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Cultural Change and Lodestones in the British Police.

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Cultural Change & Lodestones in the British Police.

ABSTRACT

• Purpose: This Research Paper considers a challenge to an occupational jurisdiction in the British police. Historically, street cops have defended the importance of operational credibility as a way of sustaining the value of experience, and inhibiting attempts to introduce external leaders. This has generated a particular form of policing and leadership that is deemed by the British government as inadequate to face the problems of the next decade.

• Design: The project used the High Potential Development Scheme (HPDS) of the British police to assess the value of operational credibility and the possibilities of radical cultural change. Data is drawn from participants on the programme, from those who failed to get onto the programme, and from officers who have risen through the ranks without access to a fast track scheme.

• Findings: Most organizational change fails in its own terms, often because of cultural resistance. However, if we change our metaphors of culture from natural to human constructions it may be possible to focus on the key point of the culture: the lodestone that glues it together. Operational credibility maybe such a cultural lodestone and undermining it offers the opportunity for rapid and radical change.

• Originality: Most assessments of cultural change focus on those charged with enacting the change and explain failure through recourse to natural metaphors of change. This papers challenges the convention that cultural change can only ever be achieved, if at all, through years of effort.

KEY WORDS: LEADERSHIP, POLICE, CREDIBILITY, LODESTONES, CULTURE.
Culture & Metaphors

It has become a commonplace to argue that somewhere around two thirds of change programmes fail in their own terms, often because of organizational culture (Beer and Nohria, 2000). The debates around cultural change in organizations still hover around the work of authors such as Schein (1985) who imply that it is the very complexity of organizational culture that makes it so resilient. However, we suggest that the alleged resilience of cultures is often premised upon the forms of language that we use to describe them, in particular the power of metaphors to enable and constrain our thinking (Morgan, 1986). If, for example, we talk of cultures as webs (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984) then we may perceive that changing this would require a considerable amount of effort in picking apart the nodes of the web or its sticky filaments, and that we may end up enmeshed in the very same web. On the other hand, if we consider cultures to be more like icebergs, that exhibit surface level artefacts which, in turn, merely reflect much more deeply held attitudes, values and assumptions (Schein, 1985) then the defrost necessary to get to these attitudes may be beyond our patience and resources. Hence trying to manipulate a culture by changing the artefacts is pointless since the artefacts themselves are merely concrete reflections of the deeper elements of culture – that are often inaccessible. The consequence of this kind of approach is the conclusion that cultural change is either impossible or extraordinarily difficult and requires years of effort. Such approaches, however, underestimate the degree to which organizational cultures are the contested result of ‘the management of meaning’ (Smircich and Morgan, 1982), and assume that culture is something which organizations have rather than something which organizations are (Geertz, 1973). Moreover, if we use an architectural metaphor then three things change.

First, there is a shift away from naturalistic metaphors and therefore the resilience normally associated with something ‘natural’, to configure the culture as normative rather than ‘natural.’ Conventionally, as Alvesson has suggested (2002: 171-7), organizational culture is assumed to be unitarist, essentialist and non-contested. However, we have known, for example, that the police have had multiple cultures since at least the work of James Q Wilson (1968). Even cults (Tourish, 2011) have regular expulsions of disbelievers – implying that the universality of the culture has not quite worked, but culture can clearly operate as
an extraordinarily coercive force, and may prove extremely resilient and pernicious as well as valuable.

Second, while traditional approaches often suggest that culture is somehow fixed in time and space – a notion compounded by Lewin’s (1951) ‘Unfreeze-Change-Refreeze’ model of organizational change - there is precious little evidence that cultures are totally static (Alvesson, 2002: 175-60) and we can get beyond this assumption (Cf. Grint, 1995) by returning to the original use of the word culture – as related to its Latin origins in *Cultura*. Here it implies tending or caring for something, for example agriculture or horticulture. In effect this suggests that perhaps we should configure culture as a set of practices not just a set of ideas.

Third, we begin to recognize the human artifice at the centre of the culture: if we made this then we can unmake it. In this approach we can begin to envision certain architectural forms – such as arches for example – which embody a lynchpin or lodestone that act to maintain the structural integrity of the building: if you remove the lodestone the building collapses. Adopting this approach then allows us to consider whether organizational cultures might also embody specific cultural lodestones or totems that are held to be sacrosanct by a large proportion of the organizational members, and if these lynchpins can be successfully challenged then organizational change may be easier to achieve.

In this vein we might invert Schein’s hierarchy and suggest that the artefacts that allegedly reflect commonly held ideas might actually be the practices that produce and reproduce the collective ideals. In this case we may be able to suggest that undermining the practices of organizations, especially those that are held to be sacrosanct, might be a key to explaining how radical change can occur. To explain this we turn first to Durkheim.

Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) is an attempt to understand how ‘simple’ societies (he primarily referred to Australian aboriginal clans) can survive across time through the development and perpetuation of moral rules, a social framework that acts to limit individual desires. Thus his concern with religion is not really linked to some metaphysical being, a god or gods, but with how the relationship between the sacred
and the profane signals boundaries and provides some notion of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. For Durkheim the sacred could be anything or anybody but it is always differentiated from the profane by some form of ritual – positive or negative. Indeed, Manning (2011) has suggested that the police use an equivalent sacred rite to produce and sustain their own legitimacy.

But how do we recognize what the sacred totem or cultural lodestone of an organization is? One way would be to notice what happens when a boundary is encroached upon or transgressed; in other words, when sacrilege occurs, often manifest in an attack upon the reified icon of the sacred (Douglas, 2002). This could be the sacrilege of flag burning, or the burning of the bible or the Koran or more mundanely when an ‘inappropriate’ word is mentioned in conversation, or the ‘wrong’ clothing is adopted. Of course, organizations have different totems in different parts, but they remain sacred and are constantly patrolled for aspects of sacrilege, and in each case occupational jurisdiction or simply the credibility of the group, organization or institution is constructed in and through the regulated and regulatory practices of the members which act to protect their totemic icon. So the question now is what might an equivalent lodestone be for the British police, or more accurately for British ‘street cops’, and how might it affect and effect change in the police?

**Police Culture & Lodestones.**

What kind of culture(s) do the police have, and are there elements that they regard as sacrosanct that might represent a cultural lodestone? Paoline et al (2000) suggest that American police culture (and Chan [1996] suggests the same for the Australian police) is, as James Q Wilson (1968) suggested, rather more complex than traditional monolithic accounts portray (Reiner, 1992). Reuss-Ianni (1993) argued that the police have at least two relatively coherent but different unitary cultures that operate at different levels of the hierarchy – they were labelled ‘street cops’ and ‘management cops’. However, in a more recent British study, Loftus (2009) has suggested that there is more commonality than difference between these cultures.
Of course, on closer examination there appear different police sub-cultures (Dick and Jankowicz, 2001; Herbert, 1998) – ‘firearms officers’ will probably have a rather different understanding of what counts as ‘real policing’ to ‘traffic cops’ as they, in turn, will have to those involved in policing domestic violence. Moreover, Chan (1996) is surely right to suggest that cultures do not determine the actions of individuals. We suggest that in each case the operational credibility of street cops acts as the cultural lodestone – it is the practice that defines success or failure.

Most HPDS officers operate at the beginning of their entry into the scheme in the context of ‘street cops’ with a core of cultural frames. One of these is the high level of discretion that can lead to both the ‘under-enforcement’ of the law (Banton, 1964) or the overuse of powers (Scarman, 1982). Another is the danger and unpredictability of the job which generates a significant division between the police and the public that manifest itself in a collective social isolation from the rest of the population, aligned to a powerful group allegiance (Reiner, 1992). At the same time, the danger of transgressing legal boundaries in their law enforcement activities propel the police to protect themselves (‘cover their collective asses’) by stressing ‘real’ policing – that is aggressive law enforcement of serious crime (Loftus, 2009; Waddington, 1999). As Kiely and Peek (2002: 168) noted in their review of British police culture ‘Junior officers valued the excitement of “real police work” which they defined as the visible aspects of police work such as arrest and chase. Senior officers – “management cops”- were more concerned with projecting a multiple image of police activity’. This division is also manifest in the different focus of anxiety: street cops are anxious about being physically injured; management cops are more anxious about reputational damage (Gudjonsson, 1984). Yet, while the common assumption appears to be that experience is the critical pre-requisite for leadership, the evidence does not always support this (HMIC, 2008: 7).

In effect, credibility – street cops’ occupational jurisdiction - is culturally determined and locally specific. Moreover, it is not the general aspects of the culture that might be critical but particular iconic aspects of it. In other words, some elements are more important than others because they embody what is perceived to be the ‘essence’ of the organization. These icons operate as lodestones within the culture for they act as the embodiment of the
organization – its character congealed in a magnetic element to which members genuflect – or reject - depending on their interpretation of the organization and its ideals.

Unlike the British military (although this may change), the British Police service (that is the warranted police officers as opposed to the civilian police staff) is unusual in only having a single official hierarchy: every officer has to serve time as a constable (minimum number of 2 years ‘on the beat’), and there is – at the moment -little direct entry to senior positions. As a consequence of this historical lineage, plus the conventions that police officers do not jump ranks, the notion of ‘doing time’ in the appropriate position to secure the necessary experience and gain professional credibility has become a crucial aspect of street cop culture, and might be the equivalent of a sacred touchstone. However, what happens when the context for the lodestone starts to shift – as Neyroud suggested in his 2011 review of police leadership? Certainly the then British Prime Minister, David Cameron, suggested that police leadership has lagged behind the shifting context and failed to move with the times. As he said in the House of Commons in July 2011, ‘At the moment, the police system is too closed. There is only one point of entry into the force. There are too few, are arguably too similar, candidates for the top jobs... I want to see radical proposals for how we can open up our police force and bring in fresh leadership.’

Since then, Direct Entry at both Inspector and Superintendent has been introduced and while the latter has provided only a handful of recruits, the former has been rather better supported. These, and the Fast Track constable scheme, are all intended to challenge the status quo but axiomatically these are all long-term projects that cannot be expected to generate radical change in a short time frame.

Of course, this does not mean that operational credibility in real policing is a pre-requisite for promotion. Promotion is not rooted in the appreciation of peers but in the assessment of superordinates: it doesn’t actually matter what peers think of you; what matters is what the boss thinks of you. In some sense, then, ‘street cred’ operates to rationalize the subordination of the majority by questioning the ability or understanding of the minority.

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But the point we are making here is not that the cultural lodestone of street cred for street cops protects them from above – it clearly does not, nor are we suggesting that street cred is a lodestone for all the police – it is not; we are instead suggesting that street cred may be a cultural lodestone for street cops and that if one wanted to change the culture of street cops then this lodestone would need to be successfully challenged. In the next section we explain the methodology adopted to examine this issue.

Leadership development and HPDS methodology

As Rosenzweig (2007) and Antonakis et al., (2010) have suggested, quite often research is restricted to a successful group of subjects but this leaves unanswered questions both in terms of conflating correlation with causation and through biased samples. Bryman (2004: 275-277) suggests that given such problems, research into the kind of fields that this research addresses ought to be rooted in a more qualitative approach in which the researchers displace anxieties about objectivity by being more transparent about the nature and limits of the research.

With these concerns in mind, in 2009/10 the authors were asked to undertake a review of the HPDS, by what was then the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA), now the College of Policing. The HPDS was first launched in 2002 as the scheme to replace the previous Accelerated Promotion Course (APC); it was open to any police officers up to the rank of Chief Inspector to identify people with the potential to reach the rank of Superintendent. The old format of HPDS was then suspended in 2006 and re-launched in 2008 after an 18-month review by the NPIA. It was designed as a five year fixed programme with an academic partner involved, resulting in a nationally recognized Postgraduate Diploma and Masters qualification. Approximately 60 officers at constable and sergeant level were selected for the scheme each year, and it was advertised as ‘hard to get on and hard to stay on’.

We were particularly interested in whether the scheme would have any impact on the prevailing police culture, whether the respondents thought that time-served experience was a critical aspect of this culture, and whether the scheme would challenge that in any way.
To circumvent some of the methodological problems mentioned above, our research methodology of this project adopted an inductive approach (Eisenhardt, 1989), including a mixed methods approach (Bryman, 2006) of face-to-face interviews with twenty-five existing members of the first cohort, along with four officers who have been successful without the scheme, supplemented by an on-line survey of forty-three officers who were unsuccessful in their application, and a workshop with the final cohort (6) in March 2017. To establish whether there might be a cultural lodestone of the organization we asked all groups what aspect of the police they considered critical to personal and organizational success. We did not have the resources to consider other officers unconnected to the scheme and used existing research to represent their perspectives.

We interviewed participants from the first cohort of the HPDS revised scheme who had just completed the first two years of the 5 year programme with all six modules of the Post Graduate Diploma in Police Leadership and Management successfully completed, dissertations submitted, and who were about to embark on the two year consolidation phase. The choice of participants was based on a funding limit that restricted us to 25 of the 65 officers in cohort 1 who were randomly identified from across the cohort, although care was taken to ensure that there was a mix of gender and Black and Ethnic Minority (BME) officers. It was realised that due to geographical locations some of these interviews would have to be undertaken by telephone and not face-to-face, which was the preferred approach. In the event 23 were face-to-face interviews and 2 were telephone interviews.

To explore the experiences of the individuals on the scheme we adopted a qualitative, semi-structured approach to the interviews, which lasted, on average, between 90-120 minutes. We also adopted an interpretive approach to the data analysis, manually coding for recurrent themes and then two of the researchers checked the results for consistency (Gabriel, 2004). To get as high a level of honesty from the participants as we could, trust and empathy needed to be ensured, and the interviewer (one of the authors) was chosen due to their familiarity with the scheme as well as having an understanding of the police as a profession; however they were not involved in any of the teaching and thus played a liminal role in the scheme itself – ‘betwixt and between’ in Turner’s (1987) phrase.
At the start of every interview, each officer was briefed to tell ‘their story of HPDS so far’ from when they first decided to apply, through to where they were two years into the scheme. They were also reassured that any of the information that was shared would be totally anonymous and no names or forces would be used in the data. During the interview itself, if the officer required some guidance, the interviewer had the use of an aide memoir of questions to help keep the officer’s ‘story’ relevant to HPDS and their experiences. Any intervention was kept brief so the officer being interviewed was given autonomy to phrase and sequence the interview to suit their thoughts, opinions and experiences.

To be able to compare the outcomes, successes, thoughts and experiences of the HPDS officers, some of the officers who had applied for the scheme, but who unfortunately were unsuccessful at stage 3 of the selection procedure, were also contacted. There was not the funding for face-to-face interviews and so a survey was constructed and used. The NPIA sent out an email to 109 officers asking them to contact the researcher if they were interested in taking part in the evaluation. The web link for Qualtrics was sent by email to the 55 who responded and this generated 43 responses, with 38 fully completed questionnaires; a 78% response rate, 69% success rate. All the data received were totally anonymous. The survey itself was compiled using an on-line questionnaire asking the group of officers to give their experiences of HPDS, including questions around the selection process, why they applied and how they, their force and colleagues, perceive HPDS. The questions were predominantly open questions with comment boxes allowing respondents to give their personal thoughts. This was deemed the best approach despite the time consuming nature of analysing this type of data.

The third group contacted were to ensure the evaluation research involved a full comparison of what can be achieved in terms of leadership development without a fast-track scheme; again the costs of an extensive round of interviews were beyond us so we decided to limit the number to just four officers who had achieved a recent rapid promotion without attending HPDS. This allowed us to investigate how they had gained leadership development during their careers so far, their thoughts on leadership in general, and their perception of HPDS as well as fast-track programmes in general. Again, before each interview the officers were briefed about why the interviewer was there, along with the
reassurance that no names or forces would be used in the evaluation data. And as with the HPDS officers, each of the four case study participants was asked to talk openly, using narrative to describe their career to date: promotions, role models, awkward situations, and relevant memories. They were encouraged to tell the personal story of their policing career, with the guidance being given by the interviewer to treat the meeting as an opportunity to reflect on their personal career profiles.

The final data set was drawn from a workshop with cohort six in their last year of the programme, in March 2017. 60 officers were present for this and notes were taken by one of the authors while another facilitated group discussions and then a plenary session on the nature of police culture and the presence – or absence – of cultural lodestones.

In the next section we examine the results of our research into the HPDS by considering the thoughts of the four different groups before discussing the implications and drawing some conclusions. The quotes used are representative of the groups.

**HPDS & the cultural lodestone of credibility.**

**Successful HPDS officers (cohort 1 and 6)**

While promotion is not dependent upon peer assessment of credibility, this issue did seem to be of critical significance to a large number of officers on the HPDS. As one of the participants of the HPDS suggested, ‘PC (police constable) work is important for credibility as a leader. You need to have been in some of these uncomfortable situations. As a senior officer making difficult decisions, putting PCs at risk, you need to understand what they are being asked to do.’ (PEV17A_0601)

In the past, HPDS was regarded as more of an ‘old boy’s network’ which provided officers with a ‘rubber stamp’ to fast promotion up the ranks; officers were deemed by many outside of the scheme as being promoted too soon, using too many buzz words, therefore
lacking credibility. In the words of one HPDS interviewee: ‘Promotion too quickly can cause an officer to trade their integrity for that promotion’, (PEV104C_2401).

However, the HPDS is more than a university-based educational programme: it is also a scheme that sees members positioned in different parts of the organization for relatively brief periods of time to maximize exposure to different aspects of the police service. Thus, with officers being in a position or rank for such a short time, it did not necessarily give them the level of experience that was seen as appropriate by other colleagues to warrant a promotion. The evaluation found that the revised scheme seemed to mirror the ‘6 months here, 6 months there’ fast-track method; which again led some colleagues in their forces to treat it with cynicism and a lack of respect. ‘There is a stigma linked to it’ one participant suggested, ‘You are seen as a butterfly – flit-in – change – flit-out. Old scheme, new scheme [it’s] all seen as the same.’ (PEV11A_2511).

The reputation of the old HPDS scheme discouraged some of the officers interviewed to apply for the revised HPDS scheme. There was a perception that to apply for HPDS you had to be a graduate, middle class, know the right people, and be aloof and arrogant. They were not deemed to be ‘real people’ and therefore ‘not respected’; they were perceived to have an attitude that they were better than everyone else. Note here how credibility seems to stretch beyond the issue of experience to that of attitude. So, on the one hand, a very common assumption was that ‘Credibility is dictated to by how much time you’ve done the job’ as one participant suggested. But on the other hand, others thought it was as much to do with acquiring the right attitude as well as sufficient experience. Despite being initially advertised for constables and sergeants only, one or two newly promoted inspectors were accepted onto the programme. One of these inspectors commented that as a constable this would have been far too early in their career and there would have been no opportunity to use any of the learning; but as an early inspector it was all very useful. As an inspector they felt that it helped them ‘buy credibility’ with more senior officers, but if they were at a lower rank, it could have ‘lowered my credibility’ therefore damaging their overall reputation within the force.
Cohort six also considered this against their experience of direct entry officers – which did not exist when cohort one were going through the scheme. As one officer said,

The introduction of the direct-entry superintendent in my force hasn’t totally enamoured himself in the organization... is that the culture of the police not giving him the opportunity? Is it because he is not good enough? Or is it because of lack of credibility. They are at a disadvantage because it means that they do not enter the role ‘hitting the ground running’. (C6.02317.7)

In effect, the programme operated in both directions with regard to credibility – it enhanced those with a sufficient level of seniority and learning but undermined those with the opposite. But what about those who did not make the scheme: did they have a different understanding of the importance of time-served credibility?

Unsuccessful HPDS candidates

The first question asked was why they had applied for HPDS. There was a list of 18 possible reasons: 94% acknowledged they applied ‘to help implement and be part of future change’, 87% wanted ‘the challenge’ and 76% ‘to become a better leader’. When asked ‘can you please comment how YOU perceive HPDS within your force?’ opinions were very mixed: despite many critical and negative comments there was some positivity. However, most of the more negative comments were about a lack of understanding of HPDS, both between officers and across their forces and also the feeling that HPDS was all about promotion without adequate experience (comments were made by 8 of the respondents). Several reflections noted the controversial issue of promotion (recently made more difficult because of operating under the government’s financial constraints): ‘HPDS is at present a tool to be promoted.’ Or, ‘It is the only way to get promoted to the rank of sergeant.’ However, some of the comments were less damning – ‘How colleagues perceive HPDS is dependent on the credibility of the student’ said one; while another seemed to sum up the position of those not on the scheme well: ‘The consensus of the masses is that HPDS officers move too quickly vertically when they should be moving laterally. Increased salary will come, officers need to slow down and gain respect.’ There were also mixed opinions on the
reputation of the individuals currently on the scheme but the stigma of being a good leader with no experience was still an issue that many kept raising. Did officers who had gained rapid promotion without being on the scheme have similar concerns about the scheme?

Successful Non-HPDS

There were two male and two female officers interviewed and their responses were very similar to each other. All four interviewed were very clear about the importance of credibility – it was considered critical to be able to speak from a position of knowledge if you were going to be recognized as a credible police leader. Moreover they also felt that there was only so much that an individual could learn through training and courses; being a credible police officer and leader could only be learnt through experience. The superintendent who was interviewed felt that his credibility stopped him making impossible demands on the officers in his team because ‘I’ve done the job’ (PEV101C_1101).

Linked to credibility, was the importance of consolidating any learning and positions within the police: demonstrating the ability to learn from mistakes; accepting that to do the job you had to know the job, and that being confident in a role (that one had already done) gave confidence to others; in effect credibility meant learning the trade to prove to others and yourself you could do the job. All four of the senior officers interviewed felt that they were all promoted for demonstrating, and therefore evidencing, their abilities to do the role. They were also agreed that there was an element of luck - ‘fluke’ was the way one chief inspector put it - in getting to where they were today; but they all felt proud that it was on merit (as well as luck) and not just for completing a course. In contrast, these officers felt that the new recruits of today were too focused on promotion; they were not making the right decisions for the public, but what was right for their career. There was too much focus on rank and not on the actual service that was being delivered.
Discussion and conclusion

This evaluation of the HPDS scheme was based on an inductive approach that sought the responses of police officers from the course itself, from those who achieved success without the course, and those who failed to make it onto the course. Using four different groups enabled us to sidestep the usual methodological inadequacies of just using self-reports from successful participants. Moreover, the consistency of the views about the scheme from all four groups lends triangulated support to the conclusions reached. However, we recognize that we do not have a representative sample of police officers and that our conclusions, therefore, are tentative.

It seems clear that one of the crucial criteria for occupational jurisdiction of street cops— that is culturally legitimated leadership—seems to be operational credibility. On the other hand, credibility also seems to be more than just ‘time served’; it is also about commitment and attitude and the latter also serves as a reminder that unreflective experience is also inadequate. In effect, therefore, we suggest that credibility—defined as reflective experience—might be seen as a cultural lodestone for the police: it might be the arbiter of legitimated success, beyond which you cannot pass if you do not have it, and the marker that distinguishes friend from foe. This does not mean that it operates as a promotion limiter as seen from above, but that it might be perceived as a limitation on the effectiveness of leadership from below. This has four implications.

First, where HPDS is perceived as a rapid promotion scheme without recourse to experience—rather than a personal and organizational development scheme—then it is likely to falter in the face of general antipathy or particular antagonism. This is important for assessing other emergency services leadership development schemes beyond the police.

Second, the demands of the contemporary police service are significantly wider than ‘aggressive law enforcement’. This being the case there are many voices now suggesting that the traditional culture of the police and its associated seniority-based promotion schemes are radically out of touch with the present day requirements (Neyroud, 2011). If the perception of the government is that time-served experience is indeed a cultural
lodestone that actively inhibits change and sustains the occupational jurisdiction of the rank and file, then supporting development schemes that challenges this lodestone from the inside might be a very important strategy.

Third, if one wanted to shake the British police up – for whatever reason – then there are two places to start: from below with the HPDS or Police Now, or from the middle with Direct Entry Inspectors and Superintendents. For the latter approach to work the changes may need to be far more widespread than those currently envisaged. The same might be said of equivalent emergency services rooted in similar experience-based promotion schemes.

Finally, one potential outcome of the creation of the National College of Policing is the partial substitution of knowledge of ‘evidence based practice’ and scientific techniques for a reliance on experience as the prime means of achieving good policing. This would also serve to erode the ‘lodestone’ from within as the professional body develops.

And what might this all mean for cultural change elsewhere? The implications are potentially significant in diametrically opposite directions, notwithstanding the limitations of the data: if radical change is possible through identifying, challenging and transcending cultural lodestones, rather than having to address the entire culture, then this also implies that those keen to protect organizational cultures might do well to embody the equivalent tactics – identify, reinforce and protect precisely the same cultural lodestone.

Bibliography


Wheat sheaf.


