

The Historical and Largely Un-Discussable Nature of Organisational Culture

The following story demonstrates that the rituals and responses embedded within an organisation are heavily influenced by history, and are followed by successive generations of employees, often without question, without them ever knowing why.

Start with a cage containing five monkeys. Inside the cage, hang a banana on a string and place a set of stairs under it. Before long, a monkey will go to the stairs and start to climb towards the banana. As soon as he touches the stairs, spray all of the monkeys with cold water.

After a while, another monkey makes an attempt with the same result - all the monkeys are sprayed with cold water. Pretty soon, when another monkey tries to climb the stairs, the other monkeys will try to prevent it.

Now, turn off the cold water.

Remove one monkey from the cage and replace it with a new one. The new monkey sees the banana and wants to climb the stairs. To his surprise and horror, all of the other monkeys attack him. After another attempt and attack, he knows that if he tries to climb the stairs, he will be assaulted.

Next, remove another of the original five monkeys and replace it with a new one. The newcomer goes to the stairs and is attacked. The previous newcomer takes part in the punishment with enthusiasm.

Again, replace a third original monkey with a new one. The new one makes it to the stairs and is attacked as well. Two of the four monkeys that beat him have no idea why they were not permitted to climb the stairs, or why they are participating in the beating of the newest monkey.

After replacing the fourth and fifth original monkeys, all the monkeys that have been sprayed with cold water have been replaced. Nevertheless, no monkey ever again approaches the stairs.

Why not?

Because as far as they know [that's the way it's always been around here.](#)

A more 'Human' example.

A story is told of an eastern emperor who presided over his country's annual sporting festival. Hundreds of athletes would be watched by thousands of spectators as they engaged in the games and events of the day. The emperor's ornate chair was set high on a platform at one end of the stadium, with tables either side for his food and drink.

One year, just as the festival was about to start, and the emperor had taken his seat, a stray cat strolled up to the platform, hopped onto one of the tables and sat through the day's events. After the last game, the cat dropped down from the table and sauntered off into the woodland behind the stadium.

The emperor was so amused by this situation that he ordered his staff to find the cat, or at least make sure that another cat was found in time for his next public engagement.

After a while it became common knowledge that the emperor had a cat and that it would accompany him to all civic functions. After many years of public service (and several cats!) the emperor died and the political scene in the country embraced democracy.

The annual sporting festival continued for generations, and although there was no emperor, a cat was found each year and forced to sit through the day's proceedings (in a cage) – indeed several events were delayed for hours whilst a suitably docile cat was found.

Over time, the animal welfare lobby persuaded the authorities that forcing a cat to oversee the festival was cruel, and so a motion was passed in Parliament for a bronze statue of a cat to be cast and mounted on the stadium platform.

Informally the event became known as the Festival of the Cat, and was eventually renamed officially. Each year the local traders and street sellers did a roaring trade in cat memorabilia and symbols but, more than one hundred years after the first cat had strolled in to see what was going on, not one participant or spectator had any real idea as to the significance of the cat.

It was just – [the way it had always been](#).