

# Hardcoding Excellence into Organizational Culture

By Kelly Linton

## Introduction

“Hardcoding” refers to the software development practice of embedding data directly into the source code of a program. This practice reduces the developer’s ability to build in flexibility for future changes and is therefore typically seen as a “bad thing” to be avoided...at least when talking about computer programming.

Let’s jump over to another subject. Organizational culture comprises the attitudes, values, beliefs and norms of an organization. While it is hard to quantify an unhealthy organizational culture, it can be experienced rapidly. Like a glass of dirty water, we might not be able to identify all the contaminants in the glass, but we’re sure not going to drink it! Within five minutes of experiencing an organization’s “culture,” the existence of “contaminants” becomes equally clear, through symptoms such as poor communication, personal conflict, poor sense of teaming, cynicism between staff and management, low productivity and accuracy, lack of direction ... and the list goes on. Over a decade of business consulting has convinced us that excellence has to be “hardcoded” directly into the “source code” of an organization.

We have witnessed two extreme approaches when dealing with org culture issues. One is to run away from those soft, “touchy-feely” issues and get on with the important things like massive restructuring. The other approach is to toss everyone in the

same room, facilitate a massive (and costly) “group hug event,” call it “team-building,” and then continue operating as before. Org culture issues cannot be ignored because they provide a critical anchor for real change; but a “quick motivational fix” doesn’t get down to the deeper, critical issues.

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We are convinced that there is a third way. To get exceptional, lasting results, an expedition is required. Successfully following the trail of org culture symptoms will lead to the root causes – the “source code.” It is here that you are in position to start hardcoding excellence into organizational culture.

## The Problem with Ignoring “Touchy Feely”

There is a tendency among some management consultants to ignore (or at least trivialize) “softer” people issues. The reasons are pretty obvious – these can get messy and require exceptional, collaborative facilitation to navigate through them. This approach reminds me of a family doctor who never took the time to listen to me and left me annoyed, frustrated and still feeling sick. Cultural issues are valuable clues – they should not be ignored. We have wit-

nessed many examples of what happens when they are.

At the launch of a recent process review project, we were concerned by the lack of engagement and enthusiasm from the CAO who was supposed to be our primary project champion. What we discovered was that the City recent-

ly had a bad experience with a previous consulting firm. After some probing, we understood his frustration. This firm had identified a long list of over 50 recommendations, but they did not provide opportunities for staff and management to provide input or share frustrations. The CAO was not even interviewed during the course of this three-month assignment. As a result, the entire report was shelved. Whether or not the recommendations were any good was irrelevant.

Bottom Line: If you don’t take seriously the real frustrations of real people, your recommended changes are worthless, or at least, worth less.

## The Problem with “Softcoding” Change

We have also experienced the shortfalls of addressing cultural issues with morale-boosting, team building quick fixes. Don’t get me wrong – if properly focused and facilitated, these exercises



can contribute significantly to positive cultural change. However, without a “root cause expedition,” they can do more harm than good.

Recently we had discussions with a food distributor that was in significant need of major process and organizational change to remain competitive. The company had already spent all available money on a human performance consulting firm who had been brought in to change employee behav-

ing in short-term improvements followed by deeper levels of frustration. A hardcoding approach would have followed the trail of “soft stuff” to hardcode deep organizational change by redesigning business processes, clarifying and formalizing lines of authority, and restructuring roles and teams.

Bottom Line: “Softcoding” organizational change through behaviour modification will fall short of lasting results and do more harm than good.

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our, enhance teaming and boost communication. After over six months of employee surveys, needs assessments, team building, individual coaching, personal skills training and performance evaluation, the company began to see significant improvements: morale was up, people were getting along, and managers and staff were treating each other with respect. This resulted in improved production, lower error rates and lower absenteeism. Good news, right? Two months after the consultants had “left the building,” things became worse than ever: personality conflicts skyrocketed, teamwork vanished, the gap widened between management and staff, and effective communication came to a screeching halt. And even worse, now that expectations had been raised to an unsustainable level, the employees were left completely jaded.

What happened? Culture change wasn’t hardcoded into the source code. In this case, the human performance firm (I might add that this is an excellent company which typically does very good work) “softcoded” a new culture into the organization by only focusing on behaviour change rather than process and organization change. This temporarily reduced frustration levels by equipping individuals with personal coping mechanisms – result-

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Here are three success factors we believe are required to hardcode positive change:

*Aggressively Listen.* We’re not talking about typical “consultant head nods.” Actively seek out the REAL issues by involving the right people at

all levels in the organization and asking the right questions (a lot of “whys”). Develop a solid level of trust by providing a safe environment that respects individual confidentiality.

*Discover Root Causes.* Effectively synthesizing symptoms will yield the true root causes. Categorize these root causes (e.g. business process-related, org structure-related or accountability and performance-related) and prioritize them.

*Hardcode Change.* After root causes have been identified (not before!), develop an action plan to hardcode change into the source code. If the process is broken, redesign it. If roles are not clear, develop new job descriptions. If individuals are not producing the right results, develop accountable performance measures. At the point of pain (i.e. the root cause), hardcode the change.

Hardcoding excellence into organization culture is not a complicated process, but it is surprisingly rare. There are no shortcuts in this journey towards excellence. ♦

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