

## DOES 'CORPORATE CULTURE' EXIST?

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### Document Text

CRITICAL FACULTIES ACADEMIC NEWS & REVIEWS Christopher Shea's column appears in Ideas biweekly. E-mail: [critical.faculties@verizon.net](mailto:critical.faculties@verizon.net).

IN TODAY'S CORPORATE culture, amid the cubicles and the Aeron chairs, you can't round a corner without bumping into someone who's yammering about, well, corporate culture.

Blame the buzz on management guru Tom Peters, whose landmark 1982 study "In Search of Excellence" touted "strong culture" as one of the crucial signs of corporate greatness. Peters argued that every good company was like a Mandingo tribe or a Sherpa village: Its long-standing patterns of thinking and acting permeated all aspects of its operations.

Of course, an organization's "culture" can also go bad, as NASA learned this week when the official investigation board concluded that a "broken safety culture" was just as responsible for the destruction of the Columbia space shuttle as any errant piece of foam. Yet John R. Weeks, an MIT-trained sociologist of business, argues that as presently used, the concept of corporate culture is so vague as to be nearly meaningless.

In his forthcoming book, *Unpopular Culture: The Ritual of Complaint in a British Bank* (Chicago), Weeks analyzes the use of the term in the *Economist* and the *Wall Street Journal* from 1994 to 2001. His conclusion: Journalists and analysts will find something good to say about your "culture," whatever it may be, so long as you keep making money.

The most common cliché are that good companies boast "entrepreneurial," "competitive," and "cohesive" cultures, while bad companies are "bureaucratic" and "risk-averse." But the use of these adjectives, Weeks found, bears a suspicious relationship to stock prices. Yahoo!'s corporate style was widely described as freewheeling and "cohesive" in the mid-1990s, he notes. But in 2001, after the company's fortunes had gone south, the *Journal* pronounced that, what do you know, it had been "insular" all along. The Coca-Cola Co., hailed by a *Journal* editorialist for fostering an exemplary "culture of competition" in 1997, was derided as a "command and control" operation in the same paper in 2001, after revenues tanked. (On the other hand, if you're a good command-and-control operation, like McDonald's, you are admiringly dubbed "military.")

Ever the good ethnologist, Weeks also headed into the field to study corporate culture in action. He spent time -- and pitched in -- at a British commercial bank, where he found that "no one . . . from the chief executive to the junior clerks has anything good to say about the corporate culture." (He calls it the British Armstrong Bank, or BritArm, but from internal clues it's clear he studied the National Westminster Bank, or NatWest, which was absorbed by the Royal Bank of Scotland in 2000.) At the bank, he found himself immersed in a Beckett-like world where managers were desperate to change the dysfunctional "culture" even as nothing ever changed.

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department, but these bodies feuded and produced little. Employees did bond a little bit over 9 a.m. videotapes of the CEO extolling the corporate "vision," but that's only because everyone felt "gentle contempt" for the whole exercise. In fact, Weeks concludes, if the bank really has a culture, it can be found in all the mostly good-natured complaining about the tedium and absurdity of corporate life. Working at BritArm, he says, means "basking in the warm glow of adversity, with sympathizers all around."

(Complaining might also mean longer lives for the employees. In a new book from Yale University Press, *Complaining, Teasing, and Other Annoying Behaviors*, the Clemson University psychologist Robin M. Kowalski observes that people who gripe openly show lower incidences of cancer, heart disease, and depression than do the silent fumers.)

But if people do their jobs, and in unguarded moments express "pride and even love" for their employer, Weeks asks, who cares if the bank's employees don't meet the Wharton School's standards of cultural fitness? And who wants an edgy, entrepreneurial local bank anyway?

Weeks, who was in Singapore last week running executive seminars for INSEAD, the European business school where he teaches, said in an e-mail he advises students that if they want to change the culture of their organization, "they should not talk about culture at all, or at least very rarely." Instead, he suggests, they should focus on changing concrete ideas, actions, and behavior patterns. After all, if you read the official NASA report, it wasn't a flawed "culture" that caused the Columbia disaster. It was specific people doing specifically stupid or sloppy things.

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#### **Abstract** (Document Summary)

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