

Why Corporate Cultures Resist Change

By Ann N. Gatty, Ph.D.



Why do corporate cultures resist change? There are many reasons, but you only need to look at the way a staff is organized, the way corporations do business and the way they select new. These become a few powerful reasons organizations have difficulty embracing and incorporating change in staying competitive.

One way the corporate culture is organized is based on history. Another is based on the dynamics of culture itself. However, leaders know that to stay competitive in the business world, it's necessary for corporations to make some serious changes.

Changing an organization's culture is one of the most difficult tasks leaders face. Change that becomes permanent is not easy and often it's messy. Let's look at the challenges facing leaders who are trying to overcome the resistance to change.

Historically, the corporate culture established after WWII was established by men. The office culture that developed through the 1950's and 1960's embraced what became known as "the American Dream." Men worked in the professional world, earning a comfortable salary, advancing along the corporate ladder. The corporation was hierarchical in structure, and a "boy's club" environment where drinking, smoking, and socializing on the job became commonplace. Wives were encouraged to stay at home and raise the children.

Women have been challenged in finding gateways to enter this work culture created by men. Clerical jobs and service roles were usually the most available. For comparison, in the 1890's, 15% of women between the ages of 25-45 worked outside the home. By the 1980's that number rose to 71%. In the US, discrimination based on sex became illegal with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. And the term "sexual harassment" was first used in 1975. However, we know that sexual harassment still exists. Today, the hierarchy developed by men is being replaced, but still many corporate cultures resist change because adding diversity challenges the status quo.

Today, we strive for a more diverse, inclusive culture. The goal is to allow individuals to work alongside other colleagues without fear or judgement because of different life choices. Yet, we find barriers in making this cultural profile a reality. Why? It stems from corporate cultures hiring people who are aligned with their culture rather than those who would change the culture. The culture members like the status quo.

A typical hiring practice is to hire people who will maintain the current culture. In such a practice, the culture is protected from change. This practice is a major challenge for increasing diversity of any kind, including gender, ethnic, racial, LGBTQ, or diversity of thought. In other words, organizations select new hires for their acceptance of the existing culture.

Organizations continue to behave and maintain the same attitudes as they have always done, even to the detriment of their future sustainability. They will resist implementing cultural changes unless leadership communicates a strong case for why maintaining status quo does not meet the organization's survival.

The resistance to change is one reason why diversity, equity and inclusion is such a difficult initiative to incorporate in an existing corporate culture. An organization's culture is comprised of a meshing of goals, values, work practices, staff roles and implicit cultural assumptions.

Amy Edmondson has written extensively about the importance of [psychological safety in the workplace](#). If a leader wants to be successful in creating a more diverse and inclusive culture that provides for higher productivity and increased innovation, then psychological safety must be present. Such an environment becomes "safe" to express different ideas, ask questions, take risks and admit mistakes without fear of reprisal. She is describing the workplace that now needs to replace past corporate culture patterns which, for too long, have maintained a stronghold on how work gets done.

We can't change history. However, we don't need to continue replicating how outdated corporate cultures resist change. It's unhealthy. We must acknowledge that the corporate culture embedded in this 20th century history has lost its relevancy for our 21st century. We also can acknowledge that these organizations, built to resist change, do not provide the opportunity to create a robust, inclusive culture where diverse thought contributes to innovative ideas, products and services. Leaders must assist in creating space where there is comfort for a diverse community of employees who can share opinions and feel that their work is valued.

About the Author

Dr. Ann Gatty is a business development strategist. She helps her clients clarify the vision for their businesses, boost their leadership capabilities and add quality talent to help the clients reach their goals. Dr. Gatty is a frequent writer and contributor www.AllBusiness.com, and www.WomenOnBusiness.com. She is the author of [Leadership Unleashed, A Great Dane's Wisdom for the Business World](#). Her interactive speaking engagements assist participants in discovering new-found talents and skills that they can immediately apply in the workplace. Join her [Facebook Group, Strategic Thinking Summit Elites](#) for strategies you can implement to grow your business success and enjoy camaraderie with others entrepreneur members.