

Ghosts in the Machine: How to get clear from an unhelpful past and move forward.



Cultural transformation is one of the most frequently referenced needs that we respond to in the marketplace. It is often an imperative associated with a business change being successful over the long term. The challenge is that an organisation's old belief systems - their associated stories and legends - can be deep rooted and hard to shift. Too often leaders are unwilling to acknowledge and reflect on the past and learn from it. Change initiatives can require a renegotiation of 'meaning' from the past and a permanent shift in our relationship with other people, groups, events or even ideas. Only then can something 'new' emerge that is fit for purpose that will successfully carry the organisation's people and ambition forward. Ignoring the past or airbrushing a difficult experience / mistake can exacerbate the problem and do untold damage in a number of very tangible ways.

Cultural change is often hampered by an old or existing Myth or Legend that carries power and, unless explored, will prevent progress.

Living with the past can be difficult – it can feel a bit like trying to drive a new car when you have an old or dirty/blocked particulate filter. You know where you want to get to but are constantly worrying about stalling and the funny noises from the engine which eat away at your confidence to make the journey!

But how can the past have such a powerful influence on the present? It's a bit like trying to fight a collection of ghosts or dementors (if you are a Harry Potter fan) that you can't see – you are dealing with other people's negative perceptions and beliefs from the past that influence behaviours and attitudes today. They are powerful because they work at all levels and stir strong emotions; you recognise your own fear or a loss of confidence in your ability to succeed. This is enough to keep you stuck in the past, unable to really move forward for any length of time.

These 'Ghosts in the Machine' (negative myths from the past) take a number of forms in organisational life. Here is a shortlist of some of the common ones we encounter:

- **Antagonistic Relationship:** "*The other group will only stitch us up again!*" (Repeat the negative cycle of defend or attack)
- **Poor Performance:** "*We (work group or division) are failures. We can't improve our performance and we deserve that poor reputation!*"
- **Inability to Innovate:** "*This is the way our industry works! Customers expect this and would reject any change from the status quo.*"
- **Lack of Confidence in Workforce:** "*The managers can't change – they're not up to the job and I am stuck with them!*"
- **Trapped in Tactical Detail:** "*We'll never be strategic – there is another short term crisis just around the corner so I'd better stay here in the detail to take control of it.*"

Failing Division: Engineering Company

18 months ago, a sizable hole was found in accounts of the 2nd largest division of a private engineering company. It was the fastest growing division and the group had high hopes it would become the ‘Jewel in the Crown’ with innovative services in growing sectors. The situation was rescued with intervention from other parts of the business but the damage had been done – the reputation had been damaged and the Divisional Leader’s voice had diminished as a consequence. The ‘ghost’ was created - there was a prolonged period of low confidence; investment cases were smaller with minimal risk taken, management time was soaked up with constant checking and peer review to the point of paralysis, the unspoken story was that this division and its people had all failed and its future was bleak. By exploring this myth we were able to safely empower the Board again for them to reappraise the past and not be trapped by it.

Teams and organisations can ‘clear the filter or remove the blockage’. But unlike the mechanical part of a car which is easier to diagnose and change, ‘ghosts’ operate at the social, psychological and cultural level where many leaders feel less resourceful. It takes courage and determination to look at sometimes difficult topics, poor decisions from the past, an ex-colleague who is associated with a difficult period or simply an attitude or approach that was proven wrong. In a car, the garage is likely to recommend a new catalytic converter or running the engine at a certain speed for a long period to clear / reset. So what are some of the organisational equivalents available to managers and leaders? Here are x 6 of our key principles to begin to work through exorcising those ghosts in the machine:

1. **Build time and effort into acknowledging the past** – Sometimes it’s as simple as just creating a moment in time for people to ‘let go’. Work at separating out what was ‘good’ about the ‘old’ that you might choose to keep and protect. Support others’ understanding of what you need to ‘let go’ of and why.
2. **Create a compelling ‘new story’** – A vision or reason for change needs to exist in order to compete and win over against the ‘old myth’ or story. This will act as an ‘invitation’ for others to renegotiate their ‘self-image’ and to shift their perspective or relationship with the situation.
3. **Make time for the emotional & personal** – Change happens at a personal level and there is much more than the hard tangible facts. Be willing to listen and support people as they make the journey. Remember no two people are the same.
4. **Show courage in leadership** – People will expect transparency and be sensitive to what leaders and managers are doing / saying. Be authentic! Be willing to share at least some of your personal story including your struggle with the change.
5. **Be consistent** – Follow up, follow through and demonstrate a consistent experience of change. People’s lived experience of what it’s like around here and how you treat them will usually win out above all else. This has to be more powerful an experience than the past!
6. **Encourage resourcefulness** – Provide the right support for people to be able to navigate the change for themselves. It might be a simple structural change, e.g. a redesigned process or simpler form or some training resource / mentoring. Their sense of autonomy and mastering the ‘new’ is important.

So with the right approach and commitment, moving on successfully from unhelpful aspects of the past or old myths is more achievable than some would have you believe. If you are willing to take a look at the past and renegotiate what it means, it can become a powerful resource for your future ambitions!