

“Humans are the only species who is not locked into their environment. Their imagination, reason, emotional subtlety and toughness, make it possible for them to not only accept the environment, but to change it”

Jacob Bronowski

THE PROCESS of CULTURAL SHIFTING

Al Condeluci

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The term “cultural shifting” is used in this article to describe the process of new or unique items becoming part of an existing community. That is, when a new person, product or idea becomes accepted as viable in the community, then a cultural shift has occurred. The process of cultural shifting is described more fully in the book, Cultural Shifting (2001) of which this article is a direct extrapolation.

The Metaphor of a Bridge

The challenge of cultural shifting is best understood when thinking of the concept of a bridge. Bridges are interesting structures as they blend two important notions, the simplicity of connecting two points, and the complexity of the engineering necessary to make the connection. This blending is clear when you look at the challenge of seeing the reconnection of people to community. The challenge is simple as we try to find ways for people, who are disconnected, to be reunited. The complexity is in making this happen.

A vivid example of this is when the change agent looks at the inclusion of people with disabilities back to the mainstream of the community. To understand this example however we must appreciate the powerful forces of exclusion that precede the challenge. That is, historically people with disabilities have been perceived out of a medical model of deficiency and dysfunction. In my books, Interdependence: the Route to Community (1991, 1995) as well as Beyond Difference (1996) the effects of the medical model and the stigma of difference that have created formidable cultural realities leading to community devaluation are explored. In these books I make the point that the medical treatment model has resulted in people with disabilities being seen in the context of inability, problems or incapability.

With this metaphor of a bridge the change agent can think about the individual with a disability on one side of reality, and the community on the other side. The goal for rehabilitation is to assist the person with the disability move from being excluded on the one side to joining the community at large on the other side. In this approach, the gap between the person and the community can be represented in the problems or deficiencies the person is seen as having.

When thinking about this metaphor of a bridge it seems clear that the problem or the reason that the person with a disability is off set from community is due to their differences, disability or perceived problem. Given this reality the medical model suggests that the best way to get people from one side of the illustration to the other is to focus the problem or in this case, the disability. In most human service programs this is exactly how the issue of inclusion is addressed. That is, conventional wisdom (the medical model) says that we try to attack or mitigate the differences so that the person can be more easily included into the community. Indeed, in my previous writing I explore this medical model approach in much greater detail. This conventional approach is a linear, and microscopic approach to the inclusion of people with disabilities. It suggests that if we can fix the problem, we can more easily get the person included. The major target for change is the person with the difference.

Although this approach has been practiced for years, in essence it has not led to real community inclusion. We have moved people “into” the community but not really helped them become “of” the community. To continue to position the person with the disability as the problem and to try to change them is to chase the wrong butterfly. This is not how culture has shifted.

Rather than to put emphasis on the person and focus attention on to their differences, I am suggesting that we re-think that approach. Indeed, consider the example of a disconnection between two points. That is, much like our illustration above, if you find yourself at point A and you are interested in getting to point B, but there is a river in your way, one might see the river as a problem. To this end, we might seek out help from an engineer as to how we might mitigate or get rid of the river so that we can pass to point B safely.

In some ways this is how the medical model frames the problem of inclusion for people with disabilities. It suggests that the way to get people included in the community is to fix the problems they have. That is, fill in the river!

However, when we use the metaphor of a bridge, the challenge changes from seeing the river as a problem to thinking what other ways we might safely pass over. Obviously, the focus turns to what it might take to build a bridge. In this shift of thinking, the river is not a problem, but a reality to be addressed based on the strength and stability of the shorelines where we plan to anchor the bridge. Consequently, the more important factors are not the problem posed by the river, but the strength that can be garnered to build the bridge.

To this end, to create a real shift in culture follows this metaphor of a bridge and demands that the change agent think about four critical steps. These steps go contrary to the medical model and in many ways how the human service system relates to people with disabilities. To my way of thinking, however, this is the only way we can get people truly included in the community.

Four Steps to Cultural Shifting

When thinking about how any new person, product or idea can be incorporated into the existing culture the following four steps are always present. As we explore these 4 steps keep in mind how they may have worked for you as you have attempted to incorporate any thing new into your community.

Step 1 – Find the Passion or Point of Connection

As with our bridge metaphor, finding the key points of strength and passion is the first step to cultural shifting. To build a strong bridge we must have a solid foundation to assure the bridge will be safe for passage. For the passage of people, products or ideas into culture require the same strength. To this end we must identify all that is strong or good about that which we hope to shift the culture around.

For people, this means we look for the following elements in them:

- Passions
- Capacities
- Interests
- Hopes
- Dreams
- Skills
- Talents
- Fantasies
- Propensities
- Avocations
- Hobbies
- Strengths

When we find any or all of these things in people this help us in 2 ways in supporting them. One is that the identified passion or skill helps uplift the person. What I mean here is that when a passion is identified in a person, the acknowledgement of this passion is empowering. People like to talk about that which they enjoy and this leads to empowerment. Think about it – empowerment is a feeling we get when we are relevant and respected. When we identify a person's skills, this naturally makes them feel good.

Contrast this with a focus on people's problems or deficiencies. When you identify problems, especially those that are difficult to address or erase, this action is actually disempowering. You never feel good about the things you cannot do, or do not do well.

This negative perspective, however, is exactly the way our system deals with difference or disability. Think about it, when a person with a disability is referred to a human service agency the first thing that happens is a formal assessment of the person's problems. These assessments are performed with detailed tests and reports. Once the problems are identified and labeled, an individualized program plan (IPP) is developed and most often the effort is to fix the person's problem.

This deficiency model creates a negative slant and skews the process. It causes people to think negatively and critically about their reality. Further, serious frustration can occur if the problem cannot really be fixed. In many ways this is not the route to empowerment. In fact, to focus on our problems continue to bait negativity and set the tone for a poor self-image.

The capacity process suggests the exact opposite. By looking for those things that are positive and strength oriented we can help people build on those capacities they already have and promote their relevancy to the community. The same is true with products or ideas. When we look for and find the positive elements of ideas or products we signal the initial points of connection of these things to the greater community. Obviously when we itemize the good points of an idea we are more apt to get others to endorse or embrace that idea. The same is true with products. That is why advertisers stress the positive aspects of their products. As simple as this seems, the positive factors are the reason you buy the product.

I often talk about an experience I had a number of years ago that drove this point of positive and negative issues home. I was attending a symposium in Baltimore MD on human service aspects. It was the first day of a 3-day gathering and people from all over the country were taking their seats in the meeting room. I scanned the room and didn't know a soul. As soon as the presenter came into the room he asked everyone to take out a sheet of paper. He asked us to write the word "positives" on the top of the page and to privately identify as many good things about ourselves as we could. Folks looked around at each other and then started in on the task. Within 5 minutes the presenter got our attention and asked us to again take out another sheet of paper. This time he told us to write the word "negatives" on the top and fill in as many problems, deficits or struggles we have. Again people got right into the task. At this point the presenter asked for a volunteer to illustrate some points. As is typical, most folks looked away and as I made eye contact with the presenter he pointed to me. "Sir, please stand up and pass your positive list to the person to your right" he said. Being the good volunteer, I complied with the request and passed my "positive" list to the person to my right. To this person I did not know the presenter said: "please introduce this man to your left, using his list as a guide." This person stood up and began to introduce me by referring to the good things I had written about myself. I smiled sheepishly and looked around at these unknown people as I was being introduced. Shaking his head affirmatively, the presenter then

looked back at me and asked that I now pass my “negative” list to the person to my left. I paused, and then hesitantly handed my second list to the person to my left. Again, an introduction occurred by the stranger to my left, this time using my “negative” items. As this new introduction went down, I can’t begin to tell you how vulnerable and naked I felt. I did not know these people and as they came to know me through my problems and struggles I felt embarrassed and ashamed.

In many cases people know their passions and interests and are quick to tell you if your bent is toward looking for the positives. With other folks you have to dig. In the work we do with our agency, we often-meet folks who have been so sheltered or inexperienced that they do not readily display their passions. Some people have been so devalued that they cannot seem to find their passions at all. In these types of situations we must give the time and space necessary for people to identify those points of connections. This only happens when people feel valued and respected. It also happens when we welcome and include those who have a history with the person help uncover the passions. Families or other relations have been invaluable for the capacity-building work we do in Pittsburgh.

When you really think about it, this process is the same one we try to use with our children. One of our primary efforts as parents is to discover the interests and capacities of our children so as to connect them to communities that celebrate those same interests. Often this is a discovery process. This was driven home to me when just this past spring my wife and I spent a Saturday cleaning out our garage. As we found and removed old bikes, cameras, hockey sticks, baseball bats, a ballerina tutu, an old trumpet, and other items, I realized that we had identified the relics of culture. All of these items were potential interests we were looking for with our children. Ones that resonated for our children created the steps to community for them. Others became artifacts to our anthropological process for community inclusion.

Step 2 – Find the Venue or Play Point

With cultural shifting, once the change agent has identified the positive capacities for inclusion or incorporation, the next critical step is to find the place that the person, idea or product will relate. Quite simply, finding the setting where the person, idea or product might be accepted sets the stage for inclusion and cultural shifting.

By venue or play point I am referring to the viable marketplace for the person, idea or product. With ideas or products the change agent can think in the conventional framework of a marketplace. That is, if you have developed a product that is best suited for accountants, your potential marketplace would be with the fiscal offices of a corporation or with an accounting firm. This, or similar marketplaces offer the best possibility that your product will be understood and, hopefully, purchased.

The same thinking relates to ideas. When a novel approach is designed, the inventor is apt to be more successful if they show the idea to a group or setting where the idea might best be applied. An example here is an idea I had as a doctoral student about ways we

could make our program more viable for students that were working full time. I had a number of options of where I could pitch my idea, but chose to introduce it to my dissertation study group comprised of a number of folks who, like me, were working full time. Here I felt my idea had the best chance of taking off. As with products, ideas land and connect the same way.

With people the concept of venue and play point have equal importance. If you are looking to find a framework of new friends, you have a much better chance of connection if you take a hobby, passion or capacity and join up with others who share that same passion. A good example is the efforts we make with our children when we attempt to broaden their horizon. Let me use my youngest son, Santino as an example. As I write these words I am sitting at a practice field where he is playing football. Earlier this year he asked me if he could try football. He has been interested in the sport and follows the game. Given this interest, I began to look for a venue where Santino might test his interest in the sport and connect with others. I found such a venue with a local group called the Montour Youth Football League. In the process Santino has developed a number of new relationships with children he has just met.

In a more formal way, this step works with agencies that attempt to connect people back to community. One example from my agency is the story of David. I first met David while working years ago at our local county home for the aged. Although he is not much older than I am, David had been admitted to this facility as a young man and there he stayed until we met. A few years later, after I had left the county home, my new agency helped David move out of this facility to his own apartment. One of our first efforts was to help David begin to meet people and make new friends. Using the capacity model portrayed in step 1, we identified a number of things that David enjoyed or had an interest in. One of these passions for David is oldies music. While at the facility, David listened regularly to oldies music on the radio. After he moved into his own apartment, we identified an oldies club not far from where he lives. This venue offered a good start point for David because he has a natural affinity for the same common theme, which attracted others together.

The secret to step 2 is to find the appropriate venue that matches the interest or positive points of the individual. In many cases this is anthropological work. We know that people gather for all kinds of reasons, but the most powerful is to celebrate that which they share. We covered this point in Chapter Two when we explored the common themes of cultures. Finding the matching community for the interest is critical to cultural shifting. In David's example, finding the oldies club was a direct match to David's interest in oldies. For Santino, it was finding the Montour Youth Football League. Often we have to look closely, but the process accelerates by asking people who might know. In David's situation we called the local oldies radio station to inquire. With Santino, I saw a story in our local newspaper about the Youth Football League. The resources are out there, we just have to find them.

As I continue to think about the importance of community venues I remember an experience that occurred while visiting Parsons KS where I had been invited to present.

Now I don't know if you have ever visited Parsons, or even know where it is located, but suffice it to say that Parsons is a small town with maybe 12,000 folks. The morning of my talk I was waiting in my motel lobby for my ride to the Community College where my talk was scheduled and, to pass time, was wandering around the lobby. I found a brochure rack that had listed local attractions and one brochure had caught my eye. It was a Chamber of Commerce piece that boasted about Parsons and the surrounding area. As I looked the brochure over I was amazed to see that the Chamber had identified over 80 clubs, groups and associations active in the Parsons area. Even this small community had people organized around 80+ areas of interest, passion or common cause.

Now one caution about step 2 must be addressed when applying the steps of cultural shifting to people, especially newcomers who have been excluded. The existing members of community may not see or understand the relevance for people who have been traditionally excluded. For example, people with disabilities have been historically separated from typical populations. Given this historic sense of congregation, the natural tendency, even for professionals in human services, is to keep these same people congregated. That is, if we discover in a capacity exploration from step 1, that our friend David loves the oldies, a natural propensity might be to see if there are other people with disabilities who like the oldies and then put them together. How many times do you see groups of people with disabilities doing the same thing together? This phenomenon is evident in our stadiums or theatres that have "handicap sections" where all folks with disabilities are herded to watch the game or show.

Even when we find the appropriate natural community venue, the energy to congregate people might unfold. An experience a few years back drove this home for me. I was assisting a friend of mine to connect in the community. Using step one, I discovered that Jim had an interest in swimming. To build on this I went to step 2 and explored Jim's community to find a swimming venue. We decided on the local YMCA near Jim's home. When Jim and I went to the YMCA to get him a membership and find out more about the swimming options, the membership director pulled me aside. In a soft voice, so that Jim wouldn't hear, he told me that he could arrange for my agency to have the pool all to us every other Tuesday evening. This way we could bring all the handicapped people we like and they could swim together. Even the YMCA membership director thought about people with disabilities in a congregative manner.

A final example about finding venues can be considered with the Internet. If you have been spending any time on-line, you know about "chat-rooms." These are settings where people gather on-line to explore something that they are all interested in. There is not a topic known to humankind that does not have its own "chat-room."

The bold fact of all these experiences is that people gather. They gather for all kinds of reasons and interests. For every capacity or passion there is a place that people gather to celebrate these passions. Once we get over our habits of segregation and congregation we can come to see that these places are ones that offer a wonderful start point to culture. In these gathering places we can find the key to cultural shifting and the dispensing of social capital and currency.

Step 3 – Understanding the Elements of Culture

In Chapter 2, I identified the key elements of community. These elements include:

1. **Rituals** – These are the deeply embedded behaviors of the culture that the members expect others to uphold. These behaviors can be formal actions or symbolic activities that members just pick up. A vivid example here for me was the rituals of my college fraternity. After spending the time pledging, we were introduced to the formal rituals that were expected of each brother. After spending a few weeks in the fraternity I also began to pick up the informal rituals that were specific to those of us who were members at the time. In some ways the formal rituals are ones that live beyond generations because they have been deeply sanctioned. The informal rituals are the ones that are developed by the current cohort and are generational in nature.
2. **Patterns** – As we stated before, the patterns of a culture refer to the movements and social space occupied by the members. Patterns are captured in how the members relate to each other as they go about the business of the culture. Patterns almost always revolve around the territory occupied by the members. As territorial animals we are very rigid and defensive of that which we feel we have laid stake to in joining the culture.
3. **Jargon** – This relates to the language, words, expressions and phrasing members of the culture use to describe or discuss that which they hold as important. Often these words might be technical or very specific to the cultural theme. Other times the jargon might manifest in sayings or expressions that are not technical, but are widely understood by other members and become important to the exchange of the culture.
4. **Memory** – This refers to the collective history of the culture. The memory is honored in formal ways by producing yearbooks, annual reports, and other official documents or celebrations that chronicle the actions of the culture. Other types of informal memory also happen within culture by the weaving and telling of stories or anecdotes. Both of these approaches create a living history of the culture and establish the bond that causes members to want to continue the work of the culture. Memory leads to community wisdom.

As we look at Step 3 in the process of making change the elements of culture become critical to this thesis. That is, once a person has expressed an interest in looking further into something that excites them, and discovers that a culture exists, the next logical step is to understand and then carry out the actions of the culture in an effort to join. When the actions of culture get defined in these four ways it gives the newcomer clear things to consider in joining. The more one understands what the community does that is common; how its members move about in accomplishing those things; what words and phrases are used to communicate their actions and the history that bonds its members, the more easily the understanding will become assimilated into the fold.

For cultural shifting with people this process is best done by observing the community in action and being clear about your observations. These observations will help you clearly be able to consider the actions you will need to do to be more easily included into the community. The sooner you come to know the rituals, patterns, jargon and memory of the community the quicker your passage.

The potency of this approach struck me with a computer advertisement I recently saw on TV. The ad featured a young, hip looking fellow who was showing the features of an IBM Think Pad computer. Behind him was a stuffy looking attorney. The hip fellow was telling the audience that the attorney was monitoring his pitch because the company wanted to be accurate in the portrayal. As the hip fellow told about the features of the Think Pad, the attorney was checking his notes. The hip pitchman, after looking back to see if the attorney was paying attention, ended his pitch by saying the Think Pad was the “baddest” computer on the planet. The attorney jumped up and challenged him. “You can’t say that; it is not bad, it is good.” At this point in the ad the hip pitchman made a frown as if the attorney was really out of it, and the ad ended.

This advertisement was interesting when thinking about step 3 in the process of cultural shifting. Obviously IBM, which is a traditional company, competing in the world of forward thinking computer users, wanted to make a statement. One was that the IBM is hip and would fit in well with the non-traditional user. They used a pitchman who looked like the customers they were hoping to win. Even the use of the word “bad” was done to tie into the jargon of the target group they wanted to influence. Clearly IBM and the ad agency that produced the commercial had thought about the important element of jargon.

In cases where you are considering the inclusion of people you work for or care about, the process is the same. That is, the observation and analysis of the rituals, patterns, jargon and memory of the culture will help you gather the information to pass on to the individual you are helping. In many ways this is what we do with our children. Once we locate a possible venue for them, we gather as much information as we can to see how other members behave, move about and talk. With my son’s Youth Football League I followed this script to a tee. I talked to other children and their families who played last year to better understand the cultural elements. This information was invaluable to me as I prepared my son for his passage into this new culture.

In situations where new ideas or products are being considered this Step 3 is adjusted. The elements of the culture are important, but they must be framed around how the idea or product might influence or impact the rituals, patterns, jargon or memory of the culture. Indeed, new ideas or products will always change or adjust the rituals, patterns, jargon and memory of the community. These influences must be identified and understood so as to offset challenges by the negative gatekeepers. For example, if a new computer methodology is being introduced to a group and will influence how the group does its business, the change agent needs to know this and be ready to prepare members for these changes.

To this extent, with ideas or products, the change agent must do a probability analysis of impact on rituals, patterns, jargon and memory of the culture. They need to remember that most people will be somewhat resistant to this new idea or product. The sooner they can focus the impact and prepare the group for change, the easier the new idea or product will be diffused.

Either way, for people, ideas or products, understanding the elements of culture become a critical piece to the process of cultural shifting. The easiest way to gather this information is to observe the culture first hand. In this observation the change agent wants to be open, receptive and highly observant of the cultural nuances. They need to make mental notes and, at times, formal notes if the culture is complex.

If observation is impossible, another way to gather information is to ask others. This type of interviewing will glean important information and perspectives from people who have had previous experiences with the culture. These leads can be invaluable. Be cautious, however, of the possibility of bias or bad information. Sometimes the informant may have an ax to grind, or may be suspicious of your questions and intentionally skew the information they give.

A third method for learning the elements of community is to read. Often information for prospective members is easily at hand. As with most written information it is usually simple and abbreviated. Sometimes this abbreviation can be a problem as nuances are left out. The successful change agent will try to use all three methods. They ask, observe and read as much as they can about the community. Usually if you do these three things you will not go wrong.

Step 4 – Finding or Enlisting the Gatekeeper

The final step in cultural shifting revolves around the gatekeeper. The only way new people, ideas or products can successfully enter an existing community is when they are introduced and endorsed by a viable gatekeeper. As we described in Chapter 2, a gatekeeper is an indigenous member of the community who has either formal or informal influence with the culture. These gatekeepers can be formally elected or selected leaders, or they might be one of the members who everyone can count on to get things done. Further, the gatekeepers can either be positive or negative, assertive or unassertive about the person, idea or product being introduced.

These gatekeepers are powerful because they transition their influence to the person, idea or product they are endorsing or rejecting. This transition of influence is the first step to the inclusion of the new thing into the culture. The mere fact that the gatekeeper likes or dislikes the idea is enough to sway other members to their side. Remember, 60% of the membership of any community is usually neutral (or slightly on the negative side) on issues. The gatekeeper uses their power and influence to persuade others to follow their lead. The assertive gatekeeper will readily offer their opinion, the unassertive gatekeeper must usually be asked.

To effectively shift a culture to accept something new requires that the change agent identify and then enlist a gatekeeper to facilitate the passage. This is simple, yet complex in how it plays out. On the one side we know that gatekeepers are a part of any culture or community. We know that 20% of these gatekeepers are positive people interested in taking risks to promote things they feel good about. We know that when the gatekeeper endorses a person, idea or product that other members observe this and open their thinking to the same. We also know that the more enthusiastic the gatekeeper is to the new item, the more apt others are to do the same. All of this makes sense when we think about culture and community.

On the other hand, enlisting gatekeepers is sensitive business. The change agent needs to be aware of the manipulation factor. That is, most people do not want to be manipulated or told what they should do by others. This is particularly true when the agent making the request is not a viable member of the community they are attempting to alter or influence. This type of “carpet-bagging” is usually counter-productive to the agenda.

Still, if you want to bring a shift in cultural perspective, the endorsement and support of a gatekeeper is absolutely essential. To this end, then, the ability to identify and then ask for gatekeeper assistance without being perceived as attempting to meddle or influence is a true art in changing culture. This may play out differently for people than for ideas or products.

For the assertive gatekeeper, the enlistment process is usually not that difficult. These folks are often quick to come out in support. The unassertive gatekeeper will need some prompts or requests. Know that the more difficult the difference the change agent is promoting will have an effect on both the assertive and unassertive gatekeeper. That is, the more novel the item to be included into the culture, the less willing even assertive gatekeepers will be to sound off. Regardless of how assertive one is if the new idea is controversial, gatekeepers will tend to be cautious for fear of rejection.

When dealing with the inclusion of new people there are some ways all of this can be addressed that lessen the risk. For example, if a gatekeeper is identified, and then introduced to the new person attempting to be included, and they begin to hit it off, this might signal a match. Or, if the potential gatekeeper shows an interest or propensity for someone the agent is trying to get included, this may also show a match. Further, if there is some knowledge that a person might be more approachable due to some past experience, this too might signal a match.

This might be better understood when applied to the inclusion of people with disabilities to an existing community. We know that gatekeepers are essential to the cultural shifting process. If we can find a gatekeeper who has past experience with disability, or is sensitive to disability issues, they may be more apt to introduce the new person to their culture. In these cases their familiarity with the point of difference gives them a much easier start point for making an endorsement.

Another point of connection might be if the gatekeeper had a difficult time getting into a group, they may be more apt to sponsor or endorse a newcomer to make things easier for them than they experienced. This sense of camaraderie is often a connection point between oppressed people. Folks who are successful in the culture, even with their difference, tend to be willing to help others make it that face similar discrimination.

Similarly, people who perceive themselves to be liberal, or more tolerant, may have a greater openness to accept differences and stand for someone new attempting to penetrate the culture. All of these things might apply when the object of change revolves around people.

In attempting to promote an idea or product, the change agent might approach things differently. Certainly the gatekeeper is needed to escort the new idea into the community, but finding the right gatekeeper is key. For example, if the product is some new technology, identifying a gatekeeper who might be apt to use new technology is an obvious start. Salespeople who represent products might do well to identify viable gatekeepers to use their product around other members of the culture. As the gatekeeper demonstrates the new product in front of other members, this demonstration begins to influence the other members to request the product.

I recently saw this play out with the hand held computers known as “palm pilots.” This new technology offers wonderful possibilities to busy people. A known gatekeeper in a trade association that I belong to told me that one of the companies that sells “palm pilots” gave him one to use in an effort to influence other folks in our association to purchase palm pilots. His raving endorsements worked. Before you knew it, early adopters in our group bought the devices and now most of the members carry one.

Finding and enlisting gatekeepers can be tricky business, but it is an essential ingredient for cultural shifting. Change agents must learn as much as they can about gatekeepers to enhance their effectiveness.

“Community is like a ship, everyone ought to be prepared to take the helm”

Henrik Ibsen

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