Why Beliefs Travel in Bundles

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We cannot expect people to abandon a belief while we keep giving them reasons to believe it. Yet that is what we ask of them when we announce a new way of working and leave the conditions shaping their decisions untouched. We encourage collaboration, but keep approvals concentrated at the top. We ask people to take ownership, then question why they acted without permission. People learn from those experiences. They then share what they learn with colleagues, and eventually a phrase like "nothing moves until the top decides" becomes useful advice. Changing the language does little if following that advice still helps someone get their work done.

Beliefs also draw strength from one another. A memeplex is a group of memes that reinforce one another and spread together. For organizational culture work, we can use

that idea to examine how shared beliefs become connected. A belief about who holds authority may support another about whether speaking up is worthwhile. Together, they help explain why someone waits, stays quiet, or works around a process. We may disagree with the behavior. We still need to understand what makes it reasonable to the person choosing it. Otherwise, we risk asking people to act against what the organization has taught them.

Consider three beliefs that could coexist in an organization:

1. People believe silos are how work gets done.
2. They believe significant decisions have to wait for the top.
3. And they believe meetings are where decisions get discussed without being settled.

We could assign each to a different improvement initiative, with collaboration workshops for the silos, delegation training for the leaders, and a new agenda template for the meetings. Each might help. But if people need senior approval to resolve anything across departments, a better agenda will still leave them waiting for someone else to decide.

Bring those beliefs together and we can begin to see how the pattern sustains itself. Teams work within their own boundaries because decisions across them require escalation. Meetings become opportunities to brief whoever has the authority to act. People leave without a decision and return to the work they can control within their own teams. That experience gives them another reason to believe that working in silos is the practical choice. The beliefs make sense together because people keep encountering conditions that support them. Changing one part requires us to understand its relationship to the others.

There are different patterns worth examining here. A reinforcing loop is a cycle in which an initial change feeds back to amplify itself. That can support a healthy culture. When people see how their work contributes to a common purpose, they may take greater pride in it. Greater care can improve the work, and visible results can strengthen their sense of contribution. But reinforcing loops can also sustain harm. Escalation can become so routine that people stop exercising judgment, giving leaders another reason to retain control. We need to examine what a loop reinforces before deciding to strengthen it.

Resistance deserves the same attention. Imagine a change announced with little practical support. People struggle to adopt it while keeping up with their existing responsibilities. Some conclude that waiting is safer than committing to another initiative they cannot sustain. If leaders interpret that hesitation as a lack of commitment, they may apply more pressure while leaving the missing support unresolved. In that situation, reluctance contains information about the conditions for participation. We should investigate those conditions before deciding that people are the problem.

Other recurring difficulties involve competing needs. Speed and rigor both matter. So do flexibility and connection. Treating either side as something to eliminate leaves people making compromises without a shared basis for choosing. A useful response makes the tradeoff explicit. Define which decisions people can make independently, what requires review, and when an exception is justified. Those principles need enough detail to guide an actual decision. "Use good judgment" offers little help when people have different understandings of what leadership will accept.

We also need to be careful about how much we infer. Hearing the same belief in several teams gives us a reason to investigate. It does not establish that everyone shares it or that it explains every instance of the behavior. A belief can reflect current conditions, an experience from years ago, or an assumption nobody has tested recently. Something heard once may still point to a serious problem. The work is to understand where the belief holds, what supports it, and where experience contradicts it. A tidy map can conceal those differences if we rush to make everything fit.

My concern is that leaders may read a map of beliefs as a judgment about their employees. Some patterns develop through reorganizations, budget choices, and changes in leadership. Others persist because people with authority continue to benefit from them. We should not assume that nobody intended the arrangement or excuse the people responsible for maintaining it. But blaming employees for adapting to it leaves the conditions intact. Accountability means examining the decisions we control and being willing to change them, including decisions that have made our own jobs easier.

A first map can be straightforward. Write down a recurring belief in the words people use. Place related beliefs beside it, then draw an arrow wherever you think one helps sustain another. Treat each arrow as a proposition to investigate. Identify the approval, meeting, or performance expectation that might explain the connection. Check it against

what people experience, including examples that do not fit. Leave uncertain connections marked as uncertain. The purpose is to make your assumptions visible enough to examine.

A belief with several connections deserves attention, but the number of arrows does not tell you where change will have the greatest effect. Look for a condition you can influence and a reason to expect that changing it will improve people's experience. Compare it with your organization's purpose and commitments. If you promise individual agency while requiring approval for routine decisions, you have a specific inconsistency to address. If a practice helps people make responsible decisions together, protect it. Understanding a culture also means understanding what already works.

This is the purpose of Memetics Frame Analysis within Culture Design's Discover phase. We examine recurring language alongside the beliefs, experiences, and consequences associated with it. Grouping findings into themes can help us organize what we hear. Examining the connections helps us work out what to investigate and change.

Start with one recurring belief and identify what makes it credible. Choose one supporting condition your team can change, name the person responsible, and set a date to review what happened. Ask the people affected at that review whether their experience has changed and what still makes the old advice worth following.