

# Tangling with your temple cats: leading change

By Dr Stephen Brown



Temple cats? In my travels I have observed such felines lying on the steps of ancient temples in South East Asia or prowling the cobbled streets of a historic city in the Middle East. These cats come in many shapes, sizes, forms and colours, and exhibit various behaviours.

Some are content to prowl around untamed, others prefer to eat, sleep, yawn and observe the passing parade—while others habitually get ready to catch their next quarry through various underhanded, dubious but deliberate moves. Welcome to the world of the temple cat.

## **Temple cats exist in every organisation**

They are policy, practices, procedures and people that inhibit progress, are never challenged, contribute little, lack authenticity and are self-serving. Kriegel and Brandt in their popular text, *Sacred Cows Make the Best Burgers: Developing Change - Driving People and Organisations* note that these ‘temple cats’ or ‘sacred cows’ typically express as outmoded beliefs, assumptions, practices and policies that prevent responsiveness to new opportunities.

## **Where are they perched?**

Think of your workplace right now and the challenges you face in leading change. List the temple cats that are the barriers to the effective implementation of any new initiative. I suspect most of the temple cats in your organisations are people. Typically, their behaviours range from disengagement and subversion to overt advocacy to retain status quo, power plays and duplicitous actions.

## **Are we too tame to tangle?**

The essence of leadership is persuading and influencing others. Why then, do leaders sometimes show a reluctance to challenge these temple cats? Tangling with a temple cat requires courage, preparation and a willingness to act for the collective good. Timing is everything when dealing with a cat.

## **Confronting the cats**

Leaders are required to act and challenge the hegemonic culture that exists in their organisation by dealing with these cats. Sometimes leaders are afflicted with 'condition blindness'—accepting or simply not being aware of the temple cats that are embedded in the organisation as cultural norms and behaviours.

Leading change by its very nature involves others—shifting mindsets, challenging assumptions and resetting culture. It's complex, dynamic and adaptive work—never easy but immensely rewarding.

***'Culture eats strategy for breakfast.'***

- Peter Drucker

Tangling with your temple cats is essential to set productive, positive workplace cultures that enable any organisation's purpose, mission and key strategic intentions to be enacted.

### **A few final provocations to ponder....**

What kind of cat are you?

What policies, practices and procedures would you now retire to the cattery?

**Old Deuteronomy lies on the floor**

**Of the Fox and French Horn for his afternoon sleep;**

**And when the men say: "There's just time for one more,"**

**Then the landlady from her back parlour will peep**

**And say: "New then, out you go, by the back door,**

**For Old Deuteronomy mustn't be woken--**

**I'll have the police if there's any uproar"--**

**And out they all shuffle, without a word spoken.**

**The digestive repose of that feline's gastronomy**

**Must never be broken, whatever befall:**

- T.S. Eliot

### **Cited**

Eliot, T.S. (1939) *Old Deuteronomy*. In *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. New York.

Kriegel, R.J., & Brandt, D. (2011). *Sacred cows make the best burgers: Developing Change – Driving People and Organisations*. New York: Business Plus.

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