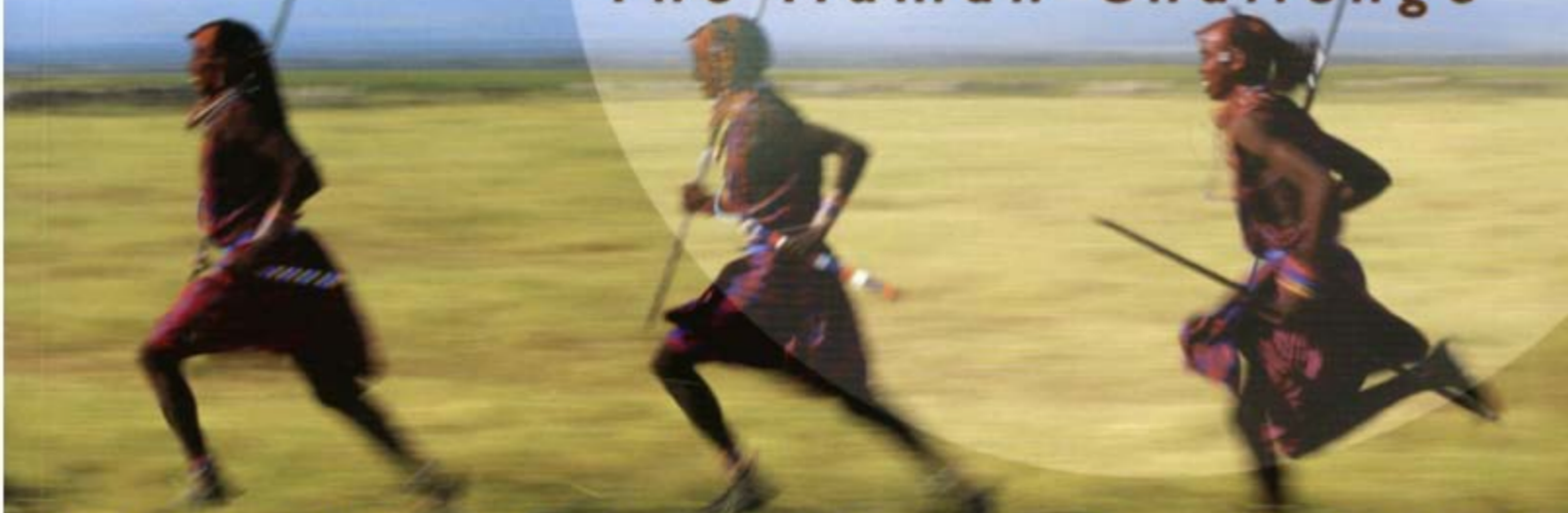


Eleventh
Edition

Cultural Anthropology

The Human Challenge



HAVILAND

PRINS

WALRATH

McBRIDE

Anthropology Applied

Anthropology in the Corporate Jungle

For the first 15 years of my career as an anthropologist, I did what most people in the discipline had done for more than a century: I focused my research on the cultures of “exotic” peoples living in remote, nonindustrial corners of the world. For me it was the rainforests of Central America and the deserts of the Sahara. Then I decided to turn the lens on my own culture and use anthropology’s methods to study businesses, non-profit organizations, and governmental and educational institutions. I became part of a growing wave of corporate anthropologists, so-called because we study corporate groups.

What makes corporate anthropology an interesting addition to our discipline’s repertoire is that fieldwork takes place in a contemporary organization rather than in the jungles of Guatemala, New Guinea, or Samoa. And when you think about it, you don’t have to go far away to find the exotic. Many of us live in jungles, whether concrete or green and leafy. The challenge for all of us, not just anthropologists, is to critically see the most familiar and mundane cultural practice as a view from afar, and in that shift of perspective to gain new insight about how we live. Looking through an anthropological lens, some of those practices can at times seem quite bizarre!

Imagine, for example, observing a typical office meeting from an anthropological perspective. There are the tribal elders milling around a huge polished wooden slab, shaking hands and pounding each other on the back. The men are all dressed in the same costumes, their “loin cloths” held up by suspenders or a belt, their feet encased in black polished footwear. On occasion a female voice is heard, only to be drowned out by the bleating of the males. And then there’s the question of what to do when you are the anthropologist and all of your informants are too busy to talk with you? I resorted to stocking my office with exotic chocolates from all around the world and

sprinkling Hershey’s Kisses, like breadcrumbs, down the hallways so that people could find me easily. I was never lonely after that.

There are moments when this work is entertaining. That said, my research is serious business. It has a practical side, a purpose. It provides corporations with insights about their operations that can lead to problem-solving solutions that increase productivity and profitability. Let me offer a specific example.

I served as visiting anthropologist with IBM for ten years from 1990–2000. During that time IBM was struggling to respond to new market demands as the computer industry morphed from mainframes to personal computers in the late 1980s. Their slow reaction prompted their executives to seek help, and I was called in. I was placed in charge of developing a methodology for changing their culture, and, if successful, IBM would apply the same methodology on its many customers and vendors around the world (the inception of the IBM Consulting Group, now a part of Global Services). I explained how I had developed rapid analysis software that could “x-ray” the company’s culture—the human networks of its current work processes. This was possible thanks to a database I’d created of more than 200 examples of corporate networks from all around the world. Using my database, I could quickly diagnose and benchmark IBM’s culture to determine

the nature of any pathology. For the next several years, several divisions were analyzed, including their executive leadership. After a statistical analysis was performed, I developed a measure for cultural inertia (a resistance to change) and determined the sunk costs of operational inefficiencies. Fixing the problem was twofold:

1. Reorganizing the company by outsourcing divisions as independent companies partnering with IBM, reducing the overall employee population from 400,000 to 250,000.
2. Restructuring the pay and performance systems for the top executives so that they were rewarded for cooperating as a team rather than competing against neighboring divisions, perversely thwarting the overall organizational goals.

Both solutions were cultural in nature and difficult for those within the culture to detect. But with the help of my x-rays, IBMers saw for themselves how sometimes their best efforts were often misguided, hindering rather than helping. Accepting the findings and recommendations as objective and sound, they were willing to change their behaviors to improve productivity.

I also introduced another change at IBM: I was the first female executive to wear pants. When confronted with the news that I’d breached the fashion code, I just told them that females wearing pants was a more modest and conservative approach, totally in keeping with their cultural values. One vice president threw back his head and laughed: “I never thought of it that way!” (By Karen Stephenson for this textbook. For more about Stephenson and her work, visit her company’s Web site: www.netform.com.) ■ ■ ■



Courtesy of Karen Stephenson