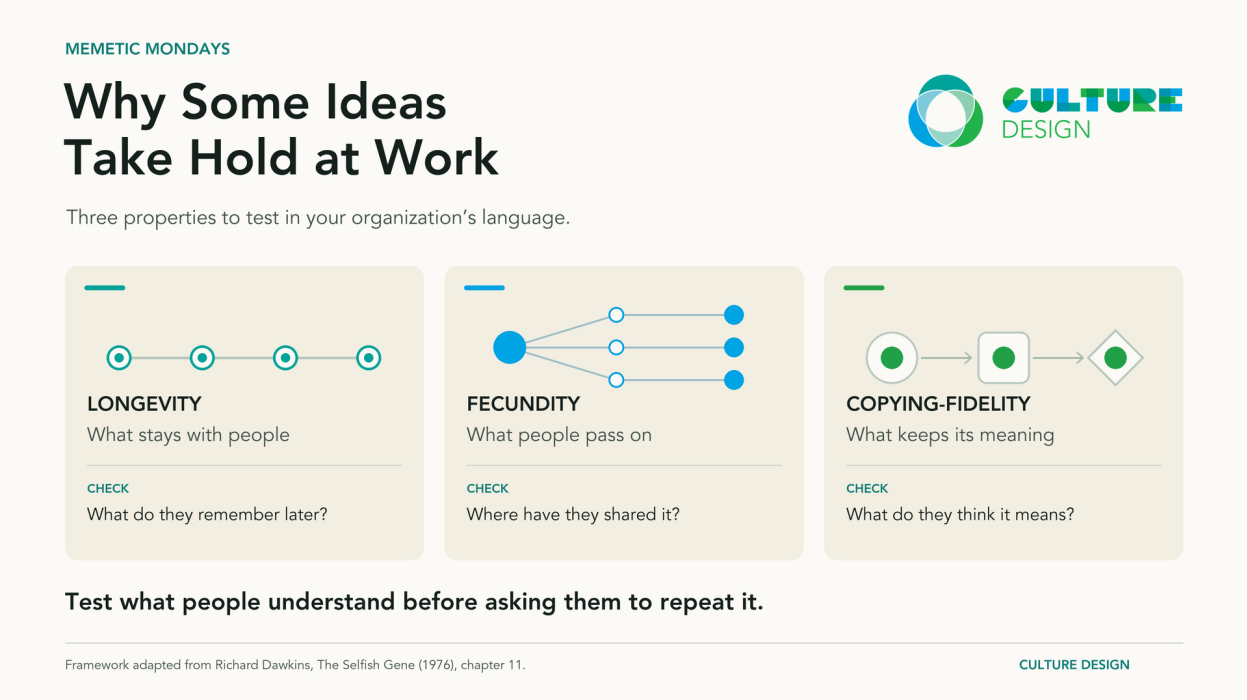
Why Some Ideas Take Hold at Work (and Others Don't)

Memetic Monday 10.5.26 | Authored by Jason Burnham



A clear strategy gives people something they can understand, but getting that strategy into day-to-day decisions takes more work. People need to remember the strategy, see a reason to share it, and explain it in ways that make sense to their teams. Each time they do, they are interpreting the strategy. A manager decides what matters for their function. An employee uses it to justify a decision. Someone else hears a shortened version between meetings and internalizes it based on their own underlying beliefs and biases. Through those interactions, people develop their understanding of what the organization expects. This is where we need to pay attention to what happens next.

The people holding an idea, what they gain from sharing it, and the competing ideas around them all influence whether the idea spreads. The language deserves some attention too. We can approve a phrase because everyone in the leadership meeting understands it, such as, "improve transparency and accountability to build trust". Then leaders disseminate it to those who were never part of that conversation. Employees have different responsibilities and different pressures. They have to work out what it means for them. What does it mean to be "transparent and accountable" in marketing? How would that be different in manufacturing? Or in accounting? You get the point. I worry about how much we leave up strategies up to interpretation, especially when we have spent far more time agreeing on the wording rather than testing what people will actually do with it.

Richard Dawkins described longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity as properties of successful replicators in *The Selfish Gene*, first published in 1976. In the chapter introducing memes, he applied that thinking to cultural transmission. We can borrow those three properties to examine how ideas travel through an organization. The workplace checks below are a practical application of that framework, rather than a validated assessment from the book. Read the chapter here:

https://colinallen.dnsalias.org/Courses/2004-2005_Fall/X755/Readings/dawkins-memes.html

Longevity: How long an idea remains available to people.

Start with what people will remember. A few weeks after introducing a strategic priority, ask people in another function to explain it without opening the presentation. Give them room to answer in their own words. Listen for what stayed with them and what disappeared. This gives you a starting point, but it cannot tell you how long the idea will last, and forgetting a phrase does not necessarily mean someone has forgotten the underlying principle. Check whether employees can connect the strategic priority to a decision they have made in their work. An idea that people use has more support than one they are just expected to recall.

Fecundity: How readily an idea produces more copies as people pass it on.

In an organization, we need to understand why someone would bring an idea into a conversation. A manager might repeat a principle because it helps their team resolve a disagreement. An employee might share it because it explains a decision that otherwise seems arbitrary. Those are reasons to keep using it. If the language feels disconnected from the work, people have less reason to pass it along. Ask where they have used the idea and who they have shared it with. Their examples will tell you more than asking whether they liked the message.

Copying-fidelity: How much of the meaning survives when the idea is passed on.

Exact wording of an idea can change while the intent stays intact. The opposite can happen too. People can repeat the same phrase and attach very different instructions to it. Consider "fewer, better decisions." A leader might mean reducing unnecessary approvals so people can focus on consequential choices. A manager might hear that they should make fewer decisions themselves and send more of them up the chain. Both interpretations are possible. Ask people to explain what the phrase gives them permission to do and what it asks them to stop doing. The difference will become easier to see.

These properties can pull against each other. Shortening an idea may make it easier to remember while removing the context people need to apply it. Adding detail may preserve the meaning but could make it harder to repeat in an ordinary conversation. Values statements are a great example of the problem. People may know that "integrity" is a company value and still struggle to explain what it requires when a sales target conflicts with a customer commitment. The word "integrity" survived, but we still need to know whether it helps someone make that decision and explain it to a colleague.

Fast circulation needs scrutiny as well. "Speed over perfection" might help a team stop delaying work that is ready to test, but it could also become a justification for skipping steps that help protect customers. The phrase alone does not set the boundary. Employees need to understand where to apply "speed over perfection", and leaders

need to reinforce that understanding through their own decisions. Otherwise, the interpretation that makes today's work easier may become the one people actually repeat. A widely repeated phrase gives us evidence of circulation, but we still have to check its meaning and consequences.

You can start testing this before a launch:

1. Choose three phrases your leadership team wants people to use.
2. Ask a few managers whose judgment their colleagues trust to explain each phrase in their own words and describe a situation where they would use it.
3. Write their answers beside the intended meaning. If a score out of ten helps organize the discussion, use it as a provisional judgment and record the evidence behind it. Leave a score open when you do not know.
4. Follow up later to check what people remember and whether they have passed the idea on.
5. Revise the language and the examples where understanding breaks down, then test them again. Before approving the next message, check what people understand it to mean for their work.