

Today, we're going to look in to one of the choice phrases used by some of the more elite, high-achiever leaders in business and the nonprofit world. So, maybe they're talking to some other executives about the strategic direction of their organization and then suddenly say, "Of course, you know that culture eats strategy for breakfast." Then all the executives in the group nod in agreement. But wait, just what was that phrase again? This is it: "culture eats strategy for breakfast." But where did that phrase originate...and what does it really mean...and is it really true? Let's peel all that back by starting with *where the phrase came from*.

Well, that catchy phrase is most often attributed to Peter Drucker, the most famous of all those modern management gurus...in fact, he's often credited as being the "father of modern management." But that attribution to Drucker in the mid-2000s is just a little bit murky. But it did come to the attention of many in that era when it was used by the CEO of Ford Motor Company, Mark Fields. I suspect Fields might have used it and specifically credited Drucker so that he could personally gain credibility and momentum in his role as CEO at Ford. Regardless, the phrase suddenly had real visibility and traction.

So...what does "culture eats strategy for breakfast" really mean? Well, a general understanding is this: no matter how good or astute your strategy is, if your organization's culture is not truly aligned with your strategy then that strategy will fail, sooner or later. And if your workplace culture is *very much unaligned and really entrenched*, then the strategy you need will indeed fail *sooner*, very early on...you know, like very close to the beginning...at breakfast-time! Yes, that *is* when "culture eats strategy for breakfast."

But now here's the big question: is that phrase really *always* true? Well, now, that's an entirely different type of question. First, let's start by granting that the idea that "culture eats strategy for breakfast" is clearly *sometimes* true. And here's why that happens. Organizational cultures can be and often are a very powerful and complex interweaving of deep-rooted forces, like people, power, processes, expectations, history, myths, bureaucracy, entitlements, legal issues, allegiances, alliances, lethargy, indifference...and even more! And needed strategy is always a threat or challenge to several of those cultural dimensions.

So, the truth is, some of those key cultural factors can and often do effectively work together to defeat the necessary strategic stewardship for an organization to continue to survive...let alone thrive. Culture can eat strategy for breakfast...and that can and does lead to the ultimate failure of that enterprise.

Why? Because the failure of an organization's culture to embrace a revitalizing strategy simply opens the door for savvy competitors to step in. And, unsurprisingly, that organization's customers and employees quite happily move to fresh new more-enterprising competitors. Hey, some organizational cultures really do win—those that do flexibly embrace fruitful strategies of the most profitable stewardship for others!

So, indeed, the idea that "culture eats strategy for breakfast" is true when several of those key facets of unaligned culture vigorously work together to defeat good strategy. And many cultures don't learn this until it's too late—so that's when the entire enterprise becomes impotent and fails. And this *is* the ultimate drift of businesses and nonprofits, the drift that serious leaders must recognize and deal with as long-term stewards: in due time, your organization surely will fade and ultimately die to its great purposes.

But wait, there *are* cases where strategy can be and is properly designed and thus can indeed change the organization for the better...and, yes, *then even sustain that organization!* And here's the core way that can happen—*when the strategy itself is designed to include and execute the necessary cultural change* that's essential for the needed strategy to become rooted and ultimately succeed.

But think back on those words—they are crucial: *the strategy itself must be designed to include and execute the necessary cultural change essential for the strategy to be come rooted and ultimately succeed.* So the point is this: culture will not eat strategy for breakfast if—and only if—the strategy is designed to successfully address the bad culture! So, the famous saying is *not* always true—fresh strategy can succeed when properly designed and executed in the context of handling cultural obstacles and change!

Hey, have you heard the term *Skunk Works*? It was coined as a part of U.S. defense contractor Lockheed Martin by its Chief Engineer Kelly Johnson. Lockheed's Skunk Works was born in World War II when the U.S. needed to create an extraordinary aircraft, so Johnson strategically isolated a key team from the rest of the company to do just that. Their result was the creation of the astounding P-80 Shooting Star, a fighter airplane created in just 143 days that went on to win the world's first jet-versus-jet dogfight. On its website, Lockheed Martin states Skunk Works' elite, ongoing mission to "[build the world's most experimental aircraft and breakthrough technologies in abject secrecy at a pace impossible to rival.](#)"

Guess what? Likewise, many business leaders have formed skunk works teams of their own in order to defeat internal cultures with a strong propensity to destroy strategic initiatives. Yes, isolated, innovative teams created to do things much differently than the larger corporate culture. In this way, the words "skunk works" came into the business world. Yeah, strategy can be crafted to overcome cultural obstacles! 'Course, none of that is a surprise to God. We know from both His story in the Bible and modern-day happenings that God totally understands and perfectly works around real cultural obstacles when it comes to His Kingdom and its citizen-believers. Consider these amazing dimensions we read about or observe.

We know *only God understands the full extent of problematic cultures and the strategy needed to overcome it all*. But God forged His strategy of His unshakeable Kingdom (Hebrews 12:28) on the foundation of Christ and Him crucified. Yeah, His Strategy was in place before humanity's culture was compromised or even established—the Bible says the Lamb was slain before the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8)! But soon, the pattern of cultural resistance and obstinacy was birthed...then settled in.

Yeah, Adam and Eve ate of the tree at the suggestion of the serpent. Later, God sent a flood to bring humanity to a small remnant—Noah's family—that in turn fell short. After that, God chose Israel, a people who, despite His repeated help and deliverance in many situations, resisted God and failed in their culture.

But when Jesus was sent "in the fullness of time" (Galatians 4:4), the cultural obstacles of religious Pharisees and Roman officials seemed to win—they actually congealed and colluded to what appeared to be victory over that radical Jesus. But God's strategy fully anticipated and actually accommodated those corrupted cultural obstacles! Jesus's death on the Cross that was wickedly precipitated and carried out by that culture was actually part of the strategy! And all eternity is anchored on that truly awesome strategy...

Still, strong cultural obstacles to God's strategy remained then and remain even to this day...yes, Paul was compelled by the Holy Spirit to write his often blistering epistles designed to correct very strong cultural teaching and practices that worked to diminish Christ and Him crucified...yes, the Revelation to John (chapters 1-3) tell of the self-derailing of several churches...and yes, during the two millennia since the Cross, many churches and denominations have eclipsed Christ and the Cross with a deadening stressing of Mosaic law and with Christ-diminishing political and social priorities. This kind of mess has always been common: many Christians define their beliefs by their hardened cultural priorities...not the Cross of Christ.

But God has never been surprised by or unprepared for those cultural obstacles, whether inside or outside churches—He has always had His strategy in play. Yes, God works through His serious disciplers worldwide, believers who help raise up new converts and plant new churches. You see, God defeats cultural pretensions by letting them ultimately defeat themselves...while He always keeps the Way open for every person who ignores the cultural obstacles and pursues true Kingdom priorities.

Yeah, it's sad that many empty churches are clear evidence of the falling away of many a local church as it pursued the social hot-buttons and the distracting politics of their day. But God has a record of fostering His own Skunk Works—tightly-knit churches the world over comprised of a half-billion new believers last century. And the aroma of those "Skunk Works" proclaiming Christ are surely pleasing to the Father!

So, what's your strategy? As a steward of Kingdom priorities—are you part of an exciting God-precipitated Skunk Works-kind of a church? Then you're in the heart of God's strategy...far away from culture's breakfast table! Yes...thoughtful, well-designed strategy can and will leave cultural obstacles far behind...

A&A: Application & Action

1. Is your workplace culture more of an obstacle or more of a clear contributor to needed strategies in order for your workplace thrive in the years to come? Discuss.
2. Does your department at your workplace act more like a revitalizing Skunk Works for the entire organization or more of a bureaucratic drag on fruitful stewardship for the enterprise? Be specific.
3. Is your church more of an obstacle to God's Kingdom purposes for making disciples of all nations or is it more distracted with other cultural, political, or social priorities? Discuss.