

A Cultural Voyage to Alexander Hughes

Company culture can be described as the shared ethos of an organisation. It is the way people feel about the work they do, the values they believe in, where they see the company going and what they are doing to get it there. Collectively, these traits represent the personality, or culture, of an organisation.

In less than three years, my career has taken me to no less than four totally different company cultures. I do not know if I would have planned my career that way, but between a global pandemic, the need for both stability, creativity, life balance, challenge, lifelong learning and decent leadership, things have turned out that way. Reading my Hogan personality profile report, the sentence that most resounds is “you prefer to let your career unfold naturally—whatever happens is what happens”. The notion of organisational culture has always fascinated me, especially the way one can both observe it from the outside and be a part of it from the inside.

In 2018, I was coming to the end of five years' exciting challenge of managing the global leadership development function of Dassault Systèmes. “3DS” was a paradoxical culture. On the one hand, a highly innovative, entrepreneurial, collaborative organisation, a collective, almost family spirit to its DNA, espousing a sustainable mission which admirably supports “product, nature and life”. On the other hand, a relatively top-down, cautious decision-making process, true to its R&D roots, lots of “Define” before the “Run”, and even though an international organisation, still very proud of its French roots. With its “3DS Experience platform” serving an impressive array of industries, including the highly topical biomedical field, the culture was a hybrid. In the words of Cameron and Quinn's “Competing Values Framework”, its industry solutions typified it as a “Market” culture, while the strong sense of teamwork confirmed the value of “bringing the community together”. Its “Innovation Lab” and impressive growth through multiple acquisitions made it an “Adhocracy”

culture which would “challenge the status quo”.

So, when a head-hunter contacted me one day, I was both reluctant to leave the “home” of 3DS, comfortable with the credibility I had established over five years, while at the same time, a sense of itchy feet and a thirst for more learning and challenge. I consequently drew up my left-brain list of pros and cons, only to act on my right-brain intuition and take the plunge into the results-oriented culture of XPO Logistics. Daniel Kahneman's theory in his book “Thinking Fast, Thinking Slow” does a great job at explaining just how reliable our “gut feel” can be. I just might not have sufficiently listened to it. But sometimes career paths have windy roads to get back on track. The irony was that I even had such a quality relationship with my manager that as I handed in my notice, he offered to mentor me in my career options. Little did I know what was about to hit me.

On my first day I was greeted by the hiring manager who broke the news that he was leaving the company. I have always put a great value on the quality of my direct manager in terms of trust, collaboration, and exemplarity. Heading up the L&D function for the European business of 50,000 employees, grappling with incompatible dual reporting relationships provided more than their set of challenges. Fortunately, I had a great team to support me in the matrix mayhem. The learning curve was steep. Lots of people management, lots of need for political acumen, lots of back-to-back conference calls.

After a year and a half, I got the sense that I was managing training at a distance, rather than making my own mark. I was far from delivering the training, teambuilding, or coaching, that I had become so accustomed to in 3DS. Sometimes the absence of a job component makes you realise just how much you need it. I was juggling a multitude of priorities, in a results-oriented culture with toxic leadership. I was spread so widely that I was questioning my own added value. The complete

reorganisation of the European HR function and the arrival of a new European HRVP, who let's just say, might have revealed a number of Hogan "derailers" (strengths which pushed to an extreme due to high pressure can actually become career inhibiting), admittedly contributed to a deep malaise towards the end of my experience. XPO's values were safe, entrepreneurial, respectful, innovative, and inclusive. I would not deny that there were many signs of these in both business and management. These included admirable corporate Diversity and Inclusion initiatives, impressive warehouse technologies, a serious health & safety drive to bring down the level of work-related accidents, as well as a passionate and highly driven global CEO. However, there were also significant signs of an absence of these values. In addition, I had the privilege of sharing a week-long driver safety training with truckers, as well as meeting highly committed warehouse managers. There was a stark contrast between their admirable sense of duty and the dictates of ever more operational efficiency from top management.

This was also a great opportunity to feel just how much national culture can seep into corporate culture. From a sense of pride and positivity in England, to nostalgic French revelling in the Norbet Dentressangle past, to the "just do it", "raise-the-bar" American hegemony of the acquiring company, where the slogan on all our Powerpoint slides was "Results Matter".

You know intuitively when it is time to move on, and it was time. So, at the start of 2020 I launched my business "Freedman Consulting", dedicated to leadership development, coaching and team building. Most of my activity was in association with HR and leadership consulting firms – my ten different e-mail addresses were testimony to my multiple partnerships.

I got an insight into the world of entrepreneurship. This meant the pros of independence and the cons of a certain instability. During this time, I was privy to several consulting firm cultures. Coronavirus

turned me into a versatile virtual training facilitator, my coaching sessions also went behind a screen, and my psychotherapy sessions all went behind a mask.

The global pandemic somewhat shook the sustainability of my business model, perhaps a pretext for the fact that I was potentially on the look-out for the next challenge back in an organisation. I was also lacking a sense of team spirit, which has always been important to me. So, when I had a fortuitous encounter with a past acquaintance, it seemed the timing was right, the role seemed right, the manager seemed right. We tested the waters in partnership with Freedman Consulting, which was the steppingstone into Alexander Hughes full time at the start of this year.

So the need for "affiliation" means I can proudly say, "we" ... are an international consulting organisation specialising in executive search and human capital assessment. We consult organisations on cultural transformation, top team effectiveness and leadership assessments. Our expertise is in ascertaining a leader's "culture fit", so important in any organisation. If we work for a company with a strong culture that aligns with our own beliefs and attitudes, we tend to want to work hard and remain with the company. If, on the other hand, a company's culture does not align to who we are, we are much more likely to leave, or worse, remain with the company but underperform.

My background in HR, corporate talent development, leadership consulting, and coaching is supporting Alexander Hughes in its international growth of the Human Capital business. It has been an exciting adventure so far. After all my experience in different company cultures, I am in the privileged position of helping organisations shape their aspirational culture. Defining the "as is" versus "to be" culture can be a great way of putting words to an intangible notion. These include structure vs flexibility, controlling vs delegating, diplomatic vs direct, individualistic vs collaborative, or internal vs external focus. So, are we practising what we preach? What is the Alexander Hughes' own culture? Well, as I

train up our consultants around the world to be able to “pitch” our Human Capital offering, I have also been getting them to apply the model to ourselves. What transpires so far is a highly professional family business, proud of its heritage while seeking to reinvent itself.

Assessing leaders according to a defined company culture ensures that the culture is being lived daily, not just plastered on walls. This means that core values can negatively impact culture if they are not adhered to. Employees will see this as the company paying lip service and failing to live up to its own standards. I have seen core values breed cynicism rather than pride.

So, my career navigation seems to be making sense after all. Letting go, trusting some form of inner knowing of what feels right together with searching for company values that match one's own values, might after all be the best way of managing one's career.



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