



People like us (do things like this)

Change a culture, change your world

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“He can’t be a man because he doesn’t smoke,

The same cigarettes as me...”

The Rolling Stones, 1965

Before we start

Have you eaten crickets? Never mind the crunchy insect-shaped kind, but even cricket flour? In many parts of the world, crickets are a fine source of protein.

What about beef? Even though this is one of the most easily addressed causes of global warming, even though beef is a truly inefficient way to feed the world, it's safe to say that most people reading this have had beef for lunch or dinner sometime in the last week.

If it's not genetic, if we're not born with a specific feeling about crickets or beef, if there are no clear cut rational reasons to eat one or the other, why do crickets make us squirm while cows make us hungry?

Because people like us eat things like this.

In Sync

This is a short essay about a big idea, the one that drives all of humanity, all the time.

Not our need for food or shelter. Not our need to survive.

For most of us, from the first day we are able to remember until the last day we breathe, our actions are primarily driven by one question, “Do people like me do things like this?”

People like me don’t cheat on their taxes.

People like me own a car, we don’t take the bus.

People like me have a full-time job.

People like me want to see the new James Bond movie.

Even when we adopt the behavior of an outlier, when we do something the crowd doesn’t often do, we’re still aligning ourselves with the behavior of outliers.

There is no one who is unaware and uncaring of what is going on around him. No one who is wholly original, self-directed and isolated in every way. A sociopath might do things in opposition to the crowd, but he’s not unaware of the crowd.

We can’t change the culture, but each of us has the opportunity to change *a* culture, our little pocket of the world.

Making change happen

Every organization, every project, every interaction exists to do one thing: to make change happen.

To make a sale, to change a policy, to heal the world.

As marketers and agents of change, we almost always overrate our ability to make change happen. The reason is simple:

Everyone always acts in accordance with the internal narrative. Always.

You generally can't get someone to do something that they don't want to do, and most of the time, what people want to do is take action (or not take action) that reinforces their internal narrative.

The real question, then, is where does the internal narrative come from and how does it get changed?

The internal narrative

We don't make decisions in a vacuum, we base them on our perception of our cohort. So we buy a \$700 baby stroller because we're smart (or we don't, because it's stupid).

Or we shop at the local farmer's market (or we don't, because it's raining, and they don't sell Cheetos).

We harass the female TV reporter outside the soccer stadium (and lose our jobs) because that's how we see our people behaving.

Or we wear a bright pink shirt, yellow trousers and no socks, because, we tell ourselves, they're comfortable (but mostly it's because that's who we imagine a successful version of ourself.)

It's all built around the simple question, "do people like me do things like this?"

Three steps to making a choice (because choice is rarely rational)

1. What does this remind me of?

When a new idea, an organization, an offer, or a person comes along, the first thing we ask ourselves is how to sort it. We want to know what it's like, what have we seen before that gives us a chance to process this input quickly.

2. Does this offer ring a bell?

Now that we have a category for the stimulus, we invest a few cycles in figuring out what to do next. Is this something I'm afraid of? Something I've been hoping for?

Which instantly and directly leads to the key question, the one that actually provides the foundation for the first two:

3. Do people like me do something like this?

Not in the sense that a Gallup poll would indicate that a plurality of people in a certain demographic have, to a degree of statistical significance, chosen to do what I'm about to do.

No. I'm talking about our perception of who we are and who *they* are and what they do.

Kim Kardashian might not know you exist, but if you define "people like us" as the group that she's part of, then your decisions will be influenced by your perception of who you are and who she is and your invented connection. (Because it's all invented.)

All our decisions are invented. We're not doing math. We're making complicated decisions about how we treat people, about events in the future, about production and consumption. And all of our stories and identities are merely invented.

Defining 'us'

In the previous era, mass media worked hard to define 'us' as 'all of us', as the crowd, the Americans, the people of the world. Of course, it never really got all the way, the racists and the xenophobes and the isolated were happy to draw the line somewhere short of all of us.

But yes, we all watched Johnny Carson and we wore jeans and we all went to school. At least the all that ran for as far as we were willing to see.

Today, though, popular culture isn't as popular as it used to be. *Mad Men*, which was hyped by the *New York Times* in more than 40 articles in just one season, was only regularly seen by 1% of the US population. And the popular culture phenomenon that is the Cronut, or the deep fried Oreo at the county fair, or the raw moon pie at the funky restaurant--these phenonemona reach, if you're willing to do a little rounding, basically no one.

We've gone from all of us being everyone to all of us being no one.

But that's okay, because the long tail of culture and the media and change doesn't need everyone any longer. It's happy with enough.

What the marketer, the leader and the organizer do today, then, their first job is: Define 'us'.

When you say, "People like us donate to a charity like this one," you're clearly not saying it to everyone. Everyone is not going to give to your charity. So, who is?

The right answer is not, “the people who give are people like us.” We need to be braver than that, more articulate, more willing to take initiative in not only reaching your market, but changing them, changing their expectations and most of all, what they choose to tell each other and show each other.

Why change agents must define ‘us’

[Culture eats strategy for lunch.](#)

Culture is more important than strategy, than benefits, than features. Culture is more important than price, than governments, than technology.

Culture shapes all our decisions and culture can change.

But culture can change. It changes when our sense of ‘us’ forces it to.

Jackson Pollock didn’t sell his art to everyone. He sold it to one gallery owner who sold it to 100 collectors, who influenced 75 curators who reached 5,000 early adopters until, years after his death, people like us like art like this.

Stop for a second and consider that this was Pollock’s greatest achievement. He redefined what people like us think about when we think about contemporary art.

Marketers define “us” because only by focusing our story and concentrating our effort can we change a few people. And if we change the right people in the right way, the culture begins to change.

It shouldn’t be called ‘the culture’

It should be called 'a culture' or 'this culture', because there is no universal culture, no 'us' that defines all of us.

When we're comfortable realizing that our work is to change 'a culture', then we can begin to do two bits of hard work:

A. Map and understand the worldview of a culture we seek to change.

B. Focus all our energy on merely this group. Ignore everyone. Instead, focus on building and living a story that will resonate with the culture you are seeking to change.

That's how we make change. By caring enough to want to change a culture, and being brave enough to pick just one.

Case: Gay marriage in Ireland

One way to pass the world's first national referendum about the right for gay people to marry would be to state your case, to focus on fairness, respect and civil rights.

That rational approach won't get you very far, though.

An alternative? Brigid White and her husband, Paddy, both nearly 80, made a video about their son and about what it meant to them to support the referendum.

People like us.

It's easy for many to watch that video and see themselves. As parents. As traditionalists, as Irishmen.

The essence of political change is almost always cultural change, and the culture changes horizontally.

Elite and/or exclusive

Malcolm Gladwell pointed out that there's a difference between an elite institution and an exclusive one.

They *can* co-exist, but often don't.

The Rhodes Scholarship is an elite award. It goes to few people, and it's respected by other elite individuals and institutions.

Elite is an external measure. Does the world you care about respect this badge?

But the Rhodes Scholarship isn't exclusive. It's not a tribe, a group of well-connected individuals with their own culture.

Exclusive is an internal measure. It's us vs. them, insiders vs. outsiders.

The Hell's Angels aren't elite, but they're exclusive.

Harvard Business School is both elite and exclusive. So are the Navy Seals.

It's easy to get confused in our quest to build something that matters. It seems as though we ought to work to make our organization elite, to let the *New York Times* proclaim that our opera is worth seeing, or to hope that the upperclassmen will like our performance on the field.

In fact, though, it's exclusive institutions that change things. Because we have no control over our elite status, and it can be taken away in an instant. But exclusive organizations thrive as long as their members wish to belong, and that work is something we can exercise control over.

At the heart of the exclusive organization is a simple truth: Every single member is people like us.

Case: Harlem Village Academy

Charter schools in New York City work under a few constraints: They get less money per student than traditional schools, and they must enroll students randomly, via lottery.

One asset they have: parents (like us) send our kids to schools (like this). It takes an effort to apply to a charter school, and Deborah Kenny takes that advantage and runs with it.

Every student wears a uniform.

And every student reads more than one book a week—52 books a year, beginning in first grade.

These two standards cause a significant shift in the learning environment at HVA. It's understood among the students that the culture of the place demands this sort of achievement.

And once that standard is embraced, each additional requirement, reach or achievement becomes that much easier.

Case: Robin Hood Foundation

In 2015, the Robin Hood Foundation raised \$101,000,000.00.

In one night.

The single most effective fundraiser of its kind, in history.

Some people look at this extraordinary result and come to the conclusion that the tactic (a gala) is the secret. It's not. It's the extraordinary peer pressure of people like us do things like this.

Robin Hood has spent a generation building an expectation, carefully amplifying the work of the outliers at the same time that it plays into the hyper-competitive egomania of Wall Street. There are few anonymous gifts (more now than ever before, which is heartening). Instead, the see-and-be-seen mindset is put to a very good cause.

It's the intentional nature of this process that is so easily overlooked. It rarely happens as an unintentional side effect.

Case: The blue ribbons

My little town had a problem. Despite extraordinary schools (our elementary school had won the national Blue Ribbon School designation) there was a schism over the upcoming budget vote.

Many in town, particularly longtime residents and second or third generation families, were upset about rising school taxes. Some of them organized and for the first time in memory, the school budget vote failed.

In New York State, the school gets a second vote, but if that fails as well, the cuts that are mandated are quite draconian, with essential programs cut without thoughtful prioritization. With only 8 days before the next vote, what could be done?

A few activists decided to try a new approach. Instead of arguing vociferously in favor of the budget, instead of passing out flyers or holding a rally, they tied 100 blue ribbons to a big tree in front of the middle school, right in the center of town.

Within days, the idea had spread. In the days before the election, many dozens of trees, all around town, had blue ribbons hanging from them.

The message was simple: People like us, people in our town, people in this blue ribbon district—support our schools.

The budget passed 2:1.

Case: Tangelo Park

Is \$11 million enough to transform a community?

Harris Rosen, a hotel magnate in Florida, has spearheaded a generation's long overhaul of Tangelo, Florida. Not was a sudden fell swoop of here today, gone tomorrow intervention, but by changing the people like us narrative.

It starts with pre-school and goes all the way to an extensive program of college scholarships. As a result, in twenty years the graduation rate from high school has *doubled*, from less than 50% to nearly 100%.

The New York Times reports that four-year-old kids show up at school ready to learn, expecting that they are precisely the sort of kids who take school seriously, who graduate, who go to college. People like us do things like this.

Case: The standing ovation

How many people are needed to start a standing ovation?

At TED, it only takes three. If Bill and Al and Sunny leap to their feet, thousands of others will as well.

At a Broadway show, no matter how tepid the response, fifteen strangers spread throughout the theater might be enough.

And at Mezzrow, the awesome jazz club, it's probably not possible.

So, what's going on?

In some audiences, there are few strangers. We recognize and respect those around us, and our trust of these people, combined with our deeply felt need to fit in combine to activate a standing ovation. If I desire to be one of 'us' and the leader is standing, well, I'll stand too.

On the other hand, in a venue of strangers, our desire to fit in is a bit different. At the Broadway theater, I'm wearing the tourist hat, and tourists like me respond in ways like this. The venue has a bias.

And the opposite is true among the hard core jazz fans. They know that jazz fans don't give standing ovations, not in a club, and the bias of the venue is difficult to change.

Case: Lions and Maasai warriors

How to save the lions of Kenya and Tanzania?

Dr. Leelah Hazzah saw how encroachments on the environment were making it more difficult for the lions to survive. But she also knew that among many Maasai, a rite of passage of the adolescent male was to singlehandedly kill a lion. This show of bravery was putting significant pressure on the lion population. It's estimated that there are only 30,000 lions in the region, down from 200,000 a generation or two ago.

All the rational arguments in the world aren't powerful enough to change deeply-held cultural beliefs. Instead, Dr. Hazzah and her team worked to create *new* cultural beliefs.

In their words, “Wildlife conservation has traditionally focused on wildlife, not people. At Lion Guardians, we take the opposite approach. For almost a decade, we have worked with local communities to protect lions and improve ... community conservation by blending traditional knowledge and culture with science.”

Now, instead of an adolescent hunting and killing a lion, the Maasai find and name lions, track them, and use radio telemetry to perform a census. Protecting a lion becomes as much of a rite of passage as killing one was.

[\[More\]](#)

Worth a thought: Questions

Why are some car models (and colors) more popular in one neighborhood over another?

What does it mean when people in a group tear down a friend for being “too white” or “too black”?

If you don't have the resources to market your charity to every possible philanthropist, who should you target?

Why do doctors go through such a grueling residency?

What did the Grateful Dead do to become the highest-grossing live band of all time?

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