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## TALKING POINT

# Healthy culture starts at the top

By Ron Rowe

**C**HRIS PERLEY'S piece "Changing the culture of our councils" (*Hawke's Bay Today*, February 27) interestingly came at exactly the same time that I had addressed a major organisation on that very subject.

The directors and management team wanted to know why organisational culture was taking on such significance today. They're a proactive board and management team wanting discussion and review of current culture and its relevance today to them and their way ahead. Clearly in a short article I can't relate or bring forward too many aspects that we addressed and reached agreement on.

I started by saying that we hear so very much about the "culture" of an organisation these days that many could be forgiven for believing that it's just another fad of management speak. But this is not one of them! Societal or organisational culture and the importance of this have been with us for eons.

Culture can be likened to the DNA of that organisation (or part), for its "everything" that constitutes the specific characteristics and originality of a

people, or a community, which provides "that organisation's" cultural identity.

Culture is embedded within "every" organisation, whether we want it, or like it, or not. It just is. Maybe the differences are small but different nevertheless.

Society and its communities along with their social organisations are cultural products. The cornerstones of culture are effective communications and social relationships.

Has the culture of the US changed since President Trump's entry to the top role?

Does the culture of an organisation such as a rugby board change because a woman is now the chairwoman or a member?

The answer, based on factual information from many current sources is a definite yes.

For culture is "tangible", it is seen, felt, experienced. It can never be hidden.

It's open for all to see and experience from the actions (or non actions), communications and ways in which the leaders treat their people... be they members, employees, board members, people of diversity, and most importantly their citizens in the case of cities and towns.

Treat them with disdain and no

matter what the culture a leader might want it to be it is the people who will ultimately determine the culture, bypassing the leader.

The leaders of any type of organisations who don't understand or appreciate this put their organisations at risk. Think of past and present leaders and their impact on the sustainability of their organisations, more importantly the legacy that they leave. Sometimes it's disarray. And then wonder how it happened. Or worse, blame others. Effective, highly regarded leaders do not shift blame.

The way in which societies distribute the benefits and products of human creativity, and very importantly, human loss, and "the meanings" that social groups attach to them, often based on history and loss, says a great deal about the leadership and that community.

A good example is the aftermath of the 1931 earthquakes and how it affected Napier, Hastings and much of Hawke's Bay.

Yet so vital to that was the immediate help and following each year after, to today, is the manner and way in which that is commemorated. All of these components are integral to the culture of Napier, Hastings and

much of Hawke's Bay and to New Zealand. The losses and service sustained in war is also an integral sustaining part of a location's culture.

Culture is born of these many factors and sustained only through effective caring, understanding and values that are deeply held.

This is one aspect addressed, among many, when working with the organisation I refer to earlier.

The last word on this important matter is left to arguably the most effective orator of the 20th century. This person through his leadership changed the culture to change the way of WWII to one of success. Sir Winston Churchill who, in an address to the University of Miami in 1946, said: "Expert knowledge, however indispensable, is no substitute for a generous and comprehending outlook upon the human story, with all its sadness and with its unquenchable hope."

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■ **Views expressed here are the writer's opinion and not the newspaper's. Email: editor@hbtoday.co.nz**