CORPORATE ANTHROPOLOGY FAQ

Q: What is corporate anthropology?
A: Corporate anthropology is the application of anthropological theories, methods and tools to businesses and other organizations. Traditional anthropologists are social scientists who study human behavior through the systematic observation of how people live and work in groups to identify the values, beliefs and behaviors that are given meaning. Corporate anthropologists apply this same systematic observation to businesses, not-for-profits, and organizations, all of which have a "way of doing things" – in other words, their own cultures.

What's so great about systematic observation? It's the key to knowing what's working and what isn't, how people are using a company, applying its products or services, and leveraging technology and social networks during the course of the workday. Most importantly, through corporate anthropology, we can better understand how workers extract meaning (or don't) from their work and how those they serve do the same. We have long learned that among humans it isn't what they say or do that matters, it is what it means to them.

All too often, businesses and their leaders make sweeping generalizations about their customers, employees, products, and many other topics, but they don't really know. Corporate anthropology provides the possibility of actually (or at least better) knowing what's happening and why in organizations.

Q: What industries does it work best for?
A: Corporate anthropology can be applied to every industry – from higher education to healthcare, agriculture to high-tech – and to companies that are large or small, start-ups or fast-growing entrepreneurial firms, complex or simple. Remember that anthropology was applied to all types of societies from simple to complex well before it gained traction among industry and business. Companies from Motorola to Nokia, Intel to Microsoft, to those included in my book *On the Brink* that operate in healthcare, higher education, pharmaceuticals, and manufacturing, all benefited from the application of the methodology, theory, and tools of corporate anthropology.

Q: Does a company have to be innovative for corporate anthropology to work?
A: For observational research and the values it offers to help a company requires only the willingness of the leadership and staff to believe that there are a lot of things happening all around them that could help them "do better." Whether that is a realization that their internal operations need to improve or their market strategies and growth opportunities need to expand is really irrelevant. What is essential is a belief that they have taken their own skills as far as they can go and it is time to step out and look at their company with "fresh eyes."

Q: What is the time frame for getting results?
A: The time frame for results will vary from organization to organization. I once worked with a company for only four days and we were able to achieve some amazing "aha" moments that sent them off in a new direction. However, I have also worked with companies once a month for over a year in order to achieve the same result. It really

depends on what the company wants to do and how the methodology can be used to help them. Sometimes I train their staff to go "exploring" and they find wonderful things that can be pieced together to shed light on a problem. The most important thing is that the people are engaged in the discovery process and willing to step out and observe their business and themselves in new ways.

Q: What are the costs associated with corporate anthropology?
A: Costs and budgets are an important consideration. In a lot of the literature emerging on corporate anthropology there is a discussion about the length of time it takes for an anthropologist to work with a company. Rather than craft a budget around time, I like to work backwards and ask the company what they would like to know, how much they would like to spend to start the process of knowing, and then tell them what I can do for that budget. In some cases I train one member of their team to begin the work and then I serve as a guide and coach. In others cases, I do the work with them or for them. If I need to add resources to expand the number of anthropologists working on a project, it also requires larger budgets. But in all cases I try to provide valuable insight through a process of discovery and observation that fits the client's size, scope, and budget. I also, at times, stay on to help in the implementation process.

Q: What is the ROI on corporate anthropology? What results can I expect?
A: What is the ROI on any type of discovery process or research? It depends on what it is we are researching or what type of market space I am trying to open for a client. What you can expect is a process that leads to new data, information, and insights that are focused around meaning, not facts. What a company does with the results is up to them. In *On the Brink*, Elkay's filler stations grew from $0 to 25% of their portfolio (a $1billion business) in four years. TelerX grew 40% after discovering that their core business was focused on the needs of the over-50-year-olds who used telephones for customer service. They reinvented their business to focus on an integrated online and phone service and they grew like crazy.

Q: Is there a firm process that I can apply to my business or does it vary?
A: Corporate anthropology applies a discovery process that is grounded in an understanding of culture. That part of the process is firm. The approach, however, is tailored to what the client wants to discover and it does not necessarily always unfold where the client believes the data or insights will be found.

Corporate anthropology applies many ethnographic techniques to capture the necessary data. Some of those techniques include informal interviews, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires with customers, suppliers and employees. A business leader applying corporate anthropology to their company may sit on the phones, look at emails, listen to staff in the lunch room, "spend an day in the life of a customer," and do mystery shops, all designed to help them better see what is 'really' happening and how it might open new opportunities or solve problems or measure results better for them.

Cyber-ethnography now also allows the mapping of social networks using content analyses of behavior and socio-demographics. Corporate anthropologists may employ online analytical programs for studying Facebook, Twitter, forums, and blogs. This technique allows for insights to emerge with often-unexpected results.

Finally, for those companies that are multi-national, adapting their business, staff, and corporate strategies from one country requires a specially designed approach tailored to the specific needs or problems to be solved. The approach and the use of anthropology in this context are customized to help companies design appropriate local management models, deal with cross-cultural sensitivity, and design strategies to cope with local issues.

Q: Can I apply these concepts to my business without being a trained anthropologist?

A: Yes! – if you are willing to take a step back and look at your company as if it belongs to someone else. This is a way of "seeing" that can be adopted, adapted, and embraced. When I train a team inside a company to go exploring, they often return with tremendous insights. It's not necessary to have an in-depth knowledge of traditional anthropology to apply the techniques of corporate anthropology to change an organization's culture. Rather, the essential requirement is that companies and their leadership are willing to embrace an understanding of that culture and identify what they would prefer it to become—including the things that people believe in, the things they value, and they way they behave.

Q: How many people on my team should be trained in corporate anthropology?

A: In some ways you can better create a culture that fosters empowerment, innovation, and change if you introduce all of your staff to the theory and methods of corporate anthropology. Most of the best ideas tend to come from employees. If they can be trained to better see what is happening, how they could do their jobs better, and ways to help the organization create better solutions, then they can expand their value beyond their particular job in the company.

Q: What is the first step?

A: Here is a simple, 3-question checklist I like to ask clients before I begin the journey of discovery with them. You can take it as well to see if you are ready to "see, feel, and think" about your company in new ways:

1. Frame the problem to be solved. What is the question you want to answer or the problem you believe needs to be solved?
2. What do you know about the problem or question today? Do a good assessment of what you think is going on and why. How do you think you are solving it now?
3. How could some discovery time provide you with fresh ideas to work with? What is really not working? What is frustrating you? Where are you stuck?

I often tell clients that if you really want to change, you should either have a "crisis" or create one. Without the pressure of a challenge, people hate to change. Their brains fight it. This checklist starts the process of realizing that you need some help to start to change.