

# Understanding Systemic Culture Through Response to Individual Behavior

Summary. Many aspects could be used to describe the “culture” of a human system. In this paper, we propose a definition of **systemic culture** in terms of the way the system responds to **individual behavior**.

Systemic Culture. Every human system, including a family, workplace, faith community and civil society at large, can be characterized as having attributes of **one of two basic cultures**.

- ✓ By far the most common is a *contractual* culture, which depends on a *retributive* or *punitive* judicial system to respond to deviations from the contract.
- ✓ Within a *covenantal* culture, however, the focus is on relationship and the judicial system is *restorative* and aimed at bringing people back into covenant.

Power. The fundamental difference between these two cultures is the systemic **distribution of power** with regard to individual behavior.

- ✓ In a contractual culture, one or more individuals in a position of authority has the ability to *limit the options of behavior* available to members of the system. Other members of the system have limited or no ability to directly object to these restrictions, so we could call this a *power over* system.
- ✓ Members of a covenantal culture, however, *mutually agree to limitations* on their behavioral options and have the opportunity to object to proposed restrictions. This is called a *power with* system.

Systemic Norms. Every human system exists primarily to enable members to satisfy individual needs with the support of others. Individual members are interdependent, so systemic norms are typically developed to **promote community values** such as clarity, shared understanding, safety, trust and respect. While systemic norms are present in both cultures, the specific strategies employed are very different.

- ✓ In a contractual culture, the main strategy to define systemic norms is *rules* or *laws*. Rules and laws are always emplaced to support an explicit or implicit *contract* among the individuals and between individuals and the organization. The rules or laws, along with the contract if it exists explicitly, define the limits of acceptable behavior and the consequences of acting outside these limits.
- ✓ In a covenantal culture, by contrast, members express their shared values by making requests, proposing strategies, and entering mutual *agreements* with each other in service of an explicit or implicit relational *covenant*. Like rules, agreements may limit the range of behavior available to members of the organization. Unlike rules, however, they are entered into by mutual consent and do not define specific consequences for members who do not follow them.

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Attitude toward Behavior. Each culture nurtures a different mindset toward the **behavior of members** of the system.

- ✓ A contractual culture fosters *either / or* thinking, where members think and act with *certainty* that individual behavior is either “right” (following the rules) or “wrong” (breaking the rules).
- ✓ In a covenantal culture, however, there is more space for nuance in thought and actions, because the agreed upon limits of acceptable behavior are understood to be fluid and open to change. This contributes to *curiosity* about the purpose of behavioral restrictions, the effectiveness of agreements, and the impact of actions.

Leadership Focus. The two cultures promote a very different **leadership focus** within the system.

- ✓ Leaders in a contractual culture are primarily concerned with the exact details of the existing rules (and/or contract), strictly *upholding* or *enforcing* them, and making *new rules* to address unexpected or undesirable behaviors.
- ✓ Leaders within a covenantal culture, on the other hand, focus on cultivating the conditions for *meaningful relationships* and maintaining the agreements and covenant as *evolutionary documents* that are responsive to changes in the system.

Membership Focus. Other members of these two cultures also **focus on very different things**.

- ✓ Members of a contractual culture have two basic choices: they can either *submit* to authority by following the rules explicitly; or they can *rebel* against authority by ignoring, subverting or breaking the rules.
- ✓ The focus of members of a covenantal culture is on maintaining or restoring *meaningful relationship*, even when agreements are not followed. This mindset encourages individuals, and the group as a whole, to *enter, keep and break agreements* with care.

Deviation Event Narrative. In either culture, there is a **basic narrative** of the sequence of events when someone’s behavior deviates from systemic norms.

- ✓ In a contractual culture, this sequence starts when someone *breaks the rules*. This person would be called the *violinist*, *offender* or *perpetrator*. Any person harmed as a result of this action is called the *victim*.
- ✓ A covenantal narrative, however, describes an action (*act*) of an *author*, which may *impact* one or more members called *recipients*.

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Judicial Process. Each type of culture follows a judicial process to **respond to deviations** from behavioral norms.

- ✓ The purpose of the judicial process within a contractual culture is to determine the *truth* about the details of the violation (crime), and then to assign *blame* for the violation and *responsibility* for any resulting harm to the guilty violator.
- ✓ A covenantal culture's judicial process, however, is designed to provide *mutual comprehension* of the impact of actions on all parties and cultivate *self-responsibility* for personal choices.

Outcome of Judicial Process. In both cultures, the judicial process results in an **outcome** for the members involved.

- ✓ A contractual judicial process ends with an authority figure (an individual such as a judge or boss or a group such as a tribunal) imposing *consequences* or *punishment* on the guilty violator.
- ✓ The judicial process in a covenantal culture offers participants the opportunity to co-create *mutually agreed actions* to restore relationship and remedy harm.

Addressing Relationship. In either culture, there is an opportunity for individuals involved in the deviation event to **address their relationships** with those who are affected.

- ✓ In a contractual culture, this takes the form of an *apology* and possibly a request for *forgiveness*, both of which are related to the "wrongness" of the action.
- ✓ In a covenantal culture, a person may *acknowledge* the impact of actions on others, and express *regret* for the harm or pain resulting from the choices leading to the action. This is rooted in awareness of impact and self-responsibility, rather than right and wrong.

The following table summarizes various attributes of the two different cultures.

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<b>Attribute</b>	<b>Contractual (Retributive)</b>	<b>Covenantal (Restorative)</b>
<i>Power structure</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One or more individuals may limit options available to others (Power Over)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Available options are determined by collaborative process (Power With)</li> </ul>
<i>Systemic norms</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rules / laws</li> <li>• Contract</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared values</li> <li>• Requests and agreements</li> <li>• Covenant</li> </ul>
<i>Attitude toward behavior</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Either / or</li> <li>• Certain</li> <li>• Language of right &amp; wrong</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curious, both / and</li> <li>• Nuanced and fluid in thought and language</li> </ul>
<i>Focus of leaders</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attend to the letter of the rules</li> <li>• Uphold or enforce the rules and contract</li> <li>• Make new rules to restrict undesirable behavior</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultivate conditions for meaningful relationships</li> <li>• Maintain agreements and covenant as flexible and evolutionary documents</li> </ul>
<i>Focus of members</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Submit to authority by following the rules</li> <li>• Rebel against authority by finding and exploiting loopholes in the rules or breaking the rules</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain relationship, even when agreements are not upheld</li> <li>• Enter, keep and break agreements with care</li> </ul>
<i>Deviation event narrative</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rules are broken or transgressed by violator (offender, perpetrator)</li> <li>• Victim may be harmed in the process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Author acts out of alignment with agreements, norms or covenant</li> <li>• This act may impact one or more recipients of the act</li> </ul>
<i>Purpose of judicial process</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determine the truth about the details of the violation / crime</li> <li>• Assign blame for action, and responsibility for resulting harm, to violator if guilty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seek mutual comprehension of the impact of actions on all parties</li> <li>• Cultivate self-responsibility for personal choices</li> </ul>
<i>Outcome of judicial process</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Authority figure imposes consequences or punishment on violator</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants co-create mutually agreed actions to restore relationship and remedy harm</li> </ul>
<i>Addressing relationship</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apologize and ask for forgiveness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledge impacts of actions and express regret about results of choices</li> </ul>