

## Your Corporate Culture's Artifacts - What Would Indiana Jones Say? - By Dennis Snow

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Archaeologists live for artifacts. As they unearth these fragments of the past—a shred of fabric, a silver pot, a crumbling wall, an ancient writing—they slowly begin, piece by piece, to build their understanding of a culture long gone.

These artifacts are keys to the past. Without them, we know little-or nothing at all-of the people who preceded us. With artifacts, however, we come to understand the beliefs, values, customs, and behaviors of these people. In short, we come to understand their culture.

As any archaeologist will tell you, artifacts are essential in understanding culture. If it weren't for a little artifact called 'the Rosetta Stone,' for instance, we might still be scratching our heads at those funny drawings on Egyptian walls. And if it weren't for those 'funny drawings' themselves (i.e., hieroglyphics), we might not know a thing about ancient Egypt.

I've always thought it would be exciting to go on an archaeological dig. Just imagine having the chance to help unearth artifacts that told a story—that conveyed culture! This would be very rewarding.

Alas, the closest I've come to experiencing an archaeological dig was through watching Raiders of the Lost Ark. But even this was enough to keep me on the edge of my seat! Sure, the fight and chase scenes were exciting, but when Indiana Jones found and explored the desert chamber, I felt like I was right there with him. What a thrill it must be for archaeologists, I thought, to discover something that's been hidden for thousands of years...to find an object that holds cultural keys to the past.

For that is exactly what artifacts are—cultural keys.

### **Corporate Culture or Corporate Wish**

Just as the Egyptians and other ancient civilizations had unique cultures, your business has a culture. This culture is made up of the beliefs, values, customs, and behaviors of your company's employees.

Corporate culture is a very real thing. The question is not, 'Do we have a culture?'—trust me, you do—but rather, 'Have we defined our culture, and do we reinforce it with everything we do?'

Many companies have the first part of this question down pat. In taking great care to write mission statements, visions, values, and the like, they have eloquently defined their corporate culture.

Or at least what they want their culture to be. You see, often there's a wide expanse between perceived culture and actual culture. A company can define its culture until it's blue in the face; if the men and women of that company don't live the culture out, however, their defined culture is nothing more than words.

A culture must be more than defined. It must be reinforced on a daily basis. It must leave artifacts behind as proof.

I once consulted with a company that claimed to have a very customer-centered culture. 'The customer is everything,' said the CEO, 'and everyone's main focus is the customer experience.' Yet I found no physical evidence to support this claim. Everywhere I turned, corporate artifacts evidenced a culture that really valued company procedures, process manuals, and rigid rules—not the customer experience. I couldn't even find a photograph of a customer in the entire company headquarters.

Was this company's main focus truly the customer experience? Or is that just what they wanted it to be? This is the difference between a corporate culture and a corporate wish.

### **'But we communicate our culture through stories, not stuff!'**

Where most companies fail to live out their corporate wish is in their lack of lasting, applicable artifacts. The company that claimed to be customer-centered, for instance, simply didn't have the stuff to back it up. If they were to start posting customer photos on the walls—among many other actions—perhaps their corporate wish would start transforming into an actual corporate culture.

'What about stories?' you ask. 'Isn't storytelling an important part of perpetuating culture?'

Yes, it is. I agree that storytelling, dialogue, and face-to-face interactions are all important in establishing, building, and sustaining corporate culture. But let's face it: A physical artifact provides evidence that storytelling cannot, evidence that an alleged value really is hardwired into a company's culture.

How? Because artifacts aren't easily changed by executive whims, changing markets, or shifting economies. Artifacts are more constant, more permanent, and more quantifiable than dialogue. Tremendous amounts of time, thought, planning, and money go into aligning physical artifacts with a desired culture. To remove these artifacts—and the culture they represent—takes considerable effort. There's a permanence with artifacts that unrecorded stories simply don't have.

Don't get me wrong. I love stories. I love to tell them and I love to hear them. Frequently I'll ask clients to share stories of their organization so that I can get a feel for the corporate culture. But in order to last, these stories must take on physical form. In the end, it all comes back to artifacts. Great stories make great artifacts-but only once they're made permanent, concrete, tangible. I find it tragic when I meet companies that haven't written any of their great stories down. When company founders and legends retire or pass away, oftentimes the corporate stories they hold do as well. Stories no one thought to get on video, or in writing, so that they could be shared verbatim with others. Stories that never made it into artifact form.

### **Uncovering the Artifacts of Your Corporate Culture**

So what about your company? What artifacts do you have in place to support your supposed corporate culture? Or are your corporate artifacts revealing your corporate culture to be something entirely different from what you're claiming it to be?

In short, are your artifacts 'walking the walk' for your company so that you're not just 'talking the talk'?

Back to Indiana Jones. If you don't mind, let's pretend I'm Indiana Jones, discovering your current office place some ten, twenty, or thirty years down the road. (Don't worry; your company wasn't destroyed by man-eating snakes, malaria, or even poor PR. You simply moved locations. Lock, stock, and barrel, you abandoned your current office space-as well as its contents, or 'artifacts'-and moved across town to set up shop from scratch.)

When I arrive on the scene, I find your old office space exactly how you left it. Conference room whiteboards still hold notes from the last Monday meeting; the desks look like they're still in use; and the coffeepot, of course, is empty as usual. In short, it's a 'ghost town'-or 'ghost office,' we should say.

I start digging deeper, as any true archaeologist (or Indiana Jones) would do, and I discover artifact after artifact. What conclusions would I come to about your organization's culture from this physical evidence? Would I imagine a company based on the values you purportedly uphold?

Remember, I have no company representatives to talk to. I can only base my conclusions on the physical evidence before me. Would my discoveries lead me to conclude that your culture is what you say it is?

The discrepancy I often find in my consulting work between perceived culture and actual culture amazes me. I've worked with many companies who say they value attention to detail, yet the physical evidence screams chaos and sloppiness. Other companies say they value creativity and personal expression while the physical evidence suggests that they really value conformity.

Imagine further that I, the archeologist, discover some your company's training materials, such as handbooks and videos. (These could be analogous to cultural writings of a civilization.) In essence, these writings document corporate values and priorities. As I go through these materials with a fine-toothed comb, I discover what this civilization (your company) taught its youth (your new hires).

Tell me something: Would the emphasis of these materials lead me to come to the conclusions you want me to?

Most of my consulting work is in the customer service realm. One my first requests when working with an organization is to see their new hire training materials. Many organizations that claim to value service excellence often spend little to no training time to the subject.

For instance, one 'service-oriented' company had a two-day new hire program. As I poured through the training materials, I kept hoping to find some content regarding customer service. Finally I found some-about fifteen minutes worth of material in the entire two days. Sure, the other material was important, but customer service clearly took a backseat to everything else. The evidence (artifacts) did not point to a service-oriented company.

### **Become Your Company's Indiana Jones**

Now it's time for you to don the safari hat a la Indiana Jones. Look at your organization as an archaeologist would. You can do this by yourself or with a team of people.

First, review your company's mission, vision, and values. (Most companies have them on a laminated card somewhere.) Then, just take a walk through the organization. If it's a hospital, start in the parking lot and walk through each floor of the hospital. If it's a bank, start in the parking lot and walk through each branch, making sure to drive through the teller windows as well. If it's a manufacturing plant, walk the floor of the plant.

The key is to travel through all areas of the organization. Pay particular attention to employee areas since they often provide some of the best evidence of a company's real culture. See if the physical evidence aligns with your stated mission, vision, and values. You may be surprised at the discrepancies you discover.

Do you say you value diversity? Take a look at the photos on the 'executive wall of fame.' Do you say you value respect for employees? Take a look at the quality of the employee break room. Do you say you value creativity? Take a look at the sea of uniform cubicles. Remember, you can't go by what people say in this exercise; you can only go by what you see, the physical evidence.

Here are some questions to get you started:

### **What do our customer areas say we value?**

Look at the furniture, the pictures, the layout of the area, the fixtures, the restroom, etc. Do they match your ideals?

### **What do our employee areas say we value?**

Examine your offices, cubicles, break rooms, cafeterias, and locker rooms. Do you like what you see?

### **What do our training materials and training facilities say we value?**

Read training materials with fresh eyes, as if you've never seen them before. Would a new hire be able to 'catch' your intended corporate vision simply from reading these materials?

### **What does our hiring process say we value?**

If 'right fit talent' is a value in your company, yet you find no physical evidence of a documented behavioral interviewing process, there is a disconnect.

Be critical as you play the archaeologist role. Be objective. Don't make excuses such as, 'Well, I know we talk about customer service in new hire orientation, we just don't have it written down.' This is the time to scrutinize, to examine, to do some in-depth exploring.

### **Final Thoughts**

A culture can never be wished into existence. It takes action and artifacts to make it happen. When Indiana Jones went exploring, he didn't find wishes. He found stuff. This stuff led him to other stuff and eventually helped him to draw conclusions about the culture that had left that stuff behind (and to make a great movie in the process, as well!).

If an Indiana Jones were to discover your office place, what kind of stuff would he find? Would his conclusions about your corporate culture be what you'd like them to be? Or would the artifacts you left behind lead him to imagine a completely different culture?

When artifacts match aims, and when actions back up values, the results are incredible. Not too long ago I had the opportunity to work with a hospital that lived out its values, and it was a delightful experience.

This hospital had 'appreciation' stated as one of its values, but this value was more than just stated; it was shining in every corner. Every employee I met reinforced this value, and I saw clues (artifacts, if you will) scattered throughout the building to back up the hospital's claim. Compliment boxes in the hallways, for instance, where patients and hospital employees alike could drop thank-yous for other employees. In an employee corridor, I found whiteboards with markers for employees to write compliments to each other. These whiteboards were filled with the most wonderful compliments, ranging from 'Thanks for covering my shift' to 'Thanks for cleaning up the patient's room after the 'incident.' Some comments were funny and some were touching, but all expressed appreciation. It made me feel good just to read them, and I don't even work there.

It was artifacts like these whiteboards that led me to the singular conclusion, 'This hospital has a culture that values appreciation.'

And amazingly, I didn't need anyone to tell me that.

### **About the Author:**

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