

# Developing a Whole Organisation Culture

by  
**Geof Cox and Walt Hopkins**

*Published in the Cultural Diversity Sourcebook, edited by Dr. Bob Abramms and Dr. George Simons, ODT Inc., 1996*

What is an organisation culture? Why is changing organisation culture so difficult? Is there an alternative to changing the culture?

'How we do things round here' is based on a set of assumptions that underline our actions. That set of assumptions is our organisation culture. It attracts people who like to do things in the same way while it repels those who do things differently.

As an organisation grows and develops, the organisation culture that originally proved so helpful may begin to get in the way. The functional organisation that enables a large corporation to manage diverse interests efficiently becomes a series of bureaucratic committees that prevent that company from responding to changes in its environment. A young company racing along a visionary track can discover that the track becomes a rut which excludes outside information.

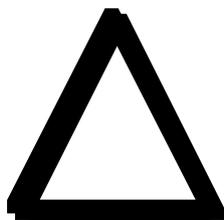
When we understand the set of values, beliefs and actions that make up our organisation culture, we can then use that understanding to create an organisation in which people want to give their best. This will be an organisation that is flexible enough to respond to the rapidly changing environment and the demands of the marketplace.

So let's look at organisation culture by considering four kinds of organisation culture. The idea of four different approaches to life has been around for more than two thousand years. The Ancient Greece described people as Sanguine, Phlegmatic, Melancholic or Choleric. Later theorists and researchers have seen the same traits in organisations. Charles Handy in the UK and Roger Harrison in the USA developed a four-culture model in the mid-seventies and each has since developed the model further. Our own version of the four cultures emerges from the work we did with Roger Harrison in 1990.

We call the four cultures Role, Control, Goal and Soul. Our simplified definitions of each culture are summarised in Table 1. Each culture has its own distinct characteristics. Although each culture is present to some extent in any organisation, usually one or two cultures predominate.

**Table 1: A Summary of the Four Organisation Cultures**

	Control	Role	Goal	Soul
My priority is my	Boss	Duty	Task	People
Decisions come from the	Boss	Policy	Goal	Consensus
Authority comes from	Power	Seniority	Expertise	Wisdom
The system is	Autocratic	Bureaucratic	Charismatic	Democratic
People are	Stratified	Inter-changeable	Unique	Equal
Myths are about the	Boss	Organisation	Champions	Team
The world is a	Jungle	System	Opportunity	Community
As a boss I expect	Obedience	Reliability	Competence	Co-operation
As an employee I expect	Reward	Security	Challenge	Support
Interaction between people is based on	Exchange	Reason	Values	Sharing
Interaction between organisations is based on	Conquest	Function	Competition	Networking
People succeed by knowing the	Boss	System	Resources	People
We go out in the world prepared for	Battle	Debate	Game	Learning
People work for	Reward	Contract	Achievement	Enjoyment
Instinctive reaction to a customer	Deal	Explain	Connect	Listen

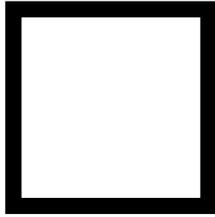


The Control begins and ends with the boss who makes all the decisions. If an organisation is large enough, the Control culture becomes a hierarchy, with a series of bosses.

When the Control culture works well, a good boss decides quickly and accurately, adjusts to the changing environment, and takes good care of the people in exchange for solid loyalty. When the Control culture works less effectively, the boss makes decisions slowly or inaccurately, refuses to adjust to change, and does not take good care of the people.

**Table 2: Features of the Control Culture**

Effective	Ineffective
• Unites effort	• Limited by leader
• Moves quickly	• Politics
• Strong leader	• Isolated from bad news
• Clear direction	• Overworked leaders
• Clear expectation	• Information as power
• Loyalty	• Short range thinking

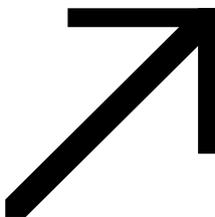


The Role culture often develops in response to the excesses of the Control culture. The culture uses rules and procedures to prevent any one person from wielding too much power.

When the Role culture works well, the systems are well-designed and regularly adapted, everyone knows what to do in order for the system to function, and specialisation helps individuals and units to develop expertise. When the Role culture works less effectively, the systems don't get updated, the communication slows down so that no one knows what anyone else is doing, and people stick to their own jobs even when the organisation needs something else.

**Table 3: Features of the Role Culture**

Effective	Ineffective
• Well designed systems	• Change is slow
• Clear lines of authority	• Low trust
• Structure	• Following the rules
• Limit to personal power	• People as parts not human
• Efficient operations	• Under-utilise talent
• Quick to learn jobs	• Boundaries

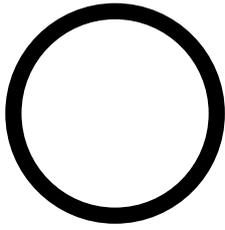


The Goal culture wants to achieve something. This culture may emerge in response to an ineffective Role culture that has lost its direction.

When the Goal culture works well, it is generating enthusiasm, de-centralising structure, motivating people, and getting things done faster and better. When the Goal culture works less effectively, it goes too fast, ignores structure completely, burns out people, and arrogantly ignores reality in pursuit of its goal.

**Table 4: Features of the Goal Culture**

Effective	Ineffective
• High motivation	• Burnout
• Maximum use of talent	• Waste resources
• Rapid learning	• End justifies the means
• Unity of effort	• Isolated from reality
• Reduced controls	• Inward focus
• Mutually valued goals	• Arrogant



The Soul culture values people. This culture may emerge to deal with the burned out people of an overdone Goal culture.

When a Soul culture works well, people communicate well, co-operate with each other, and provide lots of support for each other. When the Soul culture works less effectively, people communicate with each other about everything except the task, every single decision requires consensus, and people no longer challenge each other.

**Table 5: Features of the Soul Culture**

Effective	Ineffective
• Good communication	• Task neglect
• Commitment	• People before organisation
• High trust	• Slow decision making
• Co-operation	• Loses direction
• Caring and listening	• Slow to change
• Sense of belonging	• Frustrates ambition

When we use this model with people in organisations, two things happen. Both are confirmed by our colleague Roger Harrison, who has gathered such reactions from organisations around the world. First, many people describe the organisation they work for as dominated by Control or Role culture and say that they would prefer to work in a Soul or Goal culture. So they are working in a culture that does not motivate them.

Second, people higher up an organisation are more likely to see the culture is Goal or Soul, while those at lower levels tend to see the culture as Control or Role. So the top managers—when they hear that people want Goal or Soul culture—believe that nothing needs to be done.

But when the message does sink in, the immediate reaction of many organisations, and many consultants, is to promote a “culture change” programme. This is reinforced when some older companies think that their bureaucracies were being out-paced by the newer entrepreneurial companies. Since these companies seem to have visions instead of rules, that must be the answer.

Most of these “culture change” attempts do not work. When an organisation throws out the excesses of Control and Role, it throws out successful features. People still want to know the rules and still want people to make decisions. People are confused when told that shifting to a new culture means that the old culture is suddenly taboo. Despite its shortcomings, it must have had some positive benefits for it to have fostered earlier success. After all, you knew what you were doing in the old culture, while the new one requires effort to learn.

We believe that “culture change” is doomed to failure because what people need is not a conversion to a new culture, but a balancing of all four cultures.

This belief has been reinforced by our experience in designing and leading training courses in influencing and negotiation skills. We use a model that focuses on obtaining four different results. Each result—not coincidentally—matches the beliefs and actions of the four cultures. As we work with participants on these courses, we see that the most effective communicators are those who develop skills in obtaining each of the four results and who move easily among them depending on the demands of the situation.

**Table 6: Balancing Communication Energy**

	CONTROL	ROLE	GOAL	SOUL
Communication Style	Action	Process	Ideas	People
Result	Deal	Solution	Co-operation	Understanding
Energy	Moving Against	Moving At	Moving together	Moving With
Actions	Demanding and Exchanging	Proposing and Reasoning	Connecting and Envisioning	Sharing and Listening
Commonest ineffective use	Demanding only causing resistance	Over-emphasis on logic when inappropriate.	Visions that do not connect with others values	Not listening effectively
Remedy	Being explicit with exchanges associated with the demand	Recognising the need to use a different focus	Taking time to connect with common beliefs and values	Use listening more to build rapport and get information

In the same way, we believe that effective organisations focus attention not on one culture, but on an appropriate balance of the four cultures so that the best attributes of each enable the organisation to thrive. This may mean that there is a need to do some re-balancing. This may mean that just as our course participants focus on one result for a while to improve their skills, an organisation may need to focus on one culture for a while to improve the organisation’s skills.

But the long-term goal with both communication skills and organisation culture is to achieve a balance. This balance is what we call the Whole culture. In one version of the Whole culture people make quick and accurate decisions (Control); everyone functions smoothly within clear systems (Role); everyone is aligned with common values and aims (Goal); and there is a high level of communication, support, and co-operation (Soul).

Balancing cultures is easier if we look at the effective side of each culture. When we think of cultures in their ineffective state, they seem very different from each other. Roger Harrison suggests that it is like standing at the base of the pyramid—with each of the four sides being one of the cultures. At the base of the pyramid, the distance to walk to another side is great. As we climb the pyramid and increase our effectiveness in any one of the cultures, we get closer to the others. Toward the top of the pyramid, you can move around the pyramid much more easily. At the top of itself, the cultures are balanced in the Whole culture.

We take the pyramid analogy a step further. The sun shines only on two sides of the pyramid, these are the cultures that we see most. The other two are definitely there, but they are in shadow. What we need to do is bring them into the light and express and value all four sides equally.

Historically, some of the most balanced organisations were ones set up in the UK and the USA by Quakers. As Anita Roddick says, “I am still looking for the modern-day equivalent of those Quakers who ran successful businesses, made money because they offered honest products and treated their people decently, worked hard, spent honestly, saved honestly, gave honest value for money, put more back than they took out and told no lies. This business creed, sadly, seems long forgotten.”

Other examples of balance come from the East. The Japanese business culture is noted for its vision and commitment (Goal), and its consensus style and employee support (Soul). Many Western observers see only these two sides of the pyramid and miss the high degree of autocratic decision making (Control) and the stratification into functions (Role).

Anita Roddick’s Body Shop organisation is a UK based organisation that comes close to balancing the four cultures. The Goal and Soul cultures are very evident to anyone who has entered a Body Shop. The staff share values that extend beyond the immediate work into the values of conservation and environmentalism. At the same time, the success of the organisation is also based on a Role culture of specific systems and a functional split into manufacturing and sales as well as the Control culture strongly exerted over the world-wide operation by the founders. Anita Roddick’s book, *Body and Soul*, provides many stories of the four cultures working harmoniously together.

Or think of a theatre company. In a recent television programme on the Royal Shakespeare Company at work, the Whole culture blended: the Control culture of the powerful director with the Role culture of clear job descriptions for the actors and stage crew, the Goal culture of shared vision of excellence, and the Soul culture of supporting and coaching. The magnificence of their performance revealed the effective organisation at work.

We all know that the real work is done in rehearsal and behind the scenes. When things go wrong, it is usually because the balance of cultures has been upset—the director is too dominant, the responsibilities are not clearly defined, there is no shared vision, or there is conflict among the players.

In all organisations there are times when the cultures are in balance, but unfortunately these are all too rare. We need to look at the imbalance in our organisation and train ourselves in the appropriate behaviours to redress the balance. Then our organisation will also be like a theatre company at its best—producing a magnificent performance.

### **About the Authors**

Geof Cox runs his own international management and organisation development consultancy from a base in Bristol England, specialising in organisation change, strategy and inter-personal communications.

Walt Hopkins is a consultant and trainer based in Kinross, Scotland, specialising in influencing, negotiation, life and career design and diversity.

They are founder members of Castle Consultants International, a research and development network of consultants based in UK, USA, France, Germany, Switzerland and The Netherlands.