



How to Spot Dogma in Organizations & People

By Adrian Pei

Uncovering secular religions inside corporate America...



A number of years ago, I worked in a large corporation that had much reverence for its founder. They had a booklet of his philosophies, which senior leaders referred to often. One executive even told me, “If you want to have credibility in this organization, you should study this book well, and quote from it often.”

I found this fascinating, because it kind of reminded me of what I’ve experienced in some churches and religious environments. If you have a Bible verse that backs up what you’re claiming is true, some people will listen—and if you don’t, they will tune you out. **It made me wonder: how many “founder’s booklets or creeds” exist in companies and cultures around the world?**

For me, there was always something that felt a bit “unideal” about this dynamic. It had nothing to do with the content of the booklets themselves (I happen to believe in the Bible myself)! Rather, it had to do with the *process or method of thinking* behind those who were most fixated on these texts and words. The process seemed to be, “if you simply back up your statement by citing this authority source, I’ll listen to and likely believe what you’re saying.”



It wasn't hard to imagine how much potential trouble this approach could lead to, when applied in other situations—whether in actual religious or societal cults, or simply in cults of personality. **How many people follow celebrities or influencers so closely, hanging on their every word or action?** I don't think it's a stretch to call this kind of thinking “dogma.”

The thing about dogma, is that it's never an isolated belief system. There are always many values underneath the surface of stated beliefs—whether we're aware of them, or not.

For example, a person might quote or cite a Bible verse saying that we must put God first in everything. That sounds great, but then when you look at peoples' actions, there might be all kinds of other influences from economic systems like consumerism—as well as cultural priorities of comfort, individualism, and wealth (not to mention political views on social issues). How many religious people listen to and quote corporate moguls or popular influencers for advice, that have little or no foundation in the Bible?

A person can say they believe anything, but their actions will reveal their underlying values. That's what I learned in the large corporation I was working in, where one manager told me he saw many employees play dirty politics or ask for favoritism, all the while co-opting words like “respect” or “fairness” for their own agendas or gain (e.g. “I can't believe they didn't choose me to lead that project, even after all the years I've worked here—I don't think that's the kind of ‘respect’ our founder would have wanted”).

You can identify dogma through words, and underlying values through actions. There are layers to this, that we can uncover if we do a little digging under the surface.

So you can try a little case study: maybe it's a company where you're a customer or an employee. Maybe it's the school where your children attend, or a religious group—or maybe it's the country where you live.



Ask yourself these questions:

1. What are the words, slogans and mantras that you hear people referring to most often? From whom or where did these originate? Are there any booklets or creeds that are treated with reverence?
2. How closely do the actions of people in this group match their words? What do these actions truly reveal about the group's values?

You can learn a lot, if you notice how people identify themselves in groups. I've been in groups where every person introduced themselves by their length and loyalty of membership: "I'm Scott, and I've been a regular member here for 40 years." In other groups, every person seemed to have an advanced academic degree, and made sure others knew about it. These kinds of actions reveal some of what is valued in these groups, whether it's seniority, education or competence.

If we want to understand organizations and systems, and potentially change them, it starts with seeing these kinds of layers. I once worked with a company where all the VPs were in one room, talking about how important leadership training and diversity were to their identity and "competitive advantage." However, actual progress and work on these priorities was slow, and their investment was limited.

Then when the company's product faced some new and threatening competitors, every leader dropped everything to focus on this. This showed me that this company was always going to be product-focused first, and "people-focused" second.

Where did this come from? Well, many years ago the founder began the company with a product, and the organization was then formed around that product to support it, and help it to grow. If you imagine an organization as a living and breathing organism, its very birth and lifeblood came from a product, so its survival instincts kicked into high gear when that product was threatened. No wonder there was such an immediacy and urgency to the response, compared to other priorities that kept getting



put on the backburner! The company's actions spoke louder, than all the words of the VPs in those leadership meetings.

Understanding this, a change strategy in a company like this would incorporate a realistic view of these motivators; one would need to find a way to use the product, market, and competition to drive necessary change. Otherwise, one might be stuck in endless meetings with executives, bemoaning the lack of change and commitment in the organization.

I hope this article was interesting to you or helpful for discussion in your team or group! If you ever want a trainer or facilitator to speak on these topics, I'm here. You can e-mail me or [schedule a call on my website](#) anytime.

Discussion or Reflection Questions:

1. How can respect and reverence for a founder or "creed" help a group or organization? When and where can it get in the way?
2. What helps you to spot and understand the underlying values that really drive priorities in groups or organizations? How can that help you to influence change that really works and lasts?



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