

# The Taboo of the Bananas: Organizational Culture and Recruiting

*Your recruiting process may be on autopilot because that's the way things have always been done. Oftentimes, the reasons why you do things have been forgotten, and may not even be valid anymore.*

By Stephen Balzac

Once upon a time there was a company known as Robotic Chromosomes. Don't bother Googling it; it's no longer in business, and besides, that's not the real name.

Robotic Chromosomes had a way of hiring programmers that isn't all that unfamiliar to folks in the software industry: logic puzzles. Like Microsoft, and various other companies, Robotic Chromosomes put every potential engineer through a series of logic puzzles in order to determine if those engineers were qualified.

There is, in fact, no actual correlation between programming ability and the ability to solve logic puzzles. This did not stop the folks at Robotic Chromosomes, who were convinced of the validity of their methods and were not interested in allowing facts to get in the way.

Even within the logic puzzle method, though, there were some definite oddities and idiosyncrasies that distinguished Robotic Chromosomes from other companies.

For several years, no one skilled in visual presentation or user interface development was ever good enough to solve the logic puzzles, or at least they could never satisfy the solutions that the existing engineers believed were correct.

Also for a number of years no one with an actual computer science background was hired into the engineering team. There was always something wrong with their solutions: some were not elegant enough, and others were too elegant.

Over time, the engineering department at Robotic Chromosomes developed a certain homogeneity of thought and approach to problem-solving and presentation of information.

Also over time, Robotic Chromosomes' flagship product

developed a rather intricate codebase and a user interface that felt like a very complex logic puzzle. Members of the QA department frequently found the interface to be more than a little opaque, to say nothing of the customers. Customer feedback, though, never quite seemed to penetrate.

When, after much arm-twisting, the company eventually hired a graphic designer to redo the interface on one of their products, the senior engineer on the team claimed that he couldn't see the difference, even though that difference was strikingly obvious to many other employees.

Let's move now to another company, RED incorporated. RED Inc had a corporate policy of retiring employees each year and then firing the bottom 10 percent. This policy worked for many years, and RED developed a very highly skilled, extremely competitive workforce.

Then something odd happened. Managers at RED started to notice that more and more often new employees, defined as those who had been with the company one or two years, were appearing in the bottom 10 percent. RED was also gaining a reputation as a company where new people were burned out and tossed out, and it became increasingly difficult to hire top people; indeed, some apparently highly qualified people were being given a thumbs-down from existing employees during interviews. Although managers made several attempts to change the interviewing process or come up with other ways to make things easier for new employees, the problems did not go away. Eventually, RED Inc started bleeding red ink.

## Genetic Defects

Both Robotic Chromosomes and RED are somewhat ex-

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## ASKING WHY

treme examples of what appeared to be a flaw in their recruiting processes. However, the consistent failure of all attempts to revise those recruiting processes eventually pointed to a different, more subtle, and more pervasive problem. That problem was the genetic code of each company: in other words, the organizational culture.

Organizational culture is frequently relegated to the status of “that’s how we do things around here.” Unfortunately, this description is both superficial and dangerous. Superficial because it misses the nature of culture and the depth of its influence, focusing instead on the most trivial aspects; dangerous because it creates an illusion that problems can be easily fixed by simply changing the way things are done. Unfortunately, as both Robotic Chromosomes and RED discovered, changing the way things were done did not actually change the results they were getting.

Culture is a very deep, very powerful force. It is *why* we do things far more than it is *what* we do. The choice of what is simply a vehicle for the why to manifest. You can change the *what* all you want; if the *why* doesn’t change, neither will the results. This will require some explanation.

Organizational culture is, at root, the residue of perceived success. In other words, it is the accumulated lessons that members of the culture have learned about how to do business, how to build products, how to treat clients, how to treat one another, and so forth. If something appears to work often enough, even if working means avoiding a problem, then that action, behavior, or belief becomes a part of the culture. Eventually, the reason is forgotten, only the behavior remains.

To give an example of this in action, there is a possibly apocryphal story about an experiment involving four gorillas. The gorillas are placed in a cage with a large ramp at the top of which is a bunch of bananas. Hidden around the cage are high-pressure hoses. Whenever one of the gorillas attempts to get the bananas, the water is turned on. The gorillas are all knocked flat by the water, and left soaking wet. Eventually, the gorillas learn to not go near those bananas. At that point, one of the gorillas is removed from the cage and a new gorilla is put in. The hoses are secretly removed.

Well, what does that new gorilla do? He sees those ba-

nanas and he heads straight for them. The other gorillas promptly jump on him, drag him off the ramp, and beat him up. They know what happens if you go after those bananas!

Eventually, the new gorilla learns to not go after the bananas. At that point, another gorilla is replaced.

This continues until none of the original gorillas are left in the cage. Even though all four gorillas now in the cage have never been hosed, none of them will go after the bananas. The *why* is long forgotten; what is left is The Taboo of the Bananas, passed down from generation to generation.

Humans are no different. We learn quickly what works and what doesn’t. We figure out how to avoid getting burned, and we make a point of not letting ourselves get burned.

We figure out something that appears to lead to success and we engage in that behavior. So long as it is intermittently rewarded, the behavior is reinforced. We pass on the lessons we learn and we look for other people who are open to those lessons. We attribute values and beliefs to those lessons, and those values and beliefs become part of the lesson. The encapsulation of those values, beliefs, and lessons becomes the culture: not just what we do, but why we do it. Like our gorillas, though, the *why* is often forgotten or ceases to be relevant: the hoses were removed, but the gorillas never knew that. The Taboo of the Bananas prevented them from finding out: actions

are carried out at an almost reflexive level. In a business setting, not realizing that the *why* has changed can lead to missed opportunities or wasted time and resources.

#### How it Plays Out

Let’s now go back to Robotic Chromosomes and RED and understand what happened at each of these companies.

The founder of Robotic Chromosomes was an extremely smart, very technical guy who loved logic puzzles. Although he had a string of degrees, none of them were in computer science. His visual aesthetic sense was mediocre at best, to the point where he could not see the point of many of the visual interface issues that users care about. When he recruited his first engineers, he hired people with a similar skill profile. He did that because his example of a successful programmer of the type of software he want-

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ed to write was him. The people he hired were smart, knowledgeable guys who agreed with his approach to graphical user interfaces and to programming in general. None of them had computer science degrees but they all loved logic puzzles. They quickly produced a saleable product: in other words, success!

This, then, became the model of the ideal employee: smart, technical, loves logic puzzles, and no computer science degree. Indeed, this model of the successful engineer was so strong that someone who did not fit the model in any way would not be hired. Thus, computer scientists who solved the logic puzzles were routinely not hired. Computer scientists were Robotic Chromosome's bananas.

The recruiting process was shaped by the model of the early employees, and then that process tended to pass only those people who supported that model. Each time that happened, the belief was reinforced. Since most of the failures were in not hiring qualified people, disconfirming evidence was minimal. Remember that since we're talking about intermittent reinforcement, the occasional bad hire would not be sufficient to force a reevaluation of the hiring metrics. Even when changes were made to the recruiting process, the profile of people being hired did not change for some time: the way recruiting was being handled was merely a vehicle for finding people who fit a certain profile: changing the mechanism did not change the beliefs of the people already there about what sorts of people would make good engineers.

Next, let's look at RED.

RED was a competitive, high-pressure company. The policy of always firing the bottom 10 percent meant, in theory, that everyone would always be on their toes and pushing to constantly improve. It also led to a subtle pressure on each employee to always hire people less competent than they were. If Bob could hire someone less competent than he was, then Bob could relax: there was always someone available to take the fall. Again, this didn't work all the time. It didn't need to: whenever a newer employee on a team was the person fired, the perception that firing the newer people protected the older people was reinforced. Changing the mechanism, the recruit-

ing process, didn't work because the underlying motivation to hire less-competent people was a *why*, not a *what*. Moreover, it was not something consciously planned or thought out. Rather, it was the result of behavior being shaped and subtly reinforced a series of accidental successes: in this case, the success was in people keeping their jobs. Existing employees truly believed they were hiring the best people they could! It's just that a lot of faith was put into the interviewing process, and if enough employees felt they couldn't work with a given candidate, or felt uneasy or uncomfortable with that candidate, then the candidate wasn't hired. Once again, the Taboo of the Bananas manifests in its own unique way!

### Look at Your Hiring Process

On a broader level, how a company approaches the recruiting process and treats candidates during that process says a great deal about the culture and, in turn, reinforces the culture.

For example, how a company treats candidates during the recruiting process teaches those candidates a great deal about how to succeed in that company. In the early 1990s, a certain company, which we'll call Asteroid Systems, was infamous for its recruiting process: candidates were called back for interview after interview. This process could take weeks, and attempts to call and get information on the process were ignored. Those who were eventually hired

had learned the lesson that decisions should be made slowly, that everyone needs to have input, and that it was better to take an arbitrarily long time to make decisions than to make a mistake. This was reflected in how the company did business. While their market was hot, it wasn't a serious problem, but when competitors moved in, their inability to make rapid decisions or risk mistakes led to major problems. The candidates who got tired of waiting and went elsewhere were sufficiently invisible to the employees that they did not provide disconfirming evidence for the success of their policy.

Meanwhile, the Wasabi Corporation had a slightly different approach to recruiting. In its case, the people who called constantly and generally made pests of themselves were the ones who were called in to for interviews. If you were pas-

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sive, they didn't want you. Employees at Wasabi learned from day one that if you wanted to get things done, you needed to take action, and that taking action was rewarded. For the most part, this worked out pretty well for Wasabi. They did have some problems with employees being so pushy that it was difficult to get them to work together, but they were able to solve that.

A brief caution here: do not assume that the best way to hire is therefore to ignore passive candidates and just call in the people who keep making noise. Wasabi's method worked for them in that time and place and because it connected to the appropriate elements of its culture. If you attempted to just graft that approach on to another company, the results would probably not be so pretty. A common mistake is to take a mechanism from one company and graft it to another. That can work well when the two companies have similar underlying values and beliefs, the *why* of culture, but can be disastrous when those underlying values and beliefs do not match.

So how do you avoid the Taboo of the Bananas? It's not easy, and the more enmeshed you are in the culture of the company for which you recruit, the harder it will be. Fish do not discover water, and people who spend their days within a culture tend to take it for granted. This can make it difficult to recognize the subtle and indirect effects of your recruiting approach.

That said, there are some questions you can ask that will at least point you in the right direction:

- What are the values of the company? How do you know?
- What does the perfect employee look like? Why do you believe that?
- How will you know when you've found the right person? What areas of that definition are subjective? What does that subjectivity tell you about the values and beliefs of the organization?

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- How does the hiring process reinforce the behaviors your value and discourage those you don't? How might it do just the opposite?
- How will you know if the people you failed to hire were actually the qualified people?
- How are you measuring the success of your recruiting process in the short-term and in the long-term?
- If you were to view your company as a system of interacting parts, how would your subsystem interface with the rest of the company?
- If you believe you have a culture problem, what are the resources available to you to deal with it?

There are no right answers to these questions. The only wrong answers lie in not taking the questions, and the influence of organizational culture, seriously.



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