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# Change the Game: Craft a culture fit for the future of work

Presentation by

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Video and audio versions of this speech are available at  
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## **About the presentation:**

Sometimes it's a question of momentum; how can an organisation hold on to the best elements of its culture in the midst of rapid growth? Other times, it's a question of direction: how can we pivot our enterprise culture so that it's more aligned with our strategy? These conundrums call for more than just a motivational pep talk. If you want your people to be on board as the champions of your organisational culture, then they need to understand the science behind what drives collective behaviour.

## Dr Jason Fox

(An edited selection from Jason's presentation)

If we take a step back and look at what we're doing at an individual and collective level, some interesting patterns can emerge. This is what I want to get into. We're going to be looking at motivation, but through a practical philosophical lens.

I'd like you to think about your life as though it were an autobiography. Imagine your life has this massive story. It's not necessarily true, this is probably the narrative fallacy, it's our ability to make meaning out of random stuff or see causal connections that aren't necessarily there, but it's useful, nonetheless.

Imagine that your life is this big story that's been written down in a big book, and every single moment leading to this moment right now has been written down in this massive book. The story of your life.

If you were to look back on the last few years, I wonder, if you were reading the book, would it be exciting? Would it be interesting for you? Would you be thinking "Oh, this again, okay, all right...." In the last 12 months, in particular, the last 12 chapters, what was going on there? If you were to take a step back and summarise and distil the last 12 months of your life into just one word, what would that word be? Just one word to describe what the last 12 months are.

These are conversations where you can pick the thread up throughout the event and beyond it out into our community.

So this is interesting. I ask people around the world, no matter what type of work they do, no matter what type of country they are in, to describe the last 12 months in just one word, and by far the most common word that I hear nowadays is "busy. If it's not "busy", it's "challenging", it's "change" or it's things of that nature, and, even if this wasn't the word that you chose, I'm sure it's a theme that you can relate to.



We're in a world now where we're busier than ever before. Yes, every generation believes that they're busier than ever before, but what we all do share nowadays is that with the hyperconnectivity that we have now, work doesn't just happen at work anymore. We've got work happening wherever we are. There's always emails, there's always things to do, and we carry work home, with us, and the result is that many of us feel really busy. When we're busy, it's natural for us to feel as though we're time poor, and, when we're time poor, it's natural for us to favour quick fixes, familiar solutions, and default ways of doing things.

These defaults are the options we choose automatically in the absence of viable alternatives. Actually, defaults are quite helpful. We need defaults about 80% of the time. They're the bulk of the work that we do. Our defaults are the options we choose automatically in the absence of viable alternatives.

When we don't have much time we go to our defaults, and this makes sense when we're pressed for time. However, while it really does make sense about 80% of the time, my worry is that for many of us we now resort to it more like 98% of the time. We've become so busy, individually and collectively that it's robbing us of the ability to engage in a slower, more thorough type of thinking.

There's a book by Daniel Kahneman, a Nobel Prize laureate, called "Thinking Fast and Slow". But the essential gist is there are two types of thinking. There's fast thinking, which is quick, instinctual, inherently flawed and subject to cognitive bias, and there's slow thinking, which is much more thorough, where we consider things from multiple perspectives, where we stay in the tension, where we have curiosity and empathy. And that slow thinking usually helps us to arrive at a better decision.

We can't have slow thinking all the time, but my worry is that many of us aren't getting the time to engage in this slower, more thorough type of thinking, and the result is we see a perpetuation of default thinking.



And if we rely only on default thinking, we can work super, super busily and then one day find that our work and our efforts are no longer relevant because we've just lost touch with the community, we've lost touch with the people and the things that matter.

I don't think it's as much of an issue for you guys, because you're working so closely with communities, but it's something that we need to be mindful of when it comes to how we work, the way that we approach our work. I want to give you a bit of a frame for thinking about motivation. I'm going to give you two lenses that I think are helpful.

I think that everyone in this room knows that any meaningful success happens on the other side of good work. There's no shortcutting the work. And so the question then is, how do we get people motivated to do good work - or, more importantly, how do we get people motivated to do great work? Great work where we go above and beyond the default, where we have curiosity and empathy. How do we get people motivated and sustain that motivation to do great work?

This question was asked of over 600 managers in different industries, different organisations, different countries, and these managers were given a bunch of good answers to choose from, from distilled down from various meta analyses - studies of studies. All these are good answers.

Those five things were

- recognition for good work,
- interpersonal support,
- clear goals and targets,
- incentives and rewards, and
- a clear sense of progress.

What do you reckon the number one thing is?

And that's five seconds. So, the correct answer is, of course, it depends, but what the number one thing was they chose was recognition for good work, and it's a really good answer.



What it doesn't mean is completing the second half of your feedback sandwich, where you give them a wafer-thin acknowledgement about something good they might have done and then a whole bunch of shitty feedback laced with personal attacks and another wafer-thin acknowledgement and see you again in six to 12 months. It's not that. It's providing good feedback proximal to the activity. It makes sense.

What the researchers thought might be novel, though, is why don't we ask the employees themselves? Or, better yet, why don't we follow a bunch of employees over several years analysing over 12,000 journal entries to see what correlates to the highest levels of motivation to do great work? It turns out what came out as number one is what the managers ranked as dead last, and that is a clear sense of progress.

This became the number one breakthrough idea from the Harvard Business School in 2010. It's yet to permeate into much of leadership folklore, but it makes a lot of sense. What it means is much less about fixating upon distant goals and targets and much more about celebrating small wins along the way. The more that we can reduce the latency between effort and meaningful feedback, the more likely we are to have people invest effort into things, and, given how chaotic and how ambiguous and turbulent our country is at the moment, it kind of makes sense. If you anchor motivation to a distant goal and then your targets shift, or the politics change, or something happens, it could be devastating. When we rally our focus back on the small wins and accumulation of small wins, that's a pathway to sustaining motivation.

I'll give you an example. Imagine if, earlier in your career – let's say you're working for a different organisation, with a different boss—the boss says to you, "Look, I need you to get this report to me by Monday morning. I have some people coming from overseas. This is terribly important." You're terrible at saying no, so you say yes, and you stay back late and you work really hard, and you cancel cupcakes and shlongs with your friends on the weekend, and you work on this report. You do amazing referencing, proofreading, formatting. Late Sunday night, after proofreading it for the fourth time, you send it off.



You're quite proud of yourself, because you put a lot of work into this. It's really good. You know you went above and beyond.

Monday comes. You hear nothing back from your boss and you think that's fine, they're probably busy with a guest. Tuesday comes and you didn't sleep well because, you know, sometimes you send an attachment and it doesn't go through or it bounces or something. "Hey, just checking you got the report. Just reattaching it here. Just let me know if there's anything else you need." Wednesday comes. Still nothing. Thursday comes. Still nothing. You're a little bit pissy by this stage. Friday morning comes and you start work and you're greeted with an email that says, "Thanks. Turns out I didn't need it."

What we learn in that moment is that should a similar request come about again in the future, it's much more likely that we're going to default to a conservative level of effort because we just don't know if it's going to go anywhere. And this makes sense. We all have a finite amount of time, energy and attention available to us each day. It makes sense that we invest it into the things that provide the richest sense of progress.

Here's a useful heuristic for you. It's not always true, but it's true a lot of the time. Our motivation, our focus, our attention, our behaviour will naturally gravitate to the things that provide the richest sense of progress. You might have 98 emails in your inbox. An hour later, you've got it down to 14. It feels like you're winning.

If you have a clear a clear jug of water on your desk, you'll drink more water during the day because it acts as a progress bar, and the same thing happens with Tim Tam packets. Just take it as progress.

*Meaningful* progress is that which brings us closer to future relevance. What is future relevance? Well, it takes curiosity and empathy to answer that, so you guys are in a very good position. Finding relevance requires a slower and more thorough type of thinking, but what happens is that we find ourselves drawn to the things that provide a rich sense of progress – and the things that provide a rich and immediate sense of progress are very often the default things getting in the way of meaningful progress.



I say this to you because one of the hardest things that happens when leaving an inspiring conference like this is that you're going to leave with a whole bunch of new connections, new ideas, new inklings, new hunches, and new possibilities ... and then you're come back to a whole heap of work that built up while you were away, and there's no magical way of creating new time.

But time can be harvested, or manifested, by reducing the amount of time that we spend on the things that could be considered a rich *delusion* of progress.

We often value *effort* more than we value *value*. What this can look like in some organisations, particularly the way organisations are structured nowadays, is that it's much more of a career advancement strategy to broadcast that you're doing the work than it is to actually do the work itself. What this looks like is a whole bunch of unnecessary emails, people cc'd into emails, emails about emails, meetings about meetings, a rich pantomime of busyness, instead of getting on with the work itself.

One of the things I'd like to offer you is the potential for you to collectively map out and recognise where the delusion of progress exists in the work that you do.

It's this question of what meaningful progress is, and the question of how we can create *visibility* for meaningful progress, particularly when the default settings are so very strong. You'll get this rich and immediate sense of progress from completing emails or doing simple tasks, but the complex ambiguous, nebulous, slow-yielding nature of a lot of the work that you do - you're playing the long game here with a lot of your initiatives - can be really hard to find and sustain visible, meaningful, progress for. The opportunity here is for us to think about what rituals we have in play.

Rituals are like sacred routines, where we deliberately carve out time against the grain of busyness so as to progress the things that matter. For you personally, you might have rituals that are really meaningful and significant for you.

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For some people it's the morning walk, or it's something that they do with a cup of tea in the morning before they start work. For many organisations, there will be this fond memory: “Oh yes, I remember when we used to do cake on Fridays and we'd gather around and people would just celebrate small wins and we'd talk about some of the frustrations and things that get in the way, and it was really useful, it was lovely. We kind of checked in with each other as the complex beings that we are, and it wasn't just about the work and all the things that we haven't done at the end of the week. It was just a nice little thing”.

But, inevitably, those things have gone away. Why? Because we've become busy, and this quest for efficiency, for squeezing out the productivity in every hour, has taken away some of the most important rituals that we have. What I might just offer you is one ritual that I personally do each year

Each year, I suggest you choose one word to serve as a fuzzy contextual beacon for the year ahead. One word to cast 12 months into the future so that, should you wander off track - and you will, we all do - may help call you back into line with what your intention is.

We all had a word for the last twelve months, but I wonder; what might be your word for the next 12 months, the next twelve blank chapters in this autobiography? For me, this is a year of ‘foolishness’. A few years ago, I chose the word ‘kingly’. ‘Kingly’ was all about stepping up, growing a beard, having integrity, looking after folks and stuff. That word brought a lot of seriousness, so I then had the word ‘pirate’. The year of ‘pirate’ was about being more jolly, drinking more rum, exploring uncharted territory, looking after my mates, being savvy and buoyant. I then chose the word ‘gentleman’ - or ‘gentleman pirate’.

And so, being a paragon of aplomb - quality in all things - I then had the year of ‘jester’. ‘Jester’ was about telling truth to those in positions of power and about being comfortable in paradox. Then I had the year of ‘wizard’ and a ‘wizard’ was about being more eccentric, working on my book a bit more, and exploring the cosmos and philosophy and so forth, and here we are at ‘full’.





I wonder what your word might be for the next twelve months. This is a conversation that may take some time. It may take some inkling and some searching, but there's something there, and, if you accidentally make eye contact with someone during a networking break, an easy question to ask is: "What might your word be for the year ahead?"

And, of course, no one really knows what it is yet, but it's an opening to explore together.

ENDS

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For reports, audio, transcripts and video from the 2019 Communities in Control conference and from previous years, visit:

[www.communitiesincontrol.com.au/](http://www.communitiesincontrol.com.au/)

For Jason's podcast and episode show notes:

[The Cleverness with Dr Jason Fox](#)

Jason's e-newsletter: [The Museletter](#). It's amazing.

Selected newsletter articles and more on his website [blog](#).

Jason also recommends: [How to rekindle a sense of progress](#) and [How to harness 'quietly powerful' qualities—conversation with Megumi Miki](#)

