



BY DAVID COHEN
For Workplace News

When you think about ancient cultures, it's easy to wonder why we have not learned more from our collective pasts. Consider that the Egyptians were doing brain surgery and delivering infants through c-section long before contemporary medical practices. Concepts of social justice have also flourished then disappeared. Great wisdom can be lost in the transition from one civilization to the next. A culture may thrive for awhile, but what is it that perpetuates its success? In these electronic and print media days, it's easy to believe that the written word does the job. Upon examination, however, the common denominator between the past and today is word-of-mouth. A culture's oral tradition is the means by which a culture's commitment and passion are made meaningful. When word-of-mouth fails, the oral tradition disappears, and so does the culture.

Recently, while visiting The Alte Pinakothek in Munich, it

Word of Mouth Preserves Corporate Culture

struck me that the details and massiveness of the artwork comprised a cultural message that was frozen in time. Of course, the civilization that produced the art continued to change, as did its stories and legends. Looking at those medieval paintings, I could not help but think of the great efforts companies take to get their message right. Whether through poster or advertising campaigns or costly websites, companies produce a picture of the culture which is at best a poor rendering of the real thing. Consider how infrequently those pictures mean anything to the participants of the culture. It is through corporate legends that a culture's word-of-mouth survives and thrives. Those legends are the stories of the past, blended with the reality of the present and a hope for the future. In other words, they are timeless. Regardless of the timing of the event that prompts its telling, the story is told as if it is happening now. They are transmitted, not formally but informally, from one employee generation to the next as living examples of the correct way of doing things within that company. I see it time and again when I visit different areas of a

company. Corporate legends exist across regions and divisions and are told using nearly the same words and context. This provides new employees with the same message about the culture as the previous generation.

Too often, leaders of institutions seek to control or manipulate the cultural message that they wish to perpetuate. Doing so often stifles the "living" nature of a culture and weakens its sense of purpose. Think about public school education, as we know it in North America. At the beginning of the last century, public schools were designed to inculcate the masses of new immigrants in "the American way". To do this they created legends, which set the seeds of the American Culture as we know it today. In the process, they broke the link of the oral history which the newly born generation otherwise would have heard from those who preceded them. This became the foundation for perpetuating the transmission of the American experience. Many corporations have run a parallel course. While they are in a stage of growth and development, they engage in vigorous debates about

right and wrong, and what's best for the future. As the culture emerges, they tell stories that reinforce what feels right, and what defines the proper way of acting within the company. Then, at some point, it becomes wrong to engage in such debate and question the way things are within the firm. Company leaders, at this point, attempt to maintain what they feel is good and narrow or eliminate the debate and evolution of the culture. Why do leaders feel they need to narrow a culture in the name of progress? Planners consider it a matter of efficiency — something we've been through with the growth of our cities. Once upon a time, cities developed naturally, as people and commerce required, and took on distinct identities. Then, we went through a planning stage, in which the patterns of behaviour got imposed on the city grid. Jane Jacobs first wrote about this in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Today, in her new book, *Dark Age Ahead*, she writes, "efficiency has become an ideology instead of a practical, common sense thing." Similarly, in our approach to education, efficiencies may help students meet expectations, but the once-enduring institution of the school system itself is crumbling. In corporations, a focus on efficiency implies a similar focus on the bottom line. Downsizing, budget cutting, reengineering, and even

forming strategic alliances with rivals are standard methods of creating efficiencies today, while sacrificing the past and mortgaging tomorrow. Leaders can be visionaries, however. Some think in terms of possibilities, not efficiencies.

Those possibilities are focused on the future, relevant to the present, and strongly grounded in the past.

Such leaders amplify word-of-mouth legends for the right reasons, to propel people into the future in a way which continues to connect them with the past. This results in a steadier feeling about today, a pride in yesterday, and optimism for tomorrow.

I suggest that to ensure your company's future you have to:

- Celebrate what you have learned from the past while planning for the future.
- Preserve the legends of the past while pursuing the possible.
- Maintain the oral history by sharing legends, not through video or intranet sites, but by having real people tell real stories, from the first day of orientation on.
- Recognize what efficiencies fit within the culture, and rely on them, rather than fitting ideology around new trends in bottom line management.
- Foster leaders who lead from a shared past to a shared future. That is

what it means to speak of visionary companies rather than visionary leaders.

I don't pretend to be an anthropologist or an art historian, but the writings of people like Jane Jacobs tell us a lot about the potential for self-destruction in our companies.

This is not an article of despair, however, but one of hope. A thriving culture, the kind that gives us all room to grow, is a wonderful thing to be part of. Listen closely, the next time you go to a museum, and you will hear the voices of the past telling you so.

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