

A love letter to misfits

By [Taazima Kala-Essack](#)

17 Oct 2019

It's so much easier to be a lazy bum when everyone else is one too. Right? Bad habits thrive in numbers. It's easier to be a veritable enemy to progress when you've got others around you doing the same, forming your own little culture of ne'er-do-wells.



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In 1997, Apple released the historic, iconic and downright incredible “[Here's to the Crazy Ones](#)” television spot, and it seems more fitting today than ever before when we look at the culture conversation that permeates our corporate

workspaces as fast as it descends into smithereens. Let's remind ourselves, shall we?

It was, and remains, nothing short of poetry, celebrating the #NotYourOrdinary creatives and those who refuse to be forced into the proverbial status quo; those who are hell-bent on conforming to any definition of standard and/or boring. It's a far cry from the ne'er-do-wells and the sluggards, and yet, if we allow ourselves to occupy that oft-begotten grey territory in between, there's a point to be had. In that little area between the black and the white, the clear lines and the fixed space, is where culture, in reality, lives, and herein resides the very issue.

“Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They're not fond of rules. And they have no respect for the status quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About the only thing you can't do is ignore them. Because they change things. They push the human race forward. And while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do.”

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My clear love for Apple and absolute infatuation with “The Crazy Ones” narrative aside, I have to wonder whether, when it comes to the increasing culture conversation, the answers to our predicament today can be found almost wholly in that TVC. Culture, by its very definition, ought to be fluid. It evolves, it changes, it adapts, and it reflects in perhaps the most authentic way the ideals, purpose and passion of an organisation. We do not need the ne'er-do-wells per say, and the perfect employee or colleague may nary exist, so where in between does our ideal and realistic teammate live, and is he or she the very misfit Jobs narrated about? More relevant, have we made it impossible for him or her, and by extension a business, to thrive?

Good culture is good business

According to a Deloitte study, 94% of executives and 88% of employees believe a distinct workplace culture is important to business success. Moreover, 13 companies that have at some point appeared on Fortune's annual 100 Best Companies to Work For list also see higher average annual returns, with cumulative returns as high as 495% instead of 170% (Russel 3000) and 156% (S&P 500), according to CFO. Good, sustainable culture means good business – it is hard to argue anything otherwise, nor do I want to. Invest in culture, and the numbers tend to go up, by virtue of happier, more motivated and satisfied people.

But here's the rub: it makes sense then that how we strive to create, and sometimes force, a corporate culture needs to be buttressed by something real and tangible. BUT (and I do love me a but), do we then not stand to hurt the very thing we want to create? We want inclusive, diverse and healthily-challenged or stretched individuals and teams - just some of the ingredients in the perfect culture mix - BUT are we risking failure simply by prescriptively forcing a culture, without a real see-saw balance of individuality and business persona?

Obviously, nobody sets out to get it wrong - there are policies, manuals and processes set in place to ensure a true and meaningful corporate culture in any business. We need them, lest we subside into unmanaged, unstructured chaos. But in

doing so, do we box in the very misfits, rebels and crazy ones whose unique individuality stands to make a team or a business great, simply because we want them to fit into some sort of cookie-cutter mold? No doubt everyone can resonate with a situation in which you're asked to do something, do your best, do it as you see fit, "oh but make sure it's done in an XX and XX way". A culture built on unhealthy conformity, micromanaging and the like.

As with most things, it seems, it must be about balance. And moderation - all those great juicy things that make us not lose our sanity. BUT then here's another BUT: surely there has to be a balance between culture being informed by the ideals and founding values of a business or business owner, and yet representative of the kind of people living it. For example, do you hire to fit the culture you want to create, do you build the culture around the people in the team, or you put those hands together and accept that it is wholly possible to meet halfway without having to sacrifice anything but perhaps a wee bit of control.

Rules and guidelines keep us in check; rein in the mavericks when they stray off a bit too far, and prevent a fall into anarchy. BUT, as my favourite quote, albeit repurposed with a bit of a change goes, "well behaved people seldom make history." Let the misfits hold strong, the square plugs defy being forced into round holes, and the crazy ones to live and work to their full potential, because maybe, just maybe, they're the ones who are going to truly change the game itself, and who surprise you by occupying that wonderful grey space of awesome once they settle in.

Sustainable culture

In this plethora of merging and morphing identities, only a few great cultures stand out; more often than not, we have blurred identities *en masse* and higher risks of just plain BORING. And who wants boring? After all, in the culture conversation, that would be near suicide, and truly a far cry from our very real and very necessary need for sustainable culture. People that live the brand; stay par for the course, and all the other wonderful metaphors and anecdotes that make things just right.

While I won't be dying my hair pink before heading into the office tomorrow, I would like to take comfort in the fact that challenging the status quo is accepted and indeed encouraged, and enjoy the fact that if culture is, as we say, fluid and evolving, then the very people empowered to live and learn it play a pretty meaningful role in helping shape it.

Your "crazy" may side on the quirks of Steve Jobs, or the eccentricities of Van Gogh. Regardless, if the "people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do", then perhaps our unending desire to ensure diversity, inclusion and open culture ought to begin by no longer boxing against the very things that make those possible. I say let the crazy run free, just as they rightly should, because #NotYourOrdinary is the only way to live.

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