

The Value of Traditions During Change¹

Traditions: Past practices (the correct way), beliefs, and values transmitted across “generations” that guide current action

Pride and confidence. People take pride in their history, pleasure in performing traditional practices, and confidence in knowing how things are done around here. The traditional ways, once mastered make the decisions and the job easier, just follow tried and tested traditions. Traditions allows us to be sensitive to the feelings, interests and core values at play, to understand the potential losses at stake and to develop strategies that replace or take these losses into account. “Don’t mess (too much) with my core values and positive feelings.”

Survival value. People are loyal and will stay with the organization. They are committed when the chips are down and will fight for organizational survival during times of crisis; And conversely, the system via the leadership is loyal to me—it will protect and take care of me. “If we are threatened with survival, you can count on me.”

Community spirit. There is a spirit of social kinship, community, clique or family over several generations that has concern for future generations. “If the community changes, I will change.”

Conformity to values. Practices and protocols represent strong community values and feelings. Sometimes these ways become ends in themselves. “This is important in it’s own right.”

Allows commitment to build. Rather than adopt change rapidly only to fall off later, the vested interest in tradition allows commitment to build over time. Traditionality also measures the change advocates commitment to change. Will the leader abandon their effort to improve things at the first sign of strong traditions? “This will take time.”

Protects from trendy fads. Some changes might be too costly and actually threaten system survival. Traditions have withstood the test of time and create a check on the newest fad or whimsy of the current administration or leadership. These raise doubts and brings problems and solutions out in the open and creates a push for more creative ideas. “What’s the flavor of the month?”

Conformity to ethical behavior. Conformity to traditions provide the value base, standards, norms and interpretations for decisions across the organization; People across the org know how info/decisions were generated and how to interpret them; These traditions are enforced locally through direct personal influence rather than via written policy. “Here’s what was meant...”

Provides a basis for control/power. Change requires risk that causes insecurity. Folks who are insecure will cling even more closely to core practices and values which slows down the change effort. It helps them to reduce the differential power between themselves and the new leadership. They feel more in control to influence how much and how fast the change happens. “I’m in the know—the power seat.”

Maintains a mission focus. Folks stay with agreed upon mission that prevents the adoption of strategy inconsistent with beliefs, values. Avoids dilution, shift in mission, mission creep, or duplicative services. Demands the tailoring of change to reflect important beliefs and values; Customizing change integrates the new with the old. New practice is based on the template of existing routines and supported by complimentary activities in operation for years. “Does this fit our local culture and conditions?”

Traditions help organizations survive and create, commitment, community, conformity, pride and confidence.

They help us avoid misunderstanding, minute written rules, trendy change, and mission creep.

¹Paul F. Salipante, Jr.P. 1992. Providing Continuity in change: The role of tradition in long-term adaptation. In: Srivastva, S. & Fry, R.E. Executive and Organizational Continuity: Managing the Paradoxes of Stability and Change. Heller, P.S. 2001 and Honoring resistance. 2001. Philip S.Heller, White Paper.