



OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH & SAFETY

Elevate Culture by Releasing Adhesions

*Where are nagging sore spots or ongoing areas of dissatisfaction?
Wounds that just don't seem to heal?*

By [Robert Pater](#) | Jan 01, 2015

Ever wonder why changing culture seems so difficult for so many? To the extent that, likely out of frustration, some decree that it's either a very long-term proposition at best or just plain impossible to do, like trying to get a leopard to change its spots. But because companies are comprised of people who change in makeup and mindset through the years, major cultural repairs are attainable when approached the right way.

In fact, I've seen critical cultural elements recast within a relatively short time. For example, one manufacturing company with multiple adamant bargaining units shifted from having significant longstanding distrust/enmity among co-workers and toward management to a climate of most working cooperatively toward Safety and other objectives. Perhaps being stymied at culture-shifting reflects the method of approach. When there's significant resistance, it's not enough just to try to get people to be different, see things in a new light, or just "forget about" or "let go of" previously perceived unfair or unconcerned practices, slights, or injustices. Rather, understand these change-impervious blockages may be cultural adhesions that have to be actively worked out of the system--that the best strategy is to help the organization unearth and dissipate blockages that keep it mired in the past, hampering it from moving toward a higher level of functioning.

Benjamin Geiger is a licensed massage therapist who specializes in helping his clients release and overcome physical blockages. His view is that past trauma, often from previous physical injury, can remain locked in the body and then hamper effective functioning. For example, I have soft-tissue damage from the many thousands of falls I took when practicing jujitsu for more than 20 years. Though I never got hurt from any one fall, the cumulative damage from pounding onto mats

and stiffer surfaces still lingers.

But Benjamin, among many healing professionals, also believes such blockages can stem from traumatic emotional events--or even from longstanding patterns of self-protection from high-pressure environments. Consider that excessive torso tension in many people blocks deep breathing, making it hard to fully oxygenate and expel excess carbon dioxide. Many therapists say tight-chestedness can result from reactions to negative past events; they hold their breath to restrict experiencing distress or anxiety. But breathing deeply and fully is important to leading an energized, relaxed, and high-level healthy life. According to renowned Osteopathic Physician Joseph Mercola, there are numerous "clinical studies into the health benefits of optimal breathing. One such study, which spanned a 30-year period, concluded that *the most significant factor in your health and longevity is how well you breathe.*"

Organizations also can develop emotional scars that impede higher-level Safety and health. I recall two smart, concerned workers in a global energy company having a heated discussion about a supervisor's (who was then untrained) throwing fuel on the fire of a forklift accident. It seemed this person inappropriately attempted to remonstrate the injured worker who was lying trapped, bleeding, and in shock. After asking when this incident occurred, I was told "six years ago." Yet these two workers were as angry as if it had occurred just the previous day! Significant past events can embed lasting, negative memories and reactions that adversely impact present trust, receptivity, and performance.

Four steps to consider:

1. *Identify organizational adhesions.* Where are nagging sore spots or ongoing areas of dissatisfaction? Wounds that just don't seem to heal? What do workers or managers continually grumble about? Often these are so longstanding and prevalent that no one wants to talk about them; they're ignored and go below the surface as everyone thinks, "This is the way it is here and nothing will ever change." But high-level leaders know change is possible, so they surface what's really getting in the way of cultural change. They look for patterns of too-low performance to spot default/"knee-jerk" reactions that are stuck long term.
2. *Target blockages rather than pushing new actions.* Where old and dysfunctional ways/habits/defaults dominate, the leader's best strategy is to reduce these adhesions, rather than just come up with new things others should be doing. The key is limiting change focus to one or two problems that are most readily modified, such as reactions to executives who no longer are employed or previous work methods that are now different. Remember that emotional reactions don't

necessarily make logical sense, yet can still trigger responses. See my June 2011 column on decreasing change blockages, "Leadership: Letting Forces Be With You," <http://www.tinyurl.com/PaterForces>

3. *Release through repetition--carefully.* Understandably, long memories can especially be in play with a long-term/older workforce. Here, the key is providing opportunities for workers to express their dissatisfaction *after* the right framing. When there's adequate time to discuss, let them know you're committed to improvements, that you'll do your best to work on these but can't guarantee immediate improvements—nor do you have to power to change everything. Specifically focus on one blockage at a time in a no-blame atmosphere, rather than trying to open up a laundry list of complaints. Continue to remind that the focus is on improving, not blaming or complaining. Do your utmost to stay calm without defensiveness. Think of this as "unraveling" rather than "breaking" past adhesions. No question this might not be not easy or comfortable; consider getting help from someone with skills and successful experience in this.

4. *Replace rather than remonstrate.* Continue to remind people that the way things currently are is not the way they were: "That was then, and this is now." "Ms. Johnson is no longer heading this division, and we now have a very different approach." "I understand, and times have changed."

Want to renew culture and get past stuck same-old patterns? Often the best way is through releasing longstanding negative mental adhesions.

About the Author

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