

If you haven't got time to read the book, read this

This is a book about what people and organisations believe, how those beliefs are spread, and consequently how those beliefs can be changed.

There are things that everyone, everywhere does – we move about, we sleep, we excrete, we have sex, we eat, and then we die. These behaviours are carried by our genes. But the ways we do these things differ substantially: our modes of transport, the designs of our bedrooms and bathrooms, our courting behaviours, what we have for lunch, and our funeral rituals all vary from culture to culture and from century to century.

The differences arise because the way we think and act is not inherited biologically but is learned from our parents and our peers. Just as genes carry biological instructions, there must be something that carries information from person to person about what is 'normal' for the group. We now, thanks to Richard Dawkins, call this carrier a "meme".

Memes are more than just viral videos and stupid cat jokes - they carry almost everything that we share with our fellows: language, national characteristics, odd social customs, music, fashions, beliefs, our scientific and technological structures, the side of the road we drive on, religions, political and legal systems, and economic structures. There is no 'inherent' or 'self-evident' truth anywhere, not in politics, religion, society or business. All of these structures are made up of evolving and competing sets of memes.

The reason you should read this book is because memes also transmit the reasons that organisations exist and absolutely everything about the way that they work.

A sign of a healthy business is a simple and consistent set of memes, and it is no surprise that the most successful businesses are often those that adhere to the purpose and direction of the founders. Unbalanced or inconsistent ideas produce sickness in society, in individuals and also in corporations. When organisations get sick the symptoms include any or all of stagnation, defeatism, inability to innovate, fads, excessive change, poor product quality, crushing bureaucracy and internal politics. The good news is that these can all be cured and we have some simple meme-based techniques to help you rebalance the situation.

Now, not everyone absorbs memes readily, and mismatches between what individuals believe and what the corporation believes helps explain why some people will succeed in organisations while others, equally able, will fail. This leads to some interesting insights on mergers and acquisitions. It will come as no surprise to hear that the majority of mergers are outright disasters, even when the rationale for the merger was good and the merger process was competently managed. A hegemony of memes is not only a major driver of takeovers but also a major cause of their failure.

The way you do business is not a set of commandments carved on stone tablets, but rather just a set of ideas that can be adapted or discarded as you see fit. And if the vision, values and methods of organisations are nothing more than memes, an understanding of those memes and how to alter them becomes central to the discipline of change management. The role of the leader is to manage the memes of his team by pruning out bad ideas, introducing better ones, and living the values he espouses.

We can also finally understand the interactions of corporate and national culture. Because our parents and our schools teach us different things in different ways, it is no surprise that national cultures are not all the same. These are deep-rooted structures that can sometimes prevent us from adapting to the ways of foreign corporations. One of the major messages from anthropologists to businessmen should be that if a person places a group's needs over their own needs (and most of the population of the world do) then they will not subscribe to many of the management techniques taught in Western business schools. Seeking to impose Western management memes overseas, or even communicating in the same way as you would at home, can lead to disaster. By looking at differing attitudes to hierarchy, loyalty, ambiguity and duty we can highlight some major bear-traps for multinational corporations. Our pre-programmed attitudes to power and ambiguity determine the organisation structures we feel comfortable working in and how we react to others. And the extent to which we value what we have learned (as opposed to what we have yet to learn) also defines who we choose to lead us.

But aren't national cultures being overwhelmed by Truth, Justice and the American Way? The answer to that is a resounding 'no', as national culture is embedded in the cradle. But the superficial stuff that governs most of our waking hours is horizontally transmitted, mutable and almost overwhelming. Modern media mean that the number and variety of memes that we are exposed to is increasing exponentially. However, individuals are not swept away by the quantity of ideas coming at us every waking hour for the same reason that we are not killed by every sniffle we catch: we have an immune system that regulates what we believe. Big news – corporations have an immune system too!

We see the corporate immune systems every time we hear the phrase "the way we do things around here" – you could say that its DNA is the process manual. A healthy immune system keeps businesses on track and help them distinguish good ideas from daft management fads. But if the immune system is too strong it will stop you from identifying and disposing of out-of-date thinking. As the number of selection pressures on business increase, organisational forgetting has become as important as organisational learning. So if you want to make a change to an organisation, you will need to subvert the corporate immune system, prune the existing memes, introduce new ones, and then rebuild that immune system to protect the change.

The memes don't stop at the corporate boundary, of course. To sell your products, manage your brand, retain your customers or deliver effective change, you have to make your memes stick and that means sneaking them past your customers' immune systems. So we will look at the basis of capitalism, the art of persuasion, and how to make that more effective.

The Success Virus – Summary

For a meme to be transmitted from one brain to another it has to be heard and stored, and then later transmitted and heard again. Appeals to emotion, logic and authority are powerful sales tools, but what really matters is fooling the mechanisms that the brain uses to select the memes that it regards as 'true'. We filter out ideas according to a set of criteria based on novelty, simplicity, usefulness and what we believe already. If you don't understand these criteria, you haven't a hope of influencing others.

The rate at which a meme (such as a new product or a new way of doing things) spreads through an uninfected population is governed by a simple calculation. Easily-spread memes will saturate a population in days or weeks, while their slower counterparts will quickly die out. Mass repetition of forgettable ideas does not work, yet everywhere the advertising industry bombards us with unengaging "me too" advertisements that stand no chance of infecting us, regardless of how often they are repeated. And despite what you may have read, 'social connectors' are not the key to market penetration. They work fine within their group, but people in the mass market believe different things. There is no mysterious tipping point: only growth or extinction of memes.

When your target population is saturated with an idea or a product, however, the arithmetic of belief is entirely different. The rate at which your customers 'defect' is likely to determine your eventual market penetration, and I suggest that advertising for new customers in a saturated market is almost valueless: instead, try to be as loyal to your customers as you want them to be to you.

So this book is essential to management, consulting, marketing, and sales staff, but above all it is a book for those seeking to change minds and organisations. On this journey we will see how the societies we live in and the businesses we operate are nothing but shared ideas. If you understand the memes which drive the way the corporations work and the way that the people within them behave, you have a chance to changing things for the better. This book is your invitation to create a *success virus* – a beneficial infection that will sweep through your business and leave it fit to succeed.