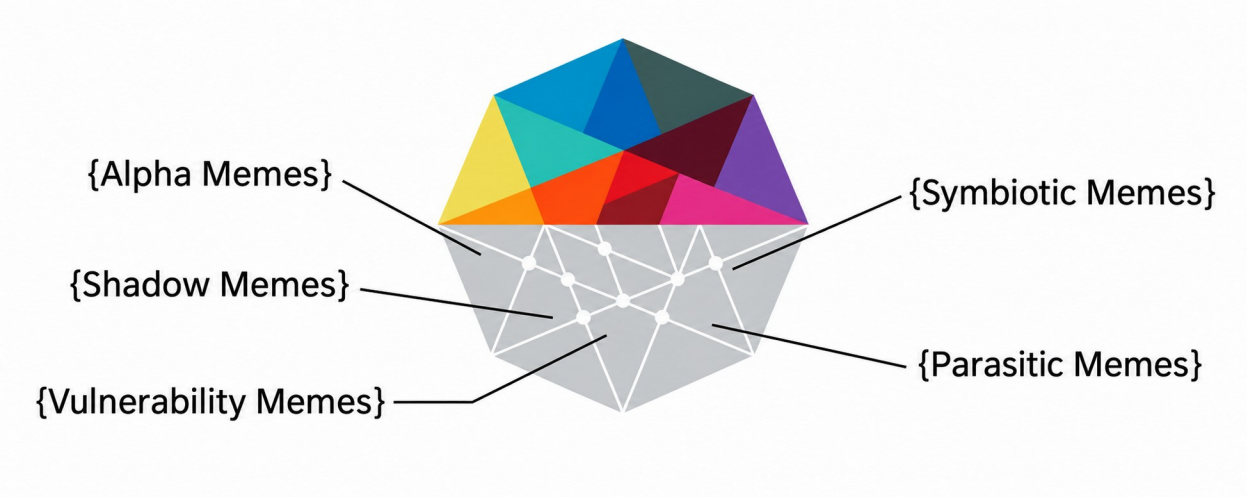
CULTURE DESIGN

All Memes Are Not Created Equal

Memetic Monday 9.14.26 | Authored by Jason Burnham



Cultures are complex adaptive systems and memes are their DNA.

We have opened with that line for years and it still earns a raised eyebrow. Fair enough. The word meme has been colonized by social media sound bites and animated GIFs. So let us define what it actually means, because the memes influencing your employees' underlying beliefs are propagating across your organization whether you realize it or not. A meme is a unit of culture that replicates across a social system. An idea, a phrase, a story, a shortcut, a rule of thumb, a behavior, or a practice. It spreads by being repeated. It survives by being useful to the people repeating it, which is not the same thing as being useful to you or your strategic vision.

Information moves through an organization as memes, not as words. Your all-hands deck is words. What two people say to each other in the hallway afterward is a meme, and that is the version still circulating in March. The reasonable response to this is a shrug. Interesting, but what changes tomorrow? Well, once you accept that culture evolves from memes, you stop asking whether the message was clear and start asking how the message was received. Those are different questions with different answers. A clear message nobody believes in is dead on arrival. A muddled one everybody replicates is your actual culture, and it will outlast the deck, the consultant who wrote it, and most of the people who were in the room the day it launched.

If you have run a culture program before, you know the shape of what comes next. A launch, a set of values on the wall, real energy for about six weeks, then the quiet return of how things were. A lot of you reading this have lived it and are being asked to believe in the next culture initiative anyway. It is rarely a failure of effort. The writing is almost never the problem either. Town halls, internal newsletters, values workshops and manager toolkits do the jobs they were built for, which is to inform people, make a decision visible, and get a calendar aligned. None of them was built to change what an organization already believes about itself, and none of them is worse for that. The work sits one layer down. That layer usually has nobody assigned to it.

That layer is where the sorting begins. All memes are not created equal. When we run a Memetics Frame Analysis, we are not building a list of phrases. We are sorting them, because the sort determines the response. There are five primary categories of memes, and each one behaves differently in the wild.

Alpha: The central themes and defining features of the way your culture is thought about and admired. Alpha memes are the ones people volunteer when you ask what it is like to work here, and they are usually shorter than your values statement, such as *we are inspired by our mission*. They spread without a budget. Find yours by listening for what gets repeated in rooms you are not in. Most leaders can name the meme they wish were alpha. Far fewer can name the one that actually is.

Symbiotic: Topics that form natural synergies with your alpha memes and spread on their own. These are the highest-leverage points in the whole taxonomy and the most commonly wasted. A symbiotic meme is a ritual, a nickname, or a piece of shorthand that carries your alpha idea without ever being mandated. One example might be, *we live our values*. You cannot manufacture one reliably. You can notice one, protect it, and get out of its way.

Vulnerability: Characteristics and weak areas that make a culture vulnerable and unsustainable. These are the beliefs that seem to be fine until the day they do not. *If it is not broken, do not fix it* is the classic, and it is perfectly rational right up to the moment the market moves. Vulnerability memes do not fight your change. They simply cannot carry it.

Shadow: Antagonist thoughts and beliefs that work against the long-term health of the culture. Shadow memes are rarely stated in a meeting. They sound like *why do I need to change, am I the one doing it wrong?* They are protective, they are often earned, and they carry the memory of the last three initiatives that went nowhere. Treat resistance as information rather than as an enemy. A shadow meme is telling you exactly what

somebody is defending, who taught them to defend it, and what it would cost them to stop.

Parasitic: Distractions and diversions that pull conversations away from your topical strengths, organizational mission, or strategic goals. Parasitic memes are the reorg rumor, the sidebar about the new tool nobody asked for, the recurring gripe that dominates the first fifteen minutes of every meeting. *When will this program be over?* They do not argue with the strategy. They eat the attention the strategy needs.

Sorting memes matters because each category takes a different response and treating them all as a communications problem is how good strategies die quietly. Alpha memes get amplified. Shadow memes get reframed, honestly, in a way that respects the original concern rather than dismissing it. Vulnerability memes get shored up with capability, not with slogans. Parasitic memes get starved of the airtime they feed on. Symbiotic memes get fed. Five categories, five responses, one diagnosis underneath all of them.

The failure mode we see most is structural rather than personal. A new message gets written, tested among the people who wrote it, and launched into an environment nobody has surveyed. Nothing in the process asks what the phrase has to compete with, because no step in the process owns that question. So the new language meets a shadow meme that has been winning arguments in that organization for eleven years, and loses on contact. Then the story becomes that people resisted the change, when what actually happened is that a well-written sentence was sent alone into a fight it was never equipped to survive, against an idea with a decade of head start, a dozen people willing to repeat it, and a real grievance underneath it.

The work starts with an inventory, and the inventory is easier than it sounds. You do not have to invent a standard to measure against, because your organization has already written down what it says it believes. The values are on the website, the purpose statement went out with the strategy, and the behaviors are buried somewhere in the performance review. All the inventory asks is whether those are the words people repeat when nobody senior is listening. So before your next all-hands, write down the ten phrases you genuinely hear repeated back to you, sort them into these five categories, and notice which column is longest. Refer to that list when you review our Workshop Wednesday content, when we put a structured version of the exercise on the table.