



SOPHIA ASSOCIATES

Awakening Leadership Within

THE POWER OF CULTURAL MYTHOLOGY

Every organization has its own mythology, the stories it tells that help define who they are and how they came into existence. Some mythologies are novels full of grandiose events, some are memoirs full of insurmountable odds that were overcome and some are adventures with twists and turns that no one would have expected. And of course there are those that appear very much like fiction!

Why are cultural mythologies important? Because at our core we are storytellers. And the CEO is the Chief Storyteller. You drive the story that creates the future mythology of your organization. You bring the future into being by maintaining or changing the cultural myths that inhabit your organization.

Cultural myths are a way of showing the world what the organization values. Think of companies that value innovation. I'll bet you thought of Apple Computer or Google. Think of companies that value the community and environment. Companies such as Patagonia and Whole Foods come to mind. Consider companies whose story is about safety and security. Perhaps you think of McAfee or ADT?

Branding is essentially making the cultural myths visible to the public in a way that generates interest from the targeted consumer and ultimately sales of products and services. Branding is storytelling with a purpose.

Cultural myths reveal ways of doing things in an organization that may not be overt. They are often unwritten beliefs that are passed around and that subtly control organizations. They can either limit an individual's ability to contribute ("We don't do things that way.") or generate energy and creativity ("Give us the impossible and we'll make it possible."). Organizations use their mythology as a way to promote their organizational goals. These myths help employees and others understand what is acceptable and encouraged as well as what is not appropriate in that environment. For those moving into leadership positions in a company, understanding the cultural mythology lends credibility and authority and the ability to navigate complex landscapes and relationships.

Mythology drives the way the organization is structured. Are there hierarchies, do employees have autonomy, is there emphasis on face time or on producing results regardless of the clock? These structures and values are all part of your cultural mythology.

Underestimating the power of cultural myths is dangerous. Myths will be created, that is not optional. How they are created directly relates to the authenticity of the leadership. Are you aware of what you contribute to your organization's mythology? If you were to ask one of your employees or customers to talk about your mythology what would they say? And is that what you would like to hear them say?

As in all mythology, there are reasons that organizations leverage their cultural mythologies. Some reasons, both positive and negative are:

- To promote a common purpose, goal or mission
- To build a company where individuals experience cohesion and connection
- To appreciate historical milestones and traditions
- To illustrate company lessons learned
- To set examples of expected behaviors

- To share knowledge and promote creativity
- To distinguish the organization from others that may be similar
- To justify a social and business structure
- To control people or to maintain the status quo
- To promote idealism in both its positive and negative aspects
- To justify an organization's actions and behaviors

Cultural myths evolve and transform over time even as they may retain some fundamental elements. Understanding the cultural myths that drive the beliefs in your organization will help you connect to what is the truth inherent in these stories. Myths are real in that they influence and affect your organization. As CEO, remember you are the Chief Storyteller. How will you use your influence to bring the future into being through your organization's cultural mythology? That may well become your personal legacy as well.

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