A Tale of Two Shipwrecks, Culture and Survival

By Francisco Gomez, M.S.

The Grafton and the Invercauld. Imagine a natural social experiment in which two groups of shipwrecked castaways are forced to live on opposite sides of the same deserted, subantarctic island for more than a year. Both are exposed to year-round weather between 30- and 50-degrees Fahrenheit. Howling wind and rain batter the island for an average of 300 days a year. The terrain is equally inhospitable, with rugged mountains, cliffs, and barren soil that make crop cultivation a challenge. The animals available to hunt are mainly seagulls and the aggressive sea lions that occasionally visit the island. Both groups possess the bare minimum of tools and provisions they salvage from their ships.

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It's a premise that poses interesting questions. Would they survive? What would they do to achieve that? Would the ship's chain of command be maintained on the island? Or would the radical change in conditions cause a shift in power or a mutiny? How would each group's survival strategies compare? What would each of their cultures look like, and what role would that play in their quality of life and survival?

Maritime history offers us a tale where precisely this reality show played out. In 1864, two ships—the **Grafton** and the **Invercauld**—wrecked just a few months apart on Auckland Island, 290 miles south of New Zealand. One ended up on the north side, and the other 20 miles away on the island's south side. Because of the challenging terrain and continuous storms, the castaways never ventured far enough to cross paths with one another, resulting in two completely isolated cultures working independently to survive in the same environment.

Thanks to the detailed journals, logs, and historical maritime records, we know quite a bit about this event. What is most striking about the story is the vast difference in outcomes between these two groups exposed to similar conditions.

The Grafton castaways exemplified adaptability and teamwork. One of the first, and most astute of their decisions was developing a system of governance that used votes to make important decisions, including the election of their ship's captain as the island leader. With that as a foundation, they built a system to overcome the many predicaments they found themselves in. They developed and codified rules of conduct, roles, and responsibilities. They maintained daily meetings to discuss plans for the day and strengthened the team's collective skill by sharing best practices on hunting, foraging, tool, and shelter building. They even conducted reading lessons and bible study to support continuous improvement and build morale.

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The culture they deliberately designed and implemented kept them alive and resulted in their escape on a boat they built with scant resources. Primarily driven by the leadership of Captain Musgrave and First Mate Francois Raynal, the Grafton crew's performance perfectly aligned with their mission to survive. All five initial crew members made it off the island after a year and a half of living there.

In contrast, the **Invercauld** castaways' experience on the north side of the island resembled the dark chaos depicted in William Golding's Lord of the Flies. Even though they started with nineteen men, they failed to leverage their manpower. The ill-fated group had ini-

tially looked up to the ship captain, George Dalgarno, for leadership. Unfortunately, he abandoned any sense of responsibility for his crew with the vessel's ruins.

In the absence of leadership—disorder and bad decisions began as soon as the crew set foot on the island, setting the tone for the rest of their experience. They failed to salvage resources from the wreck while it was still afloat, their shelters were inadequate for dealing with the harsh weather, and they made no systematic efforts to fix them or build better ones. Their foraging and hunting efforts were reactive and lacked coordination, leading to multiple missed opportunities to collect food. Individuals hoarded and misused the few resources they had.

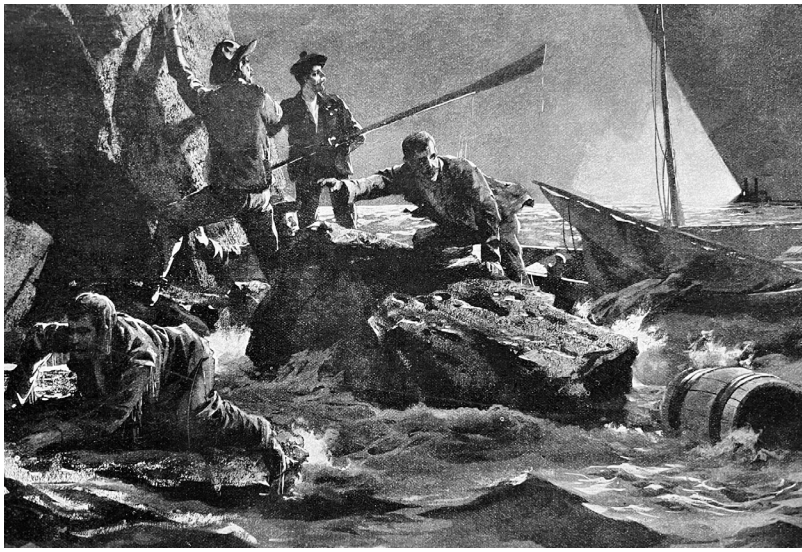
Bereft of a leadership structure—lacking rules of conduct, resources, survival skills, training, and a collective set of values to work towards—the group fragmented. They grew hostile toward one another, took advantage of the weaker members, and lived in a constant state of fear and starvation. There was one recorded case of cannibalism. Considering their circumstance and desperation, this likely occurred more than once.

our behavior is influenced by the environment

After a year on the island, only three of the nineteen survived long enough to be rescued by a Portuguese ship that fortuitously sailed past the island on a trading route.

THE CORNERSTONES FOR HIGH-PERFORMANCE CULTURES

When a group of people gathers, behavior patterns will eventually emerge and form a unique and identifiable culture. This happens because



our behavior is influenced by the environment. More specifically, elements in the environment will encourage some behavior patterns and discourage others. This is a foundational principle in the science of behavior.

In an organizational setting, the most critical elements of the environment include the activities of peers and leaders (what people do and say) and the processes and systems under which people work. These environmental factors are critical drivers for employee behavior and performance.

That means leadership teams need to ensure each of those areas is working to support the desired performance and produce the behavior patterns that best represent the cultural vision.

Regardless of the context and type of "performer"—it can be castaways on a deserted island, athletes in a sports team, students in a classroom, or employees in an organization—fostering peak performance requires unrelenting attention from leaders to the critical areas in the environment that most influence performer morale and output.

Consider these as cornerstones and critical buckets of activity for leadership teams. Put in another way, these are six areas that all leaders must address to produce a culture that aligns with what they want their culture to be. Conversely, if your business and cultural objectives are not being met, it is very likely because at least one of these dimensions is being ignored or underserved somehow.

Although there is much that can be said about each of these categories, I'll provide a summarized description of them below:

VALUES—In high-performance cultures, leadership often talks about, models, and reinforces the behaviors that represent the company values

ECOSYSTEM (processes and systems)—In high-performance cultures, the processes and systems are designed and implemented to directly support employee output. In the cases where they don't, the barriers are addressed.

RESOURCES—In high-performance cultures, the required resources (tools, time, staffing) are frequently assessed and provided to support the desired performance.

SKILLS—In high-performance cultures, employee and leadership skill sets are assessed, and deficiencies are addressed to support peak performance.

EXPECTATIONS—In high-performance cultures, clear expectations are provided for the desired performance.

DRIVE—In high-performance cultures, the right sources of motivation are arranged to encourage optimal performance and discretionary effort.

VERSED CULTURAL ASSESSMENT OF THE GRAFTON

The detailed history of this event shows ample evidence of the Grafton's leadership effectively engaging across all six cornerstones, just as it shows the Invercauld ignoring them all.

Below, I will summarize the cornerstone in the first column and describe the leadership practices from the Grafton in the right-hand column.

VERSED Cultural Framework: Assessment of The Grafton		
	Cornerstone Definition	**What Grafton Leadership Did**
VALUES	What leadership talks about the most is what conveys to the workforce what the company values are. In a high-performance culture, leaders model the behaviors that represent the values and reinforce the behaviors of others when they see them. In effect, this helps convert corporate values from words on marketing materials to measurable behavior at all levels of the organization.	Musgrave and the crew developed a system of governance that outlined everyone's roles, task distributions, and collaboration rules. Written in Musgrave's Bible, these rules were reviewed and discussed every day, with longer discussions about them on Sundays after prayers and bible study. This consistent discussion of norms and rules during daily operations and meetings aligned the entire crew on the team values of collaboration, innovation, and survival. Although there is no evidence that all five crew members adhered to a Christian belief system, given the European mid-19th-century cultural context, it is probable that they did. The Bible readings and Sunday services would have served to position values such as unity, respect, harmony, and cooperation as paramount for the group.
ECOSYSTEM (PROCESSES AND SYSTEMS)	When deliberately implementing a culture, leaders pay attention to how the processes and systems support (and don't hinder) the desired performance. In high-performance cultures, leaders are aware of how the processes and systems do this and address the gaps when they don't (with input from the workforce).	The Grafton story shows a focus on organizational efficiency, with processes and systems deliberately arranged to improve performance and reduce hardship. A voting system supported cooperation and collective decision-making It also made the crew members feel heard. Roles were assigned for efficiency, with tasks like dishwashing rotated to share the workload and specialized tasks managed by experts to ensure quality. Morning meetings aligned the crew on daily tasks and troubleshooting obstacles. Best practices for shelter and tool development, as well as food and water procurement, were standardized and continuously improved based on crew input.

RESOURCES	Do leaders ensure employees have the necessary resources to engage in the desired performance? This can include work tools, time, staffing, and authority.	After the Grafton was shipwrecked, Captain Musgrave immediately directed the crew to salvage essential resources before the ship sunk. They brought ashore items such as salt, navigational instruments, cooking utensils, a double-barreled rifle, and provisions like biscuits, flour, tea, coffee, pork, and tobacco. Materials from the wreck were used to build a small shelter that protected them from the harsh weather. Captain Musgrave encouraged all crew members to use their skills to support the team's resources and shelter. This included having an officer with blacksmithing experience build a forge from the salvaged materials to make tools that helped them survive and eventually escape. Throughout their stay, the crew continuously used and repurposed resources to meet their evolving needs.
SKILLS	Leaders ensure employees have the necessary skills to perform at the desired level. In an organizational context, some of these skills include social, technical, leadership, time management, resilience, conflict resolution, and adaptability	Self-development and education were key elements of the Grafton's values and organizational system. Captain Musgrave frequently organized exploratory expeditions, making sketches and taking notes to educate himself and the crew about their surroundings. They developed a "school" where someone would teach a relevant skill during nightly services, fostering continuous learning, adaptability, and moral support. Morning meetings provided opportunities for sharing best practices and reinforcing skills, ensuring everyone was equipped to handle various tasks.
EXPECTATIONS	Leaders ensure there is clarity in the expectations of what each team member needs to do	During daily morning meetings, the crew discussed and assigned tasks based on the day's needs and individual skills, including hunting, tool development, gathering firewood, and maintaining shelters. These meetings provided clarity on what was expected from each member and ensured that everyone understood their roles.

DRIVE	One of the most critical roles a leader plays in an organization is to identify the most important sources of motivation for the workforce. The Drive cornerstone tells us that leaders need to arrange reinforcement for the behaviors that support team objectives and embody the team values.	Musgrave made decisions that arranged sources of positive reinforcement for the behaviors required for their survival. For example, by encouraging the crew to work on the tasks they were interested in (and most skilled at), they were able to improve their shelters, effectively hunt and forage, and develop essential tools. Meaningful work is a powerful source of reinforcement. One of the most important examples of this was François Édouard Raynal's blacksmithing work, which led to the creation of a forge, and development of tools and a boat. Musgrave also used positive recognition. One recorded example of this is while Raynal was working on building the forge and Musgrave exclaimed, "Victory is ours! Look at the master blacksmith, the most accomplished in his trade!" Collaboration and harmony were among the rules of conduct written down in Musgrave's Bible. Examples of how they did this were discussed during their morning meetings, which offered opportunities for the behaviors to be practiced and reinforced. Musgrave strengthened the practice of collaboration and team support by constantly seeking input and asking for ideas. The governance system also encouraged input, since the most important decisions made on the island could only be made through the voting system. The crew felt like they were heard. Holding regular prayer and Bible study sessions were likely contributors to the positive morale and harmony of the crew. Assuming they shared belief systems these practices would have arranged powerful sources of reinforcement for social cohesion. These leadership efforts not only enhanced their chances of survival but also maintained high morale and produced discretionary effort.

The field of Organizational Behavior Management has introduced several useful models to assist leaders, OBM practitioners, and scholars in identifying and prioritizing the most crucial areas for organizational success. The model I've developed and presented above is the one I've found to be most helpful and user-friendly for my consulting work. It has been heavily influenced by Dr. Aubrey Daniels' Performance Management system, Dr. Thomas Gilbert's Behavior Engineering model, Dr. James Hillgren's performance model and Dr. Steve Hayes' research on values. It has been shaped by ADI's extensive global experience in conducting cultural assessments across various industries. Most importantly, it is informed by the research and history of applied behavior analysis, which provides a scientific understanding of what it takes to design and implement high-performing cultures.

There's a principle that underlies models such as these. It's also what makes the story of the Grafton so compelling, and the Invercauld's a cautionary tale. Culture is dynamic and malleable. If leadership does not take the helm in guiding the direction of their organizational culture, it will instead be driven aimlessly by multiple internal and external forces. Without resolute guidance, its path may not align with the company's long-term interests, purpose, and corporate values.

Often, these organizations end up with reactive, punitive, and unpredictable cultures driven by fear and negativity. These are likely the companies that will do anything for short-term shareholder return, including sacrificing safety, quality, and customer value. These companies may have started with an inspirational vision that looked great on marketing materials and investor decks. However, the lack of intentional direction from leadership prevented them from embodying their corporate values.

I encourage you to view your culture with a sense of possibility and purpose.

The good news is that it doesn't have to be this way. When leaders approach culture deliberately, with intention, and with an understanding of what motivates human behavior, they can direct it to support the corporate vision, purpose, and business objectives.

I encourage you to view your culture with a sense of possibility and purpose. The science of behavior offers decades of empirically validated principles that can guide you on how your actions affect the workforce. It explains why people do what they do and what factors influence those choices. In short, it provides a set of tools and principles to help you convert your cultural vision into tangible, measurable behaviors at all levels of the organization.

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[About the Author]

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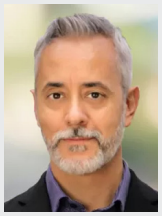

With a career that has encompassed performance management consulting for multiple industrial sectors across the globe, as well as executive positions in the tech industry, Francisco consolidates this experience to generate results and bring value to his customers.

Francisco is a board member for industrial as well as a nonprofit organizations and serves as public speaker and columnist on behavioral science and performance management. He and his family currently reside in Asheville, North Carolina. In his free time, he enjoys spending time in the North Carolina mountains and playing music.

[About ADI]

Regardless of your industry or expertise, one thing re-mains constant: People power your business. Since 1978 Aubrey Daniels International (ADI) has been dedicated to accelerating the business and safety performance of companies worldwide by using positive, practical approaches grounded in the science of behavior and engineered to ensure long-term sustainability. ADI provides clients with the tools and methodologies to help move people toward positive, results-driven accomplishments. Our clients accelerate strategy execution while fostering employee engagement and positive accountability at all levels of their organization.

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