REFRAMING
SUSTAINABILITY

A Cultural
Approach to
Transformative
Change

By Walter Faaij

Content

In the face of the escalating climate crisis, meaningful and sustainable change is imperative

As an anthropologist who has studied the social impact of climate change, I have come to understand that true transformation goes beyond technological innovations, new business models, or policymaking. It requires a fundamental cultural shift. Drawing on experiences in the fields of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG), and sustainability and corporate anthropology, I propose a human-centered approach to driving this change. This involves integrating anthropological insights and methods to navigate the complexities of cultural transformation.

The following text reframes the challenge and the transformation process and outlines key strategies for fostering a culture of sustainability within organizations - emphasizing the importance of dialogue, storytelling, peer-to-peer influence, and local translation. These tools can help navigate the liminal space of transition and facilitate the reordering of the existing order, ultimately contributing to more sustainable and equitable organizations, societies and futures.

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REFRAMING THE CHALLENGE

In 2010, I spent three months in Greenland researching the social impact of climate change. As an anthropologist, this was a fascinating experience. As a human being, it was quite shocking to witness the everyday and fundamental impact of climate change on people's lives. However, this story goes beyond Greenland; it's a story about climate change and humanity.

In the 2010's I started working in the field of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) and sustainability to help counter the effects of climate change, and seek new solutions. Generally, the focus was on technological innovations, new business models and policy-making. The Paris-Agreement in 2015 gave the world hope. But in retrospect it's safe to say the agreement didn't live up to global expectations – we're still on a path towards a temperature increase of over 2 degrees Celsius, while we're also exceeding the Earth's ecological boundaries and depleting ecosystems.

To better understand the challenge we're facing, I took a deep dive into the causes of climate change, which eventually led me into the realms of economics and economic anthropology. The fundamental challenge any group of people faces is to "live on a piece of land without destroying it," and the strategies to address this challenge are what we call "economics."

I came to understand our existing capitalist-based economy in a new way. It's a system built to accumulate capital, which is then used to acquire even more capital. The system is geared towards continuous growth on a planet that has finite resources and clear ecological boundaries. Furthermore, capitalism is about the accumulation of wealth by externalizing some of its production-costs onto society or the environment. Essentially, it's about taking more than you give. With the concept of

dualism, Descartes effectively placed humankind outside of nature. Positioning nature as something to serve humans, this mental framework or narrative has enabled us to exploit nature and deplete the natural resources our planet provides.
I believe this extractive mindset extends beyond our relationship with the natural environment - into the realm of overexploiting each other, ourselves, and, to put it boldly, the future and the children yet to be born.

Each year, Earth Overshoot Day arrives earlier, indicating that we're living on borrowed resources and creating an ecological dept for the future and the people inhabiting that future.

Where reciprocity is a means to create and maintain relationships between people, I believe we've created a society and an economy, a system, based on negative reciprocity – we take more than we give. We're living in a global culture of extraction, resulting in a severe ecological and societal crisis, casting long shadows into the future due to crossed thresholds and ecological tipping points.

I'd conclude that we're not merely in a climate crisis that can be resolved with technology, business models or policy-making. Instead, we need a fundamental culture change. This means we need to deeply understand how culture and transformation processes work, and we can do to foster that culture change.

SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION – CONFUSION, TENSIONS AND POWER STRUGGLES

The first important concept here is liminality. Liminality represents the space between the old and the new - when the old is fading but the new has not yet emerged. Anthropologists like Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep have extensively studied how groups of people navigate change, revealing a crucial third phase, the "liminal phase", also dubbed as 'meanwhile'.

Liminality is incredibly important for successful transformation. Change involves reordering the existing order, which requires us to redefine our world and rewrite both written and unwritten rules. In this context, we also must redefine our relationship with

nature and redesign an economic system that promotes flourishing and reciprocity instead of extraction and overexploitation.

Liminality means both confusion and strong emotions. Victor Turner refers to this phase as "betwixt and between".

This liminal phase is uncomfortable because it brings many uncertainties. We don't know where we stand or what cultural order we have to live by. It's deeply about power, as it involves who gets to define what's normal. This normative power to define the story often leads to power struggles, demonstrations, strikes and all kinds of sabotage.

At the same time, change brings new opportunities and possibilities. Hope alternates with the fear of loss or the need for change. As humans, we often try to shorten or even skip this phase. However, the confusion and not-knowing are the ideal foundations for learning, dialogue and for new sense-making, which is the essence of change.

To address the profound changes and challenges brought by liminality and the overarching ecological crisis, I want to highlight five ideas, tools, or interventions anthropology has to offer.

5 ANTHROPOLOGICAL INTERVENTIONS

1. CAMPFIRE CONVERSATIONS

Anthropology teaches us that nothing holds inherent meaning; rather, we construct or negotiate the meaning of things. Humans are sensemaking creatures, constantly interacting to fill concepts like right or wrong, and sustainable or extractive with meaning. Interaction is one of the most important and powerful drivers of creating culture. Change is about making new sense of the world – reshaping the underlying system of meaning, beliefs, and values. And is there any better way to do this than through dialogue?

Meaningful, open, brave and honest interactions are key in guiding any process of change. Change involves restructuring the existing order, and interaction plays a central role in that process. One way to foster such dialogue is through "campfire conversations", which are geared towards collaborative thinking, exchanging all possible perspectives, and gathering collective wisdom to gain insights. A campfire conversation is a meeting of minds, a transformational dialogue. It stands in stark contrast to the bullet-point meetings we often have in our office buildings, following a strict agenda, offering little time and rarely allowing for exploration, ambiguity, or emotion.

Campfire conversations are essential in the process of making new sense of the world and finding new answers to fundamental or even existential questions. Campfire conversations create a space for liminality, guide the reordering of the existing order, channel insecurity, confusion, and emotions, and facilitate the power shifts that inevitably come with transitions.

2. STORIES – BIG AND SMALL

Big Stories - Narrative of Change

Stories structure reality and provide the mental frameworks through which we perceive the world. They influence the way we think, act and interact. Change is about people, and any change only takes off when people want to be part of the new. That's why a strong narrative of change is of utmost importance. It's about redefining ourselves, revisiting our origins - but also stating the challenges ahead, Change demands us to learn new things, and to let go of old habits, while continuing to excel in what we do best. It is worth taking the time to build this story.

A narrative of change should answer the question: why do we believe in this change? Furthermore, it should meet at least three criteria: factually correct, highly attractive, and easy to spread. It must deal with the real issues, not sugarcoating painful decisions or tough dilemmas, while also inviting people into the new story to 'join the movement' and to participate in building and shaping the new reality. And when the story is easy to spread, it will naturally circulate at coffee-corners and in the informal chatter within the organization. If it's not attractive and easy to spread, it won't work.

Small Stories – Running Reporters
In any organization – especially larger ones – there are pockets of change where people already made the shift and are working accordingly.

The Running Reporters are a small group of people tasked with finding these people, collecting their stories, and spreading them throughout the organization.

These stories showcase the new reality – the future, if you will – and, without stating the old ways of working were obsolete, each story about the new way of working sparks conversations that gradually shift the norm and narrative. These are the stories that influence how people perce ive right and wrong within the context of the organization.

Change can be hard to prove to outsiders, clients, or managers because daily differences are subtle, but over months or years, the change is unmistakable. Like children growing up. These small stories serve as proof of the change program, illustrating how people are aligning with the new sustainability direction. Finally, these stories make the change not only tangible but also very personal.

Once, I guided a culture change program on circularity within a water authority where a mechanic was refurbishing pumps instead of completely replacing them when their pre-defined 'end of life' arrived. He believed it was a waste of money and good materials since only a small percentage of the pump parts needed replacement to give it a second life. By doing this, he saved the company thousands of euros each year, while contributing to its circular goals. After interviewing this mechanic and sharing the interview on the intranet, he was approached by pioneering colleagues who found a like-minded buddy, by colleagues who had never considered this approach but were inspired by it and by management who applauded his efforts. Simply by refurbishing pumps, he had a significant impact. These pockets of innovation and change always exist. Find them and spread the story.

3. BUILDING A MOVEMENT

Creating change is about mobilizing people on a large scale. I don't believe in blueprints for culture change because people are difficult to fit into models and timelines, and every social and cultural context is unique.

A movement emerges when people want to join, and that's why spreading change in a viral way is such an effective tool. Viral Change, developed by Leandro Herrero and enriched by anthropology and my own experiences, is a method that uses the informal social fabric within an organization - tapping into the social connections between people. This approach contrasts sharply
with the more common method of implementing change through large-scale and top-down change management pro-

grams; cascaded down through the organization with water-fall-methods, training programs and lots of formal communication - factual presentations without an appealing narrative of change, let alone space for emotions.

However, most people don't do things because formal hierarchy demands us to (our parents, teachers, political leaders or CEO's), but because our colleagues, friends and peers do so and are enthusiast and vocal about it. Since culture is nothing but shared meaning getting shape through interaction between people - creating change and building a movement is much easier when you tap into the already existing social tissue of an organization.

It's about creating a social tipping point, and when enough people start adopting the new behaviors, a shift in norms occurs.

To unleash peer-to-peer or viral change, a small group of people is handpicked carefully and asked to help spread the change by challenging the existing order, creating a movement, and developing strategies, methods, and local interventions. I like to call this group Green Rebels, but you can give them any name that works in the local context of the specific organization and its lingo. The Green Rebels function as an informal team, but they do have budget, mandate and the support of senior leadership.

4. GREEN REBELS

There are several considerations when selecting and designing the Green Rebels:

▶ Each member should be highly connected within the organization. You want individuals who know everyone and are known by everyone, with high informal social status. The

people who know about the important decisions before they are public, but who also know the latest jokes and gossip. Essentially, you want the people you'd quarantine first in case of an epidemic outbreak since for the aim of culture change and creating a movement, they should be as contagious as humanly possible.

▸ The group should be highly diverse for two reasons. First, a diverse group has a richer understanding of the organization because they see and hear more. Second, they will be better equipped to design interventions that resonate across different departments, teams, and units. The social realities, languages, and primary processes differ between HR and the production line, between strategy and marketing, between sales and IT, between finance and the call center.

▸ Ideally, the group should include individuals from a few specific organizational functions: HR (since organizational change is an HR topic), communication (since it's about storytelling), some management but not top-heavy (since it's about decision-making), and one or two employee representatives (since they wield informal and formal power and bypassing them often backfires).

▸ If you're a skilled facilitator, it's also beneficial to include someone who thinks the change is nonsense. Opposing perspectives are often prevalent in the organization, and by including this voice, you remain aware of it and can design solutions to address it. Often, if this person eventually joins the movement, it has a strong trickle-down effect on those with similar viewpoints. 'If John changed his mind, it's a change worth joining.'

Once the individuals have been invited and the group has been formed, their task is to come up with micro-interventions to attract the first followers and help create a movement. They find and spread stories, start campfires to help the process of

sensemaking, build rituals to mark important milestones, and facilitate emotions, tensions and confusion within the organization. They keep the conversation going to discover new ways and solutions with sustainability as the guiding principle. Essentially, the Green Rebels are guiding the liminal space and facilitating the reordering of the existing order.

5. LOCAL SOLUTIONS

When management decides on sustainability as the new strategy after extensive deliberation, offsites and numerous management-meetings with external consultants - they've been through a process of sensemaking. They've given meaning to the new strategy and all the changes it brings in the distant and near future. However, it's often forgotten that all the other people in the organization also need time to make sense of this change and determine where and how it affects their working processes, projects, client base, hiring process - essentially everything. A 'generic' concept like sustainability has different context-specific, local meanings.

Business units, departments, and teams should be given the opportunity and time to translate the change to their own processes.

This involves embedding sustainability, circularity, or impact to their projects, decision-making processes, planning cycles, yearly objectives, KPI's for individual and group performance, HR rewarding-system, and everyday practices. It requires local translation into specific roles, functions and positions. While most of the day-to-day activities may remain unchanged, there will certainly aspects that need to be altered, stopped or initiated. No culture change occurs without behavioral change.
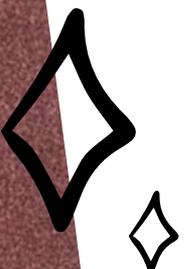
Conclusion

Creating a sustainable future is a complex challenge that extends far beyond technological solutions and policymaking. It requires a deep cultural shift, an evolution in how we think, act, and interact within our organizations and societies. And at the same time it's fairly simple: make the tough choices and start acting accordingly. By leveraging anthropological insights, we can better understand and navigate these processes of change. Through meaningful dialogue, compelling storytelling, peer-to-peer influence, green rebels and localized translation of broad concepts like sustainability, we can mobilize people at scale and foster genuine transformation.

The tools and strategies discussed highlight the importance of engaging people at all levels and embracing the social fabric of our organizations. These methods not only facilitate the adoption of sustainable practices but also ensure that the change is meaningful, inclusive, and lasting.

I strongly believe in the power of anthropology to guide us in this journey of transformation, ensuring that sustainability becomes an integral part of our organizational DNA and a shared value that leads to cultures of sustainability.