment and begin shifting that culture not as an artificial imposition on a static model, but with a clear understanding of how they can leverage imbedded culture patterns by not only shifting the models upon which they are based, but alter the behaviors that are designed to keep that old model in place, and the rules that limit behavior to that old model.

Building Blocks International has a goal of placing and working with 5000 corporate service fellows by 2010. They have already worked with 2300 fellows who are serving communities around the world from Santiago, Chile to Karakol, Kyrgyzstan, to Orissa, India and incorporating themselves into the cultures they encounter. Making a difference in places that are often slowly

extracting themselves from the 19th century let alone opening to the possibilities of 21st century is not always as simple as making a few changes here and there and expecting immediate results. The corporate service fellows Anastasoff works with find themselves up against rules and behaviors that are firmly imbedded in the old world, running up against 2nd century models that bare only scant resemblance to the past.

It is at moments like these that all that can be turned to is the principle — the goal that is trying to be accomplished — and search out the leverage points to create the next adjacent opportunity. Fortunately, for Anastasoff and her colleagues, she has created a hotbed of corporate service fellows dedicated to living diversity and eager to create change. With her assistance, the old models get replaced, the old behaviors transform toward the new, and old rules are forced to relinquish their transitory hold within ancient cultures now forced to shift within a new millennium. And what is revealed is the next layer of adjacent opportunities, offering yet another possibility for real change.