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# Culture-Building to Culture-Competing: How opposing mental-models impact organizational change

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**ABSTRACT:** The culture-building graph (CBG) provides a visualization to understand and approach cultural change within an organization<sup>1</sup>. The foundation of this cultural change is the changing of mental models to a shared mental model rooted in the organization's Vision, Mission, Capacity, and Learning (VMCL)<sup>2</sup>. However, what happens when there are opposing VMCL mental models competing for the same group of "fence sitters"? This competition may be characterized by political conflict during elections, cultural conflict between social groups, or even kinetic conflict (warfare) such as the U.S. attempting to win hearts and minds in Iraq and Afghanistan. These are situations where the culture-building model may be utilized for cultural change even when two organizations are in competition. This paper will present a modified version of the CBG, the culture-competition graph, for applications to conflict and propose additional organizational change strategies for cultural change.

<sup>1</sup> D Cabrera and L Cabrera, *Flock Not Clock: Design, Align, and Lead to Achieve Your Vision*, Plectica Publications, 2018

<sup>2</sup> 1

**Keywords:** VMCL | Mental Models | Culture | Culture-Building Graph (CBG) | Culture-Competition Graph (CCG)

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## Introduction

COMPETING FOR HEARTS AND MINDS. ACTUALLY, THE COMPETITION IS JUST FOR THE MIND. YOUR MIND. TO ALIGN YOUR MIND AND YOUR VISION OF THE FUTURE WITH A BETTER ONE. MINE. Re-read those first two lines. It may sound ominous, but it is essentially what this paper is about. It is about the alignment of a mental model to a shared mental model to accomplish something big. To change the future. But it is not only what this paper is about; it is what this paper intends. It intends to compete for the reader's mind - to share a new and better way of approaching organizational change when culture is in conflict.

## Establishing a Mental Model

### VMCL

BEFORE EXAMINING cultural change in an organization, it is critical to understand that every organization is a complex adaptive system (CAS) where individual agents within the system follow simple rules

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that produce emergent properties<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, if an organization is a CAS, then it must have simple rules that determine the actions within the organization and produce the organizational behavior. These simple rules, defined by Drs. Laura and Derek Cabrera, are Vision, Mission, Capacity, and Learning (VMCL)<sup>4</sup>. Every organization, whether stated or not, follows these four simple rules; and by understanding these rules, leaders can begin to shape organizations. This section will provide an overview of VMCL that will be essential and foundational to understanding culture in conflict. (Systems Leadership utilizing VMCL is rooted in Systems Thinking and its structural components - distinctions, systems, relationships, and perspectives [DSRP] which can be explored through other papers and publications<sup>5</sup>.) Before examining each tenet in depth, Table 1 provides the simplest definition as found in Drs. Cabrera’s book *Flock Not Clock*.

Vision (V)	Desired future state or goal
Mission (M)	Repeatable actions that bring about the vision
Capacity (C)	Systems that provide readiness to execute the mission
Learning (L)	Continuous improvement of systems of capacity based on feedback from the external environment

Table 1: VMCL

VMCL gives leaders the power to not only understand the emergent properties of their organization, but it also unlocks the opportunity to create change within the organization by creating better simple rules to bring about the desired system behavior. However, developing a new set of rules must meet certain criteria to be an effective catalyst for system change. Therefore, Vision, Mission, Capacity, and Learning must be developed using predetermined “checks” to ensure translation from idea to behavior<sup>6</sup>. These checks help guide the formation and application of each tenet and expand their definition.

In its most basic form, the vision of an organization is the “desired future state or goal<sup>7</sup>”. It describes what the world will look like when the organization has fulfilled its purpose. As the Cabrerass state, “Visionary leadership means seeing a future that others can’t envision, standing in that future, and describing what you see<sup>8</sup>”. A vision must describe the future state, and it must be intrinsically motivating, short and simple, measurable, and live in the hearts and minds of the members of the organization<sup>9</sup>. These are the checks that each vision must meet, but the organization has to actually do something to achieve the vision.

Therefore, the actions that the organization does repeatedly to bring about the vision - the future end state - is the mission<sup>10</sup>. Within that first sentence are the first two checks of mission - actions



done over and over to bring about the desired future state. Like the vision, the mission must be measurable and live in the hearts and minds, but it must also explain who does what for whom and be clear, concise, and easily understood<sup>11</sup>. The final characteristic of mission is that mission moments - the instances when the repeated actions of an organization interact with its customer - are sacrosanct; these moments will define the organization's future<sup>12</sup>. Once the mission is established, the next step is to determine what and how the organization needs to perform its repeated actions.

<sup>11</sup> 1

<sup>12</sup> 1

Capacity is the ability of an organization to perform its repeated actions. An organization must build capacity by creating a system of systems that supports the mission, and these are the first two checks<sup>13</sup>. To ensure that the organization builds the right capacity to support its mission, it maps its capacity systems to understand the relationships and develop the most efficient system of systems<sup>14</sup>. Lastly, learning is used to build and expand capacity<sup>15</sup>. Learning, which will be discussed in the next paragraph, must drive capacity refinement and growth.

<sup>13</sup> 1

<sup>14</sup> 1

<sup>15</sup> 1

The final simple rule of an organization is learning, which is the ability to incorporate feedback from reality. This type of learning is organizational, but it depends on the individual. Organizations must understand the power of individuals' mental models and seek to create a shared understanding through the alignment of mental models<sup>16</sup>. This requires that organizations ensure their members know how to think, learn, and evolve their mental models to match reality. Learning becomes its own capacity system which continues to drive the repeated actions that bring about the vision, therefore it is critical to facilitate understanding of this simple rule.

<sup>16</sup> 1

Together, these four simple rules VMCL create a mental model, and a shared mental model creates organizational culture<sup>17</sup>. To create change in the emergent properties of a system, a systems leader must change the simple rules - VMCL. However, to bring about this change, a systems leader must also ensure that the mental model of the organization's Vision, Mission, Capacity, and Learning is shared by its members. Therefore, organizational change in the culture is determined by changing the individual's mental model to the shared mental model. The next section will explore the concepts of cultural change and the culture-building graph (CBG).

<sup>17</sup> 1

*Culture and the Culture-Building Graph*

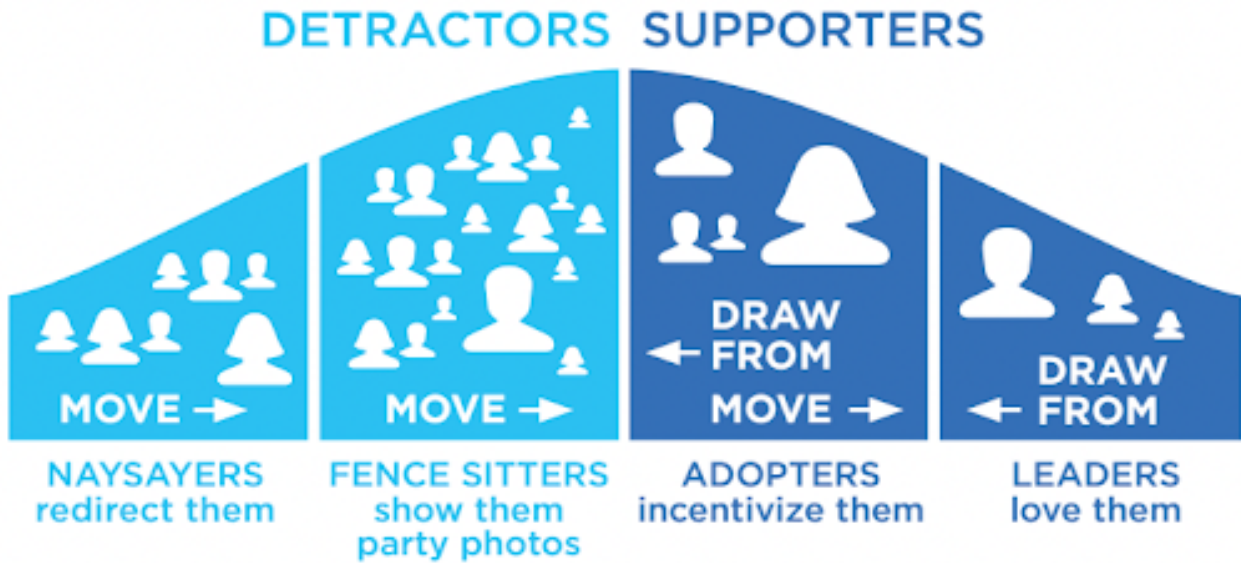
THE GOAL of organizational culture change is to get as many members as possible to share the same mental model of VMCL. The CBG is



one method of understanding members of an organization and their level of support (or lack thereof) for the organization’s VMCL<sup>18</sup>. This model (Figure 1) can be utilized to visualize members of an organization and recommend actions based on placement in the model.

<sup>18</sup> 1

Figure 1: Culture-building graph (Figure 6.5 in Flock Not Clock)



As a systems leader, this model gives direction for how to respond to each group based on their level of commitment to the organization’s VMCL, whether supporting or detracting from the direction the organization is trying to go. The “thought leaders” have inculcated the VMCL mental model, and it drives them; therefore, they need to be given freedom because they are driven by what drives the organization<sup>19</sup>. The “adopters” are also committed to the VMCL, but may be motivated internally and externally; thus they need to be incentivized by the organization<sup>20</sup>. The detractors, on the other hand, compose the majority of an organization and are both the “fence sitters” and “naysayers<sup>21</sup>”. The goal for both is to help them see the Vision and Mission, and align their mental model with the organization’s VMCL; but this means not incentivizing the current position of the fence sitters and redirecting or possibly ignoring the naysayers<sup>22</sup>. The culture-building graph has the ultimate goal of building the momentum of an organization towards its vision by providing a method of engagement for each group to align vision and mission.

<sup>19</sup> 1

<sup>20</sup> 1

<sup>21</sup> 1

<sup>22</sup> 1

The culture-building graph is an effective tool when utilized within an organization. However, what happens when a naysayer is



in direct opposition to the organization's VMCL? How do organizational leaders respond when they are in direct conflict with the antithesis of their vision for the world - their VMCL? What do leaders do when culture is in conflict?

### *Culture in Conflict*

THE CULTURE-BUILDING GRAPH was designed as "a tool for organizational change that demarcates who is on board with the organization's key mental models and who is not (and to what degree)<sup>23</sup>". However, this tool can be expanded to modeling, understanding and engaging parties at conflict between organizations. Merriam-Webster defines conflict as a "competitive or opposing action of incompatibles<sup>24</sup>". Translated to VMCL, conflict is mental models in opposition or competition; visions with opposite future states (unless we are in the multiverse).

<sup>23</sup> 1

<sup>24</sup> 10

This is often not business competition where companies are fighting for customers with a similar product. This is not conflict in the sports arena where one team has the desired future endstate of a championship ring just like every other team in the league. Instead, this manifests itself in extremism in politics. Far left versus far right. Big government versus small government. This manifests itself in religion. Islam versus Christianity. Conversion versus damnation. It is most visible, however, when it manifests kinetically in war such as Russia and Ukraine. These are opposing mental models of the world. Two different organizations - whether religious, political, state, or other - that desire future end states that are incompatible.

However, the goal of these organizations is often conversion or acceptance of their mental model, their VMCL. Therefore, they seek to build their own culture - stimulate organizational change - by convincing others to see their vision and mission for the world. Before General James Mattis was the Secretary of Defense, he sought to change the culture of the U.S. Marines in order to engage the culture of the people in Iraq and Afghanistan in response to the irregular warfare that the United States was facing in 2005<sup>25</sup>. He understood that it was not enough to have a vision and mission. He needed to first convince the Marines to adopt his vision, and then he needed the Marines to convince the people to believe his vision. General Mattis sought to move the fence-sitters.

<sup>25</sup> 11

### *A New Model*

THIS IS WHERE the culture-building graph can prove useful. Just like within one organization, the CBG, with a few modifications, can provide a visualization of how people are arrayed between two opposing visions. It can also recommend how to engage each of the groups. Figure 2 depicts the modified culture-competition graph (CCG). An organization tries to build culture by aligning mental models within the confines of the organization. However, when two organizations, groups, or ideologies are in conflict, they are fundamentally competing for the mental models of those caught between the visions. One organization is building while the other is being destroyed, and there is a constant tension between the two. Thus, the graph requires a delineation from culture building to culture competition.

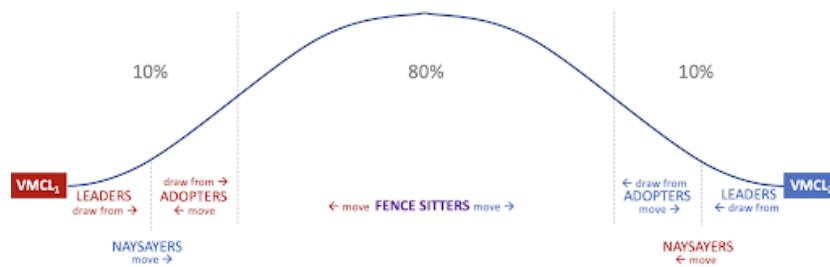


Figure 2: Culture-competition graph (CCG)

As the reader can see, this graph closely resembles the CBG if it were reversed and superimposed upon itself. Similar to the culture-building graph, the CCG is a 80/20 split, but split 80/10/10. Ten percent of people are committed to VMCL1 and 10% are committed to VMCL2, while the other 80% are fence sitters waiting to see which way the wind blows. However, there are some key differences. First, though the distribution of people with similar mental models may not fit the exact curve, the majority of people will be in the middle of the two mental models. They may be closer to VMCL1 or VMCL2, but they are willing to accept either depending on the situation or what benefits them most at the time. Second, the leaders are the zealots, and the adopters have too much invested to lose. Together they comprise the opposing VMCL's naysayers. Third, both leaders and adopters for both mental models are actively trying to move fence sitters to their "side". It is not a tractor pull, but rather an all out tug-of-war. Now that the need and recommendation of a new tool is established, the next section will discuss underlying assumptions and how this impacts the approach of groups within the CCG.



## *Implications of the Culture-Competition Graph*

### *Assumptions*

BEFORE GETTING INTO recommendations based on the CCG, there are a few assumptions or disclaimers that must be made clear.

First, this is a snapshot in time of a dynamic system that must be constantly checked against reality. Just as any systems thinker or leader knows, it is critical to constantly check mental models with reality and change the model to fit reality<sup>26</sup>. Therefore, a leader must receive continuous feedback to know who is where within the system/graph in order to appropriately engage them. This must inherently be a part of the organizational learning system as described earlier.

<sup>26</sup> 2

The second assumption is that the CCG is limited to a binary representation of a non-binary system. In this graph, there is VMCL<sub>1</sub> and VMCL<sub>2</sub>, but it does not account for VMCL<sub>3</sub> or VMCL<sub>4</sub>. Realistically, this would look like an ebbing and flowing three dimensional bell curve, if there even is such a thing. Once again, this is why an in-depth understanding of complex adaptive systems and systems thinking is foundational to the utilization of tools such as the CBG or CCG. Though it is a binary representation, it can still be utilized to array the groups according to mental models and respond accordingly. As George Box stated, "All models are wrong, but some are useful." This model is essentially wrong because it does not capture the whole picture, but it still may prove useful in application.

The final assumption is that VMCL<sub>1</sub> and VMCL<sub>2</sub> cannot be reconciled; they can never be brought into alignment. They must be so different and so opposed that there is no common ground between the desired future end states. Any other mental model within the CCG can be incrementally changed closer to the shared VMCL<sub>1</sub> or VMCL<sub>2</sub>, but there cannot exist a compatible mental model.

### *Recommendations*

THE INTRODUCTION of the culture-conflict graph presents new challenges to the approach of the parties within the original culture-building graph. Within the CBG, each group was already contained within the organization. In contrast, the CCG contains all people who are between two opposing ideologies or mental models. Therefore, in order to move either VMCL<sub>1</sub> or VMCL<sub>2</sub> towards its vision, leaders have to exceed the momentum of the opponent. If VMCL<sub>1</sub> changes



the mental model of one fence sitter to align and therefore share the VMCL1 vision, then VMCL2 must do the same. Otherwise, VMCL1 will gain momentum toward their vision. Hence the reason this is culture in competition. The following are the recommendations for each group within the CCG.

*Recommendation Zero: Calculate and Recalculate Risk*

THIS IS termed “Recommendation Zero” because it is intertwined with each of the following recommendations. Within the CCG, every action that leaders take will either incrementally move agents toward VMCL1 or VMCL2. Therefore, each action is a risk that must be taken seriously and mitigated. There is credence to “no risk, no reward,” and Recommendation Zero is not suggesting that leaders not take risk. However, every risk must be considered, mitigated, and possibly matched (Risk1 = Risk2).

*Recommendation 1: Love and Loose the Leaders.*

THIS IS NO CHANGE from the original CBG. The thought leaders have already internalized and sold their soul to VMCL1 or VMCL2. As the Cabrera’s suggest, “Show them the love. Give them what they want/need. Let them run<sup>27</sup>.” They are the greatest advocates for the mental model, so let them convince and motivate others. Allow them to convert the fence sitters.

<sup>27</sup> 1

However, with the introduction of the CCG, there is one situation which must be handled delicately. VMCL1 thought leaders may also choose to combat the naysayers, the VMCL2 thought leaders. For example, a political debate, a religious discussion, or a military negotiation. This could prove to be a beneficial endeavor, decreasing the strength of an opponent while incrementally changing mental models of fence sitters (and possibly adopters) to a particular VMCL. However, it is often more likely that this proves catastrophic for one or the other. Therefore, this goes back to Recommendation Zero - always calculate risk.

*Recommendation 2: Capture the Competition*

NAYSAYERS ARE NOT immovable. Within the CBG, leaders are to expend as little energy as possible on the naysayers by either redirecting or ignoring<sup>28</sup>. However, it is possible within both the CBG and CCG that naysayers can become adopters and even thought

<sup>28</sup> 1

leaders for the opposing vision. Though rare, it does happen. Consider a Christian missionary converting to Islam or vice versa. Consider spies or double-agents. These are examples that can have devastating effects not only to the ideology, but also to the other leaders, adopters, and fence sitters that looked to that person. Not all actions need to be incremental.

This does not suggest that a concerted effort should be dedicated to convincing a VMCL1 leader that VMCL2 is better. Rather, it is a recommendation to apply the organizational learning systems to have an increased sensitivity for naysayer vulnerabilities. Depending on the situation, these vulnerabilities can be capitalized on for coercion or conversion. No matter the method, a silenced thought leader can deal a heavy blow to the opponent; but a converted one - that is devastating.

### *Recommendation 3: Kick the Fence*

THE TERM fence sitter is aptly named. In the CCG, these are often the people who sit between VMCL1 and VMCL2 just to receive the benefits that each has to offer; they enjoy the greener grass on each side of the fence. The CBG suggests that systems leaders withhold incentives but show what they are missing out on (party photos)<sup>29</sup>. However, this does not work when in culture competition because while VMCL1 may be incentivizing their adopters and showing party photos to the fence sitters, VMCL2 is offering handouts to fence sitters and beginning the process of incremental changes in their mental model. This will quickly turn to an unbalanced scale with momentum tilting in the direction of VMCL2.

<sup>29</sup> 1

Instead, system leaders should seek to balance the opposing mental model as much and as often as possible. Otherwise, the culture competition can quickly become a war of incentives where the side with the deepest pockets and savviest marketing techniques will win. However, this also does not create true supporters. Therefore, by balancing between VMCL1 and VMCL2, systems leaders can work incremental changes to fence sitters' mental models in order to make true supporters.

This is all to maintain the status quo. The actual recommendation, though, is to "kick the fence." Within cultural competition, fence sitters become content and complacent between VMCL1 and VMCL2, and it becomes difficult if not impossible to convince them to one or the other. Every once in a while, system leaders need to take a swift kick at the fence to force the fence sitters to choose a side. For example, a military leader issuing an ultimatum to a village or a

government creating a law against private gun ownership. It is the “for us or against us” mentality. The goal, however, is to kick the fence in the right place at the right time where a VMCL<sub>1</sub> leader can get enough fence sitters that are leaning toward VMCL<sub>1</sub> to fall on their side of the fence. Utilizing the organizational learning systems, leaders look for opportunities that can swing in their favor if executed properly at the right time. Once again, this involves a risk that must be constantly considered (Recommendation Zero).

#### *Recommendation 4: Patience and Perseverance*

LASTLY, the cultural change that the CCG depicts is a war of attrition. It is about outlasting the opponent. That is why many of the previous recommendations are about matching or balancing the opposing VMCL. Time and culture moves slowly, until it doesn't. The key is to have the organizational learning systems established that capture the right moment to act to change mental models. Whether it is the vulnerability of a naysayer, an international event, or a social movement, a systems leader must be patient and take action when the opportunity arises.

#### *Conclusion*

THE CULTURE-COMPETITION graph is a tangential exploration and application of the culture-building graph. Utilizing the foundational concepts of systems thinking, systems leadership, and VMCL, the CCG offers leaders a new tool to understand their environment and incrementally move to their desired future state. Though leaders may often lead organizations independent of some of these external concepts, there are instances when the competition is escapable. This is when the CCG, based on its assumptions and driven by the recommendations, can be applied for increasing organizational momentum towards the Vision.



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