CULTURE DESIGN

The Smallest Unit of Culture

Memetic Monday 9.21.26 | Authored by Jason Burnham



Memes are the smallest measurable units of culture. However, most organizations still assess their culture according to stated values and whether or not people are living those values. However, each value is a larger cultural concept made up of smaller, observable units. A value is a label for a bundle of habits, stories, and phrases.

For example, a stated value like “Integrity” is not a single behavior someone can copy. It is an umbrella for many phrases, habits, stories, norms, and repeated behaviors that collectively communicate what “Integrity” actually means in that organization.

Culture is too large to hold in your hands, so most programs try to change it whole. The values refresh, the engagement program, and the new operating principles each aim at the entire organization at once, and each one arrives with a launch date. Last Monday we sorted memes into five kinds. This week the question is smaller and more useful. What is the smallest piece of culture that can actually move from one person to another?

The Big View

Values, purpose, and brand identity are real, and an organization that never defines them tends to drift. We have written plenty of brand identity statements and we would write most of them again. The trouble is what we expect them to do on their own. A value is a label for a bundle of habits, stories, and phrases, and what people actually catch is one piece of it, from one person, on one ordinary afternoon.

The Organizational Meme

An organizational meme is the smallest unit of culture that one person can pick up from another in a single exposure and pass on without the original author in the room.

Three tests sit inside that definition. One, the unit is small enough to copy on one hearing, and it keeps traveling when the person who started it has left the conversation, and then the meme carries a belief with it whether or not anybody ever states the belief out loud.

A Meme in Practice

A meme in practice could be a phrase, like "let's take this offline." A habit, like the pre-meeting where the real decision gets made before the meeting that announces it. A story, like the one every new hire hears in their first week about what happened to the last person who pushed back.

Each of these can be learned in one exposure. None of them appears in a values statement, and every one of them teaches something about how work actually gets done here.

What You Can Count

Size matters because the unit decides what you can observe, count, and change.

You cannot audit Integrity. You can count how often "let's take this offline" closes a disagreement in the Tuesday leadership meeting, who says it, and what happens to the topic afterward. That count is data.

Your organization is already producing the data every week, in every meeting and every hallway, but none of it is captured.

Every Meme Carries Weight

Every meme carries some weight. “Let’s take this offline” teaches that disagreeing in front of others is risky. People who sit through enough pre-meetings learn that the formal meeting is theater, and they stop preparing for it. The story about the last person who pushed back tells every new hire exactly what candor costs, in a single anecdote, before they have met their own team.

Nobody designed those lessons or signed off on them, yet people learned them the way a child learns an accent, by hearing them enough times from people who mattered.

Why Programs Can Miss the Memes

That is why so many culture programs feel busy and change little. They work at the level of the bundle of behaviors that support a value. Because the value is what appears in the strategy, while the memes keep circulating underneath, untouched and continuously propagating.

In this illustrative composite, an organization relaunched its values with real care while the phrase everyone actually used about leadership kept circulating at every team lunch for another two years. That outcome was nobody’s plan, because the program had no step that looked at anything smaller than a value.

Finding Memes Takes Listening

Finding memes takes listening rather than surveying. A survey asks people to rate a value, which returns the bundle with a number attached.

Listening returns the units of memes: the phrases people use in their own words, the habits nobody documented, and the stories told to new hires. Three places are worth an afternoon each. Sit with a new hire in their first week, arrive ten minutes early to a meeting, and listen to how managers explain a decision they did not make.

The Five Categories of Memes

Once you can see memes, the five categories from last week become usable. You sort phrases, habits, and stories into alpha, symbiotic, vulnerability, shadow, and parasitic, rather than sorting abstractions nobody can point to.

And next Monday we look at why some units spread through a whole company while others die in a single meeting.

Try This Before Friday

So, try this before Friday. Pick one value your organization already publishes on its website and write down three units you have seen carry it in the last month: one phrase, one habit, and one story.

If you can only fill that list with units that carry the opposite, you have found your real starting point. Refer to this list when reviewing our upcoming Workshop Wednesday content, because the next question is who is doing the carrying.