

## What is the value of culture?

What is the value of culture, and could you define it?

Lori Clos Fisher, COO - Global Transaction Services for Bank of America Merrill Lynch, guided an audience of 30+ business men and women in their quest to answer these questions as she spoke on “From Ephesus to Colosse, or from Brazil to Hong Kong ... What is the Value of Culture?” at BELIEVES on August 12<sup>th</sup>.



How did Lori receive the peace and certainty to talk about this topic?

“God teaches us in many ways,” Fisher told everyone in her opening remarks following an inspiring devotional and invocation prayer from Mike Murdock’s “Leadership Secrets of Jesus” shared by Father John Howren.

“To prepare for our discussion, I had several discussions with Andrew over coffee or on the phone to consider a few ideas. Then while lying in bed at 3 AM one morning, I felt a certainty enter my heart and head that culture was our topic,” Fisher recalled, “and I have to admit, I felt pretty good and confident.”

Fisher’s 25+ year career with Bank of America has provided her the opportunity to experience first-hand a variety of cultures around the world touching countries such as South Africa, Brazil, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Mexico, and many others on just about every continent throughout the world.

“I consider myself a very ‘culturally aware person,’” Fisher said, “but in all honesty, I know what culture looks like, but I can’t really clearly define what culture is.”

How does the dictionary define culture? Once you get past definitions that are biological, such as a culture of bacteria, the focus of the definitions shifts.

- *Beliefs, customs, and arts of a society, group, place or time that is characteristic of everyday existence, and integral to transmitting knowledge to the future.*
- *A way of life of a group of people made up of beliefs, values, and symbols that are reinforced by members of the group.*
- *A way of thinking, behaving or working that exists in a place or an organization.*

“As I read each of these definitions, I was searching for the common thread, and the common thread I found was this – people,” stated Fisher. “Culture isn’t a thing, it is us.”

One of the first lenses that we use to identify culture is often geographically-based. To illustrate, Fisher asked everyone to close their eyes and imagine if they were dropped into Atlanta Hartsfield Airport.

“How would you describe the United States’ culture based off of what you see when you close your eyes?”

Responses were varied.

Busy. Wired. Eating (especially lots of fast food). Variety. Lots of cell phones. Lack of beauty. Prosperity. Loud. Not a lot of interaction between people.

These were several of the initial observations close to a dozen of the men and women at BELIEVES shared they envisioned.



“How about if it’s based on magazine headlines?” asked Fisher.

The response: Hollywood. Star-focused.

Fisher shared that the prior Wednesday she had been in Atlanta’s Hartsfield Airport and noticed that there were a lot of folks seeming lost. She found it heartening to notice people helping those who seemed lost, and was thankful for that part of the culture experienced.

Growing up, Fisher said her family moved around a lot. Looking back, she says she realizes that she was being prepared for a life of many cultures later, though she didn’t recognize it in her youth.

“At a very young age my family moved from New Jersey to DC, and then to Macon, Georgia. I became aware of ‘cultural differences’ even within our own country,” she said. “While being raised to be a polite child, we did not grow up adding ‘Ma’am’ or ‘Sir’ to a yes or no answer. However, once I moved to Macon and was asked ‘yes, what?’ a few times in school by teachers, I learned the importance of this sign of respect in the south and adapted.”

More recently in her professional career, Fisher had the opportunity to build a bank in Brazil, and found culture to be a major influencer on how that experience unfolded.

During the process of establishing the bank, Fisher made a series of visits to Brazil over a 6-month period to meet with Merrill Lynch employees in Brazil who worked in tax, finance, compliance, technology, and operations. She said that much of the time was spent learning from the employees she met before ultimately developing a detailed list of requirements to build the bank.

Once the detailed list was completed and documented, it was sent to the Brazilian employees who she had met with so the groups from each department could approve their sections.

“A week after we sent it, I got a call from the CFO in Brazil and he told me that I had the people in the office all excited,” Fisher recalled. “When I asked him why, he said, ‘they did not really think you would ever actually get this far.’ Despite all the time they spent with us they were only being polite. So now we had to go through everything again to be sure every function was comfortable to move forward.”

Just as Fisher’s experience in Brazil allowed her to experience the importance of meeting people where they are, Fisher said that in the Bible, Jesus and the writers of the Bible are always doing the same.

No matter if Jesus is teaching using stories of shepherds and farmers, or if Paul is writing to the inspiring followers of Christ in Colosse, or traveling to the thriving city of Ephesus where there was a small faith community amidst all the big city’s trappings, they always seek to meet people where they are at.

The fact that we all read the Bible today is perhaps evidence of their success in doing so.

“Imagine the challenge of writing for people to understand for 1,000’s of years,” exclaimed Fisher. “That’s astounding!”

So when it comes to meeting people where they are at, and having that grow in an organizational setting, how does that happen?

According to some 2013 research from the Harvard Business Review, there are six common components that are needed to make a culture.

The first is a simple and compelling mission and vision that provides purpose to guide not only employees, but also suppliers and other stakeholders.

Non-profits are often particularly good with this, with examples such as the Alzheimer Association’s “A world without Alzheimer’s” or the Cathedral of Christ the King’s “To know, love, and serve, like Jesus.”



Fisher shared that values is another key component and are critical in how we treat each other. The key with values is – they have to be authentic.

“Has anyone ever worked in an organization where it’s said one way, but lived another?” Fisher asked.

One attendee quickly replied, “Yes, it’s discouraging.”

The other four key components that form culture are practices, people, narrative, and place.

Though the Harvard Business Review was focused on corporate cultures, Fisher said that all six components apply to church and faith communities as well.

To illustrate citing faith cultures she experienced, Fisher recalled visits to churches in both London and Hong Kong to attend Mass on overseas business trips in prior years.

“In London, the church was a beautiful, old stone structure with only 20 worshippers at an 11 AM Mass on Sunday. There were no worship sheets to follow along with the Mass, no choir and nobody spoke to me the entire time. It was an austere and quiet experience,” Fisher recalled.

“By contrast, in Hong Kong, the church was full and everyone queued up in the stairways and lobby waiting to enter. There was a lot of talking, smiles, and a sense of community. Several members of the parish showed me where to go. This was a parish that loved to sing, had a beautiful choir, and to accommodate the large Philippine population, several of the songs/prayers were sung in Tagalog – and the words were projected on a screen from an overhead projector so everyone could participate. After Mass, they had a community celebration with food and crafts in the small parking lot.”

Though each parish has different circumstances, Fisher once again circled back to the common thread in all cases – culture is created by the people.

Why is culture important?

Research by the likes of James Heskett, an author on corporate cultures, shows that organizations with a strong corporate culture perform 20-30% better when compared with “culturally unremarkable” competitors. It’s not just about making people feel good, it is about actually helping people achieve results.

Fisher asked everyone to think about Heskett’s statistic and apply it to the food bank.

“What if food insecurity and hunger was impacted 20-30%? What a tremendous difference we can make,” she said. “Again, people are the key. That is us – you and me.”

So what culture do we each create? What do people see in you? How many folks would know you’re Christian? As managers, owners, and employees how do we translate our faith and values to our workplace and community?

These were open-ended questions Fisher asked everyone to ponder as she shared a few more thoughts before having those at each table engage in discussion.

She said that in Father Feiser’s homily on Sunday, he took the concept of how people see us through our interactions a step further, sharing that we each encounter God in different ways as we are different people, and that we encounter God through the people we meet – whether at work, in the store, at a restaurant or at Mass.

“He challenged us to think about how we treat God in these circumstances because he said ‘if God is in you, every interaction you have is with God.’ As we find God within us, and let it come out, culture changes. Small efforts and changes help us grow. If we individually grow our culture grows,” Fisher concluded.

Having shared a number of insights, Fisher guided each table to discuss culture, how they each define it, and what they each had experienced.

Amy Cornelius, Strategic Account Manager at Steelcase, said, “Companies sometimes reinvent culture based off what’s happening. It’s really the same for us throughout life. If we learn what customers want, it shapes culture.”

Having spent considerable time overseas like Fisher, Sharon Zukauckas, a BELIEVES attendee, commented that the international perspective is very different.

“When we lived in Europe, the French and Italians wanted to get to know you first,” Zukauckas said. “Germans were precise. Americans are checklists. When I think of faith, Jesus wanted to get to know us. We try to see God in everything.”

Brian Pilger, co-owner and Director of Sales for Warfield Technologies, noted difference in culture just within the United States that he observed from his life experience.

“I grew up in Colorado, but have learned that it is much easier to have faith in Atlanta. Likewise, when we were in Boston if you said, ‘let’s take a moment to pray’ ... forget it. In Boston, you just didn’t talk about faith at all, and you couldn’t move forward in your career if you brought that into your day. It can be a lonely life in the NE United States if you choose a faith path.”

Other comments expressed from business men and women attending the session centered on a belief that in the last 20-30 years, our society’s become neutered, where we often can’t express our faith.

As one attendee stated, “It takes courage to do this.”

In discussing what a true sign of culture is, John Monroe, Chief Financial Officer at TradeRocket, shared that at his table one thing they all agreed was that the key is authenticity.

“It’s got to be lived from top down,” Monroe said. “Management has to work and live the culture. It needs to be intentional.”

Yovany Jerez, a Corporate Training Manager at AT&T, seconded what Monroe shared, adding that being intentional about culture involves striving to be inspirational about what we do.

“Christ didn’t just say listen to me,” Jerez stated, “He inspired people from within.”

As the dialogue closed with discussion amongst tables touching on Protestant and Catholic churches and the need to cultivate understanding of messages in our faith communities, Fisher summarized the remarks shared that culture is all about authenticity, being inspirational, and that it is evolving.

Then to close she said, “Hopefully there’s been pause to think about culture and your role. It’s all about the people.”

