

Organizational cultures are ripe for change when the familiar starts to seem odd

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Imagine having never seen a handshake.

You would know nothing of the different levels of importance and

intimacy, when it should be done, what's happening during the shake and even whether you can learn something from the shake itself. Trying to learn about it all at once would be akin to learning a new language.

For everyone else, the answers to those questions and dozens more are simply taken for granted—and the handshake, which has survived since time immemorial, long persisted in society as though it were decreed from on high and written in stone.

But the handshake—or private property, organizations and even democracy, for that matter—are not as ironclad as they appear, according to Chris Steele, a professor in the University of Alberta's School of Business who argues in a new paper that the enactment of institutions we take for granted can hang by a thread and can actively generate change.

"In some ways, institutions are incredibly precarious because all it takes is to meet somebody else who also says, "It doesn't have to be like that," and suddenly you can start thinking about how it could be otherwise," said Steele. "Sometimes it doesn't even take that much."

Another example is the act of purchasing something. Steele explained that within a store, shoppers don't stop to think about private property, the market system or capitalism, let alone what money is, what sellers and buyers are or what a commodity is.

"All of that's in the background. It's stuff that you know and that you can use to make sense of what's happening in front of you, otherwise none of it would make sense," he said. "Sometimes it still doesn't."

Making things make sense

Steele argues that making sense of everyday life is only possible because

people continuously enact institutions that can be taken for granted, all in the name of competence.

"If nobody can work out what you're doing, given prevailing ways of making sense of things, you're incompetent," he said. "Competence requires that you produce a world where other people can take things for granted, and you do it all the time without thinking about it."

And though this taken-for-granted world seems robust, little oddities poke away at its weaknesses and it's either constantly being repaired or it breaks down.

Steele said whether you're trying to push for change or trying to stop it, the framework laid out in the paper provides some places you might want to look at tactically. These places include the material environment, the custodians invested in keeping the [institution](#) in place, the complexity of the institutions in play and personal accountability for making sure others understand each other.

"Often you can be a bit enigmatic, but if you have to be really clear and well understood, you're going to have to work to make sure everything can be easily interpreted by other people," he said.

Opportunities for culture change

In the context of organizational change, making things less or more easily taken for granted can be a powerful tool.

"Organizations are all about interpretation, they're all about how you make sense of things, and how you influence the [sense](#) that other people make of things. Taken-for-grantedness gives us [building blocks](#) for organizational strategy, and organizational cultures."

"I think change is easier if you can get a little bit of dissatisfaction to bubble where all these little oddities keep coming up, or things don't quite seem to be working as they should," he said.

Steele added you can create a groundswell for change in an organization by identifying areas in the material environment that may be problematic or subverting some of the custodians in such a way that they're not quite so quick to clamp down on apparent deviations from the norm.

He added, "This is a framework for understanding, and for bringing things to your attention. What you see with it depends where you're looking and what you want to do."

More information: Christopher W. J. Steele, When Things Get Odd: Exploring the Interactional Choreography of Taken-for-Grantedness, *Academy of Management Review* (2020). [DOI: 10.5465/amr.2017.0392](https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2017.0392)

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