Your Messaging Has Not Changed the Meme

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A message is something you send. A meme is something somebody else repeats when you are not in the room. Most culture programs change the message. Very few of them ever changed the memes. So, the deck gets tighter. The town hall lands better than last year. The values move off the wall and into the executive review. And eleven months later people are still saying the same thing they were saying before, in the same tone, in the same way. What happened? The message really did change. It was simply never the variable that decides what an organization believes about itself.

We want to be fair to the message first, because the message is doing real work. A clear message settles a decision. It gives four hundred people the same facts on the same morning. It tells a team which of two roads the company took and why. Communications teams are good at this, and they have gotten better at it. So have their tools. The all-

hands, the newsletter, and the manager toolkit each do the job they were built to do. None of them was built to change a belief that has been paying off for people for years. The trouble starts when we ask a well-written sentence to do a second job that it was never designed to do.

So, what decides whether an idea or belief propagates? The messenger, the payoff, and the competition. Start with the messenger. Somebody has to repeat this in their own words, to their own team, on an ordinary Tuesday, with you nowhere in the building. In most organizations that person is a middle manager, and middle managers are your greatest change accelerators or your greatest change resistors, depending on their own beliefs regarding the message. Then the payoff. Communicating an idea has to mean something for the person repeating it. It has to make them look competent, informed, and useful in front of people whose opinion of them matters. Then the competition. Your new message does not land in an empty room. It lands next to an older idea that has been winning arguments in that building since before you arrived, with a dozen people willing to say it out loud and a real grievance underneath it.

Now look at what a rewrite touches. A rewrite touches the words, and the words decide nothing here, because the messenger is still the same manager with the same twelve people, the payoff for repeating it is still whatever it was last quarter, and the older idea is still winning the argument it won in June. You can spend six weeks strategically rewriting one sentence and never change any mindsets or behaviors.

Something else happens along the way. A phrase does not travel intact. It gets shortened, sharpened, and bent. You say the company is moving to a shared accountability model. By the third retelling, that is we are getting rid of the approval step. By the fifth, it is nobody signs off on anything anymore. Each person reframed the message to what they already expected to hear. That is not sabotage, only what ordinary repetition does to language, and it is happening to your strategy right now. The version of your plan circulating in March is the one that was easiest to carry rather than the one you wrote in October.

So, the honest question is not whether the message was clear, but whether it was repeatable, by whom, and against what. We measure clarity at the moment of sending. Replication only shows up later, in somebody else's sentence, on a day nobody is watching, and the two measurements almost never agree. We have sat with leadership

teams who could quote their own messaging word for word but could not name one phrase their people actually use. That gap is the diagnosis.

If you have run a culture program before, none of this is new to you. You have seen the launch, the energy, and the six good weeks that followed. Then the quiet return of how things were. You were probably told afterward that people resisted the change. Usually that is not what happened. What happened is that a good sentence was sent alone into a fight it was never equipped to survive, and the process that sent it had no step that owned the question of what it had to beat. Nobody chose that. It built up over years, in the ordinary way work gets divided, and most of us have had a hand in it.

The repair starts one layer down, with an inventory of what is already circulating, and it costs less than you would think. The inventory is done through listening, sorting, and counting the memes. Your organization has already written down what it says it believes. The website, the strategy, and the review form all carry a version of it. The inventory only asks whether those are the words people use when nobody senior is listening. You are not importing an outside standard. You are holding the organization to a promise it already made in public.

So do this before your next all-hands. Name the three managers whose language your people copy. Write down what each of them said about the strategy last month, in their own words, not yours. Put your official phrasing in a second column beside it. The distance between those two columns is your real starting position, and it is the number to bring to Workshop Wednesday, when we put the structured version of this on the table with the Experience Impact Assessment canvas.