

# A Culture-Centric Strategy for Sustaining Change

by CPT Daxson Yap

## Abstract:

This essay highlights the need for the SAF to focus on understanding its own organizational culture (as opposed to continuing to define and espouse it) as a first step towards implementing change. Only with an understanding of the mechanics of culture and the elements of the SAF's culture can a coherent plan be formulated for building a mindset that embraces change. This culture-centric strategy will be a cornerstone of the SAF's ability to continually adapt and remain relevant in a dynamic environment.

*Keywords: Organizational Culture; SAF Core Values; Culture-Centric Strategy; Military Culture*

## INTRODUCTION

*"Whosoever desires constant success must change his conduct with the times."*

– Niccolo Machiavelli

In March 2004, then-Minister for Defense Teo Chee Hean announced in Parliament that the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) would embark on a transformation journey to ensure that it meets current and future operational requirements.<sup>1</sup> Six years later in 2010, he reported that the "key building blocks" for transformation into the Third Generation SAF were in place<sup>2</sup>—new platforms had been delivered, the Army, Air Force and Navy had been fundamentally reorganized, and new people development schemes were introduced to recruit and retain the personnel needed. Consolidating these fundamental changes and combining new platforms into an integrated capability occupied the SAF, along with the high tempo of overseas deployments to Afghanistan and the Gulf of Aden. Then in 2011, the watershed General Elections and the Presidential Elections heralded the "tipping point" where societal agitation for participatory politics and information "democratization" came to a head in the most competitive elections since the People's Action

Party came to power. Notwithstanding the backdrop of an uncertain global geopolitical landscape, these internal and domestic issues highlight the sustained pace of change that the SAF has had to undertake. If anything, the consistent theme since the 9/11 bombings has been the need for the Ministry of Defense (MINDEF) and the SAF to continue maintaining this pace in order to successfully navigate its future course in this dynamic environment.

The challenge of remaining relevant in the face of change is evergreen. Over the past four decades, MINDEF and the SAF have always been able to successfully forecast the drivers of change, identify trends, formulate strategies and implement plans to stay ahead of the game. Organizational culture also became part of the dialog in the early 1990s, resulting in the promulgation of the SAF Core Values in 1996 as a larger effort to create a value-based culture.<sup>3</sup> These broad strategies of building a value-based culture and focusing on nurturing strong leaders in order to sustain change might not be sufficient as the events of recent years have shown that global, domestic and internal drivers of change will manifest at a rapid pace. In addition, the mental models and strategies that have worked well in the past, and that

current leaders hold to be true, might not be valid in a “new normal” environment. The game has changed—and without instilling the ability to sustain change within the organization’s culture, the risk is that the necessary changes will not take root in people’s beliefs and therefore behaviors, despite the leadership’s best efforts.

The SAF needs to focus on understanding its own organizational culture (as opposed to continuing to define and espouse it) as a first step towards implementing change. Only with an understanding of the mechanics of culture and the elements of SAF culture can a coherent plan be formulated to effectively build a mindset that embraces change. This culture-centric strategy will be a cornerstone of the SAF’s capability to continually adapt and remain relevant in a dynamic environment.

## WHAT IS ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE?

There are many definitions of organizational culture but the most widely accepted definitions revolve around a similar understanding of culture as a set of shared beliefs learned from past experience. Edgar Schein, Professor Emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Sloan School of Management defines organizational culture as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way you perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.”<sup>4</sup>

This definition breaks down an amorphous word and provides insight into the tangible elements of culture as assumptions or habits that are learned from past experience and considered valid due to past successes. It further leads easily to an explanation that culture is

often the hardest organizational attribute to change—because it represents group habits that are basic and difficult to unlearn. Schein posits that organizational culture can be viewed on three levels: (1) artifacts, (2) espoused values and (3) assumptions. Artifacts refer to the tangible or visibly identifiable elements in an organization. These are the unique rituals or items that can be recognized by people not part of the culture. Militaries all over the world have a comprehensive set of artifacts (uniforms, hair-cut, parades, protocol, unit slogans, initiations—just to name a few) which uniquely identify military personnel from normal citizens. Espoused values are the organization’s stated or desired cultural elements. Most obviously, the SAF’s values are represented by the SAF Code of Conduct and our Seven Core Values.

The Officer’s Creed and Warrant Officer’s Creed are also espoused values for the respective communities. Assumptions are then the actual underlying, implicit beliefs of the culture, which are not necessarily the same values that are espoused. Linking this back to Schein’s definition, these assumptions are the “truths” that have “worked well” in the past and therefore are seen as valid by the collective community. These beliefs may be subconscious and hard to recognize even for members of the culture.

This frame of organizational culture is appealing because it gives an idea for how one should go about effecting cultural change. The issue to focus on is the underlying assumptions of the group, and not the superficial artifacts or espoused values. It leads to the realization that if one were to merely change the visible artifacts and dictate a set of values, organizational culture—that is, the way that “things are done around here”—will not change. The key is finding a means of surfacing these assumptions, and to convince the group that these assumptions are no longer valid. Until the leaders are aware of this and find a way of changing those shared assumptions which have worked well enough in the past to be

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considered valid, the desired culture will remain superficial and the artifacts, that are not anchored by deeply held beliefs, will disappear with the leadership that espouses it.

### WHY IS CULTURE IMPORTANT?

Precisely because culture offers a means of creating lasting change, it is a hugely important area for all leaders to understand. Many management authors have written well-known books on the importance of organizational culture in affecting organizational behavior and performance. Stanford professors Jim Collins and Jerry Porras wrote *Built to Last*, a book that studied dominant companies in 18 key industries to find out the secret that made them successful for so long. What they found was that the key distinguishing characteristic between companies that “lasted” compared to those that did not, was the strength and clarity of their cultures—their espoused ideology, values and purpose for existence. They hypothesized that culture leads to success because it motivates people to greater performance by engaging with the emotional elements that drive them—the need for identity, camaraderie, and purpose.

In the military domain, historians often neglect the role of culture and focus on areas such as leadership, doctrine or training in analyzing the reasons for victory. Yet military culture may be “the most important factor not only in military effectiveness, but also in the processes involved in military innovation, which is essential to preparing military organizations for the next war.”<sup>5</sup> In *Does Military Culture Matter*, Murray uses the example of the German Army between the two World Wars as a prime example of the importance of military culture. The Treaty of Versailles had imposed a limit on the size of the German army’s officer corps and Hans Von Seeckt, the Chief of Staff at the time, turned the officer corps over to the control of the general staff. This resulted in fundamental change in the organizational culture to include “thorough, systematic analysis, a willingness to grapple with what was really happening on the battlefield, and a rigorous leadership selection process.”<sup>6</sup>

In 1932, Generals Werner von Fritsch and Ludwig Beck, who would go on to assume control of the German army after Hitler came to power, rewrote their basic doctrinal manual, *Die Truppenführung*



Commanders discussing tactics

(Troop Leadership), which served as the basis for the combined-arms battle doctrine which the Germans used in World War II. The opening paragraphs of that manual encompassed the fundamental cultural assumptions of the German army:

1. The conduct of war is an art, depending upon free, creative activity, scientifically grounded. It makes the highest demands on individuals.
2. The conduct of war is based on continuous development. New means of warfare call forth ever changing employment.
3. Situations in war are of unlimited variety. They change often and suddenly and are rarely discernible at an early point. Incalculable elements are often of great influence. The independent will of the enemy is pitted against ours. Frictions and mistakes are an everyday occurrence.<sup>7</sup>

While this does not suggest that the German Army's culture is the paragon of all cultures, the point to take away from this example is the power of culture in shaping military effectiveness. It is crucial for the SAF to take this "culture-centric" approach as a complement to the current "people-centric" approach as a strategy that not only reflects the primary importance of developing our people, but also addresses the issue of how they work together and respond in the face of change.

#### WHAT CULTURE IS NECESSARY TO SUSTAIN CHANGE?

This perspective that the SAF needs to continually adapt is not original. In 2010, CPT Sean Wat suggested building a culture of innovation and explained the need for "not just the leadership but every member of the armed forces to be an innovative element" on the battlefield.<sup>8</sup> He made the point that innovation will be necessary in an era of increasing complexity on the battlefield and as a means of better engaging soldiers who are very comfortable with technology.<sup>9</sup>

The pace of technological advances is astounding and continues to accelerate. It used to be the case that civilian commercial applications were found

through technological breakthroughs made in the process of military research. The Internet is the most famous example of this process. Today, however, given the ever-shrinking commercial product cycle and the labyrinthine bureaucracy of defense procurement programs, it is now civilian commercial technology breakthroughs that are leading to military applications. The use of smartphones with customized applications on the battlefield demonstrates the paradigm of centralized information turned on its head.<sup>10</sup>

In *Capacity to Change* (C2C), the authors suggest that large organizations like the SAF are akin to complex adaptive systems and its leaders "should find ways to allow creativity to emerge naturally within organizations rather than impose pre-conceived solutions."<sup>11</sup> With the technological trend laid out earlier, more power is placed in the hands of each individual soldier—competitive elections in 2011 have also shown that the younger generations are agitating for greater participation in all areas of society. The evolution of war-fighting in a networked manner requires soldiers to take more initiative and adapt tactics according to the tactical situation on the ground. Such trends mean that the SAF will need to be comfortable in an environment that shares information more readily, decentralizes decision making and places more responsibility on each soldier on the ground.

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The authors of *C2C* also argued that the existing MINDEF and SAF mindset is focused on efficiency and effectiveness. Effectiveness because we will always need an organization aligned to mission-driven outcomes, and efficiency because resources will always be outstripped by an inexhaustible list of legitimate demands.<sup>12</sup> These twin precepts will unfortunately come into tension with the capacity to change—"to continuously reinvent, to remake oneself to stay relevant, to be able to respond to disruptive changes."<sup>13</sup> It is clear however, that in order to stay relevant and

remain successful, MINDEF and the SAF must manage these tensions.

### WHAT IS OUR CURRENT CULTURE?

Before we can even proceed to lay out a roadmap for cultural change, it is necessary to attempt to understand the SAF's culture. If you know your destination but do not know your current location, how will it be possible to decide which route to take? In *Built to Last*, Collins and Porras argue that any cultural change should start with the existing core values of the organization in an effort to preserve them while stimulating progress. In addition, it is useful to identify potential elements of the SAF's culture that might be at odds with change readiness. This task of attempting to unpack the cultural elements of a large and complex organization is impossible to accomplish in this article, and will require months of interviews, surveys and open access to and observation of the conduct of the SAF's daily operations. This was exactly what Schein did when he authored *Strategic Pragmatism – The Culture of Singapore's Economic Development Board*. The book's first chapter notes that the EDB was a "spirited, proud, high-morale organization that believed in itself completely yet wanted to find a way to become more conscious of its vulnerabilities and shortcomings."<sup>14</sup> Sound familiar?

In COL Kelvin Koh's essay, "Communicating the Third Generation SAF: An Inter-Cultural Challenge?,"<sup>15</sup> he attempted to analyze the SAF's culture and hypothesized that Singapore's culture can serve as a proxy for the SAF's. To that end, he cited Dutch social scientist Geert Hofstede's typology of cultural dimensions at the workplace and the associated ranking of Singapore under this framework to infer several characteristics of the SAF's culture. Of the four cultural dimensions used by Hofstede (Power-Distance, Individualist-Collectivist, Feminine-Masculine, and Uncertainty Avoidance), of particular interest is Singapore's ranking as the top nation most comfortable with uncertainty. Without delving

into the research methodology, this finding clashes with lay impressions of the Singapore work culture and COL Koh admits this as much when he suggests that a more detailed study into these findings are needed before drawing any conclusions.<sup>16</sup> This is an example of the difficulty in attempting to understand an organization's culture by proxy. The point is that there is a need for a serious and academically sound study into the SAF's culture.

It is interesting to note that as early as 1972, Dr Goh Keng Swee had already recognized the need to anchor the SAF on a common set of unique beliefs and habits to overcome our lack of a strong military tradition or history of successful campaigns.<sup>17</sup>

The British Army, especially the infantry arm, cultivates pride, loyalty and comradeship among its officers within the framework of the regimental tradition. ... We have tried to transplant these practices in our army. I have come to the conclusion that they do not work, and possibly cannot be made to work. Indeed, it would be astonishing if it were, otherwise, seeing that not only are our military systems different, but also that we are two different peoples, with different histories, customs, social values, individual perceptions and group responses. We will have to find our own methods of fostering esprit in the officer corps, which will fit into our own social environment as well as our systems of military organization. I do not believe that this can be achieved by resorting to gimmicks; it will be a long term and long haul effort over many years.<sup>18</sup>

However, our efforts to imbue behavioral traits in our people have relied on espoused values such as the SAF Code of Conduct, Oath of Allegiance and Officer's Creed. Even with the promulgation of the SAF Core Values in 1996,<sup>19</sup> the authors of *Spirit and System* acknowledged that the decade of educating SAF personnel on the core values had likely been overly prescriptive.<sup>20</sup> The seven values of Loyalty to Country, Leadership, Discipline, Professionalism, Fighting Spirit, Ethics, and Care for Soldiers were meant to "act as the foundation upon which a quality armed forces is built" and were expected to "shape the SAF's professional beliefs and attitude and

determine how members of the SAF go about doing their task.”<sup>21</sup> Artifacts such as the recitation of core values prior to water parades were widely used to drum them into the minds of our young soldiers. Such artifacts are representative of the prescriptive approach which misses the point of instilling these values as fundamental beliefs. This superficial treatment of group behavior will prove ineffective in grooming leaders and men to be adaptive and make value-based decisions in situations without clear right or wrong choices.

If one were to scan the *POINTER* articles written on culture in recent years, only COL Koh’s piece attempted to analyze the SAF’s current culture. Perhaps the *POINTER* monograph *Spirit and System* comes closest, with its historical re-telling of organizational beliefs, albeit from the perspective of leadership development. Thus far, only the most visible feature of the SAF’s culture has been highlighted and it is not the purpose of this article to decipher the essence of the SAF’s culture. Rather, in laying out a framework for organizational culture and a method for understanding a group’s culture, leaders on the ground can apply this understanding to their necessarily unique situations and personalities. What follows is a model for viewing the SAF’s culture, in a bid to decipher how to proceed with changing it.

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It should first be recognized that the SAF is not a homogeneous organization. It is made up of three services, each with a distinct history, set of experiences and therefore, culture. Taking this structural breakdown another step, the services are themselves made up of fighting units and staff departments which necessarily operate differently based on platform, mission role, training and purpose. This zooming in on the cultures of the “sub-groups”

that make up the SAF offers some traction in thinking of the SAF’s culture. Seen in this light, the culture of the SAF mostly consists of the various cultures of its constituent units. More practically, to the individual servicemen and women of the SAF, the unit’s culture is the organization’s culture. This frame offers the view that focusing on each individual unit is perhaps the key to instilling broader organizational change.

## HOW DO WE CHANGE OUR CULTURE?

The central strategy proposed in this paper emphasizes a “culture-centric” approach and requires first a deep understanding of the subconscious assumptions that underpin the collective habits of the group. Second, with Schein’s model of organizational culture, specific initiatives can be organized at the level of culture that is targeted for a clearer understanding of the mechanism by which it will change beliefs and thus behaviors. Finally, the strategy calls for intentionally creating latent capability to introduce new changes.

It has been suggested earlier that the SAF should commission a culture study, similar to the EDB effort, as a means of understanding itself better. Analogous to self-mastery as the basis for personal development, a deep understanding of the its own culture will form the basis of all of the SAF’s organizational development efforts. At the same time, it should occur to Commanding Officers (CO) that an intimate understanding of their unit’s culture is not as difficult as trying to dissect the SAF’s culture. With a smaller group of people, it is quite possible for the CO and CWO to have deep conversations at the unit level to tease out the basic assumptions that govern how unit personnel work.

## THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP AND A SENSE OF URGENCY

Besides the need to understand culture as a framework and identity, the role of leaders in the formulation and execution of this strategy is the key success factor. As part of his larger work on change management,<sup>22</sup> Professor John Kotter, Professor of Leadership, Emeritus at the Harvard Business School,

emphasizes in *A Sense of Urgency* that leaders will need to skillfully cultivate a sense of urgency in making changes.<sup>23</sup> This entails convincing the group about the impetus for change and managing the pace with “quick, easy successes” so as to generate and sustain the momentum. Kotter also makes clear that leaders should not take this to mean that crises should be manufactured or allowed to deliberately happen as it creates an angry backlash if people feel manipulated.<sup>24</sup>

## SUSTAINING CHANGE

There can be no change if the organization is unable to free up capacity in people and resources to formulate and execute a transition plan. In *C2C*, the authors propose giving employees space, in terms of time, resources or intellectual bandwidth,<sup>25</sup> to build the spirit of “defense entrepreneurship.”<sup>26</sup> There are also mechanisms within MINDEF and the SAF that generate institutional flux, such as imposed scarcity and temporary special project offices to allow for structural evolution.<sup>27</sup> Creating meshed networks that will cross-fertilize ideas and results in cognitive capacity far beyond the sum of the network’s parts is also a strong strategy.<sup>28</sup>

The demographic trends need to build a full-spectrum force to deal with the wider range of threats and situations, and fulfill international expectation of participation in overseas missions all force the SAF to be more judicious in the allocation of capacity. The result is that leaders need to maintain a strategic reserve for unforeseen change.

## CONCLUSION

The task of changing an organization’s culture is arguably the hardest task of any leader. Previous essays written about culture have focused on what shape the SAF culture should take and specific initiatives. In laying out a framework for understanding organizational culture, it is hoped that this article has provoked thought into how these initiatives to bring about organizational change fit under a wider cultural strategy. If SAF leaders are better able to understand their own units, diagnose elements resistant to change, and design effective

cultural transition plans, it is more likely that change will be sustained and the organization will be in a better place to continually handle change. 🌐

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