When "That's Just How We Do It Here" Becomes the Answer

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There may be a good reason your organization does something the way it does. Someone dealt with a problem, made a decision, and established a practice that helped people get their work done. We should understand that history before deciding the practice needs to change. But we also need to know whether the reason still applies. *"That's just how we do it here"* gives us very little to work with. It tells us what to accept, while leaving the thinking behind it unexplained. And when we accept that answer without looking further, we can carry an old constraint into decisions about the future.

Consider a finance team that rebuilds a forecast manually every month. This is an illustration. An analyst asks why the information has to be copied between spreadsheets

when the reporting system appears to hold the same data. A colleague explains that the team has always done it this way. The forecast is due, everyone is busy, and investigating the process would create more work today. So, the analyst learns the process and gets on with it. The immediate problem is solved. Another person can now produce the forecast. The question about why it works this way remains unanswered, and the manual process gains another person who knows how to maintain it.

It would be easy to call that resistance to change. I would want to understand what people are protecting first. Perhaps the system once produced unreliable numbers. Perhaps a customer required a particular format, or a previous manager wanted an additional check. Someone may have tried changing the process and discovered a dependency that nobody else knew about. Those are different situations. They require different responses. Treating every established practice as an obstacle can remove something useful and make people less willing to share what they know. Keeping every practice because it once served a purpose creates its own problems.

This is where a memetic lens can help us understand culture. We can look at a phrase as something people learn, repeat, and pass on to others. Its usefulness may come from the advice it transmits. “That’s just how we do it here” can save someone an argument or help them meet a deadline. As it travels, the phrase may transmit the instruction more effectively than the explanation. People learn what to do. They may never learn what made it necessary. Over time, a decision can become an expectation that nobody feels authorized to revisit, even when the circumstances around it have changed.

The phrase alone cannot tell us whether that has happened. We need context.

A person saying it once may be frustrated, joking, or giving an incomplete answer because they have another meeting to get to. Hearing it across teams gives us a reason to investigate, but repetition still does not establish that everyone means the same thing. One team may be describing an approval requirement. Another may be describing a manager’s preference. The work is to follow the phrase back to the practice and find out

what people experience when they question it. Otherwise, we risk turning a memorable quote into a conclusion it cannot support.

But what happens when leaders ask people to challenge established ways of working without dealing with the consequences of doing so? Put yourself in the analyst's position. The forecast still needs to be finished. Their manager still expects it on time. Investigating a better process takes time they have not been given, and making a change may require approval from someone they cannot reach. *"What am I supposed to do differently tomorrow?"* is a reasonable response. Curiosity adds work before it removes any. If we want people to improve a process, we have to make room for that work and give them a way to get a decision.

There is also something being learned in that exchange. A colleague's response can influence whether a new employee asks the next question. So can what happens afterward. A manager may welcome suggestions and still leave every suggestion unresolved because there is no time, budget, or clear ownership for acting on it. People can reasonably conclude that raising another issue will accomplish little. Over time, the team may become very capable at working around problems while getting less practice at resolving them. A leadership message about speaking up will have limited effect if employees keep encountering the same obstacles after they do.

A useful starting point is to capture the question as well as the answer. Write down what the person was trying to understand, the practice being discussed, and what happened next. Then ask someone who knows the work to explain why it is done that way. Keep the conversation open. You are trying to understand a decision, and the person explaining it may already have spent years compensating for its consequences. They may also know about a risk you have missed. If the discussion starts with an accusation that the team is stuck in the past, you are making it harder to learn either of those things.

Follow the explanation far enough to check whether it still holds. In the forecast example, the original reporting system may have lacked a reliable export. That gives you

something specific to investigate. You can check the current system, compare its output with the manually prepared forecast, and establish whether the additional work still protects accuracy. A date can help locate the original decision. Age alone tells you very little about whether it remains sound. A long-standing requirement may still be necessary, while a workaround introduced recently may already have outlived the problem it addressed. The relevant test is what the practice does for the organization now.

Then make the cost visible. Start with the time spent preparing the forecast and correcting errors. Look at whether the process delays a decision or depends on one person who knows how to fix it. Be clear about what you have measured and what you are estimating. A rough estimate can support an initial conversation, provided nobody presents it as an audited saving. Compare that cost with the effort and risk of making a change. Some improvements will justify the investment. Others will be sensible to leave alone for now. The purpose of the exercise is to make a considered decision about the work.

Someone needs authority to make that decision and responsibility for following it through. That might be the process owner working with the team, rather than a new committee or another standing meeting. If a change looks worthwhile, test it on a manageable scale and agree on what would count as an improvement. If the practice needs to stay, explain why and document the requirement. Either outcome gives the next person who asks a more useful answer. They can understand what the practice protects, who owns it, and where to take a concern when conditions change.

As you plan for 2027, pay attention to the everyday practices your strategy depends on. A goal to make faster decisions will run into trouble if routine work still waits for approvals nobody has reviewed. Plans for greater collaboration need to account for the handoffs that already frustrate people. These details belong in the planning conversation because they affect what employees can actually deliver. Choose one recurring practice your team struggles to explain. Start by finding the reason behind it, checking whether that reason still applies, and giving someone responsibility for deciding what happens next.