If we accept the widely-held view that “company culture” refers to persistent, observable patterns in the behavior of employees – often referred to as “the way things work around here” – then it follows that to change an organization’s culture entails changing those patterned behaviors that define it.

“Aye,” said Hamlet, “there’s the rub.” What does it take to change the patterns in human behavior? Many people would likely respond with words such as rewards, sanctions, reinforcement, punishment, persuasion, coercion and the like. Before leaping to any conclusions about what it takes to change human behavior, I think it is worthwhile to examine just what behavior is.

Ask people to define human behavior and you’ll likely hear phrases like the following:

* Behavior is the activity of the organism.
* Behavior is action on the part of an individual.
* Behavior is a response to the environment.
* Behavior is what people do.
* Behavior is what people can be seen doing.

Those are fine, as far as they go but they don’t go far enough; they shed no light whatsoever on what it takes to change human behavior.

One phrase you’re *not* likely to hear (unless you’ve been hanging around a certain group of people) is this one: *Behavior is the control of perception*. This definition, once you understand it, does what the other definitions don’t: it sheds light on what it takes to change human behavior and thus to change a company’s culture.

The phrase “Behavior is the control of perception” owes to the title of a book by William T. Powers titled *Behavior: The Control of Perception* (1973, 2005). Powers’ book sets forth a theory of human behavior known as Perceptual Control Theory (PCT). Essentially, Powers’ theory holds that what we really control are our perceptions and our behavior provides us with the means to do so, hence the notion that behavior is the control of perception. Equally important is that part of PCT which shows that perceptions are controlled in relation to some goal or what in PCT is called a “reference signal.” In essence, we behave so as to bring our perceptions of the world around us into alignment with the way we want them to be. We are, then, purposeful, goal-driven, feedback-governed “living control systems.”

The net of this is that whenever we are behaving, we are doing so in order to bring one or more perceived aspects of the world around us into alignment with the way we want them to be. If those persistent patterns in our behavior are to change then a few basic options are available.

Our goals or reference conditions must change; we must set or adopt new and different requirements for the way we want the world about us to be.

Our behaviors are failing to achieve our goals or reference conditions and so we must change our behaviors, we must experiment and find new, more effective behaviors. In PCT this essentially amounts to reorganizing ourselves.

Those aspects of our world that we care about and want to control are often subject to influences from other actors and factors. In PCT, these are known as “disturbances,” owing to the fact that they act so as to “disturb” our control. Generally speaking, we can compensate for these disturbances but, on occasion, they overwhelm our best efforts. In such cases, we have to adjust and adapt, either by way of modifying or altering our view of the way we want things to be or by modifying or altering what we do to achieve and maintain our desired state of affairs.

So, from a PCT perspective, if persistent, widespread behavior patterns are to change so as to result in perceived changes in a company’s culture, you must first change (1) those things people are currently trying to control; (2) the effectiveness of current behavior patterns; or (3) their ability to compensate for any disturbances to what they are currently trying to control. The second and third options carry great risk because they amount to overt efforts to interfere with what is currently a satisfactory and rewarding degree of control on the part of people. That leaves the first option: getting people to set or adopt new goals or reference conditions.

The starting point for changing a company’s culture is with the behavior patterns that are to change. You have to define and describe them. From there, you have to determine what those behavior patterns serve to control (e.g., advancement, pay raises, the respect of co-workers, the security of employment, etc.). Then you have to identify the new behaviors that are to replace the old ones. Last, you have to find ways of connecting those new behaviors to the things that people want to control. If, for example, promotions currently foster competitive relationships and what you’re looking for are new levels of cooperation and collaboration, then you have to find some way to tie promotions to cooperative, collaborative behaviors in ways that forestall competitive behavior patterns.