

Fearless Thinkers, Episode 13  
"Has your organizational culture reached its expiration?"  
with Kelsey Raymond

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**Masami  
Cookson:**

Welcome to *Fearless Thinkers*, the BTS podcast. My name is Masami Cookson and our host is Rick Cheatham, head of marketing at BTS.

On today's show, Rick has a conversation with Kelsey Raymond, who is an associate director at BTS. She specializes in culture shifts that enable large scale organizational change and transformation.

Prior to BTS, Kelsey was a consultant at Accenture Federal, working to improve the efficiency of federal operations through process improvement, people and system alignment, and developing enterprise and functional strategy.

Hey Rick, how are you doing today?

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**Rick  
Cheatham:**

Oh, Masami, I really couldn't be better. I just got back yesterday from Buenos Aires. We had our partner meeting down there and if for those of you out there listening if you know anything about the BTS culture, we truly like and enjoy both the fun friendship but also the debate.

Well, today we have a great conversation with Kelsey. She brought some different perspectives on culture and what we can be watching out for as leaders when it comes to the culture that we've had not serving us as well as it once did.

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**Masami:**

I can't wait to hear more.

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**Rick:**

Well, let's do it.

Hey Kelsey, welcome to the show.

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**Kelsey  
Raymond:**

Thanks, Rick, great to be here.

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**Rick:**

So, coming off the weekend, any exciting things going on in your world?

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**Kelsey:**

You know, it is finally fall here in New York so a lot of great Central Park walks seeing all the crazy Halloween decorations on the Upper West Side. Just lots of relaxation, which has been great.

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**Rick:**

Oh, so jealous. I lived up in the Northeast briefly, and you know, fall is a luxury we can't afford in the Southwest, so very, very jealous.

But hey, more interested to talk to you about culture and a phrase that I've heard you say a few times, which is: "Helping organizations discover whether or not their culture has reached its expiration date." I'm wondering if you could share a little bit with us around what that means in your perspective on culture in general.

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**Kelsey:**

Yes, happy to.

The idea of examining culture is nothing new. You know, business leaders, they've known for a while that in addition to examining their strategy and thinking about their purpose, that culture is critical. But I think what we've seen is that it wasn't usually prioritized until now.

One thing that I think really, really gets at this it's this idea that change reveals dysfunction, and the changes that we've seen in the past few years – you know, from the pandemic to thinking about economic and political turmoil – those have all further revealed that there is this dysfunction in some companies that lies beneath the surface. Leaders are starting to realize that their culture may no longer actually enable them to reach their business goals.

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**Rick:**

Can you share with me, when you are talking about culture.. What does that mean to you?

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**Kelsey:**

We have a very specific definition when it comes to culture, and we would break it down into this idea that culture is a set of deeply held organizational mindsets that shape who we are as a company and how we do things.

We'll break it down even further if we think of this idea of deeply held. That's this notion that culture is instinctual. It's the things that are unspoken or second nature that are bigger than any individual in the organization. And that ultimately goes to shape who we are as a company.

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**Rick:** It actually makes even more sense to me why you would say change reveals dysfunction, because I think change equals stress and stress exposes all the cracks in the foundation, right?

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**Kelsey:** Yes.

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**Rick:** As leaders out there kind of starting to think about culture or culture change, what are a couple of approaches that they might have?

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**Kelsey:** We've seen more companies think about changing their culture because it's past its expiration.

There are two ways to approach that. The lucky companies might take the one that is prevention, 'cause ideally, we don't actually wanna reach that expiration point. So, the question becomes, you know how do you actually prevent your culture from reaching said point?

And that might be triggered by an event. You know, maybe you change your strategy; there is a new CEO or a change in the executive team perhaps a merger, an acquisition. That might ask leaders and prompt them to take a closer look at how the culture exists today.

But what we see a lot and do with our clients is the second point, which is kind of around intervention. This usually applies when companies are already approaching or have neared their expiration date. So, there's a lot of urgency here.

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**Rick:** How do we know that we're getting close, or we're already there?

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There's a lot of different warning signs. One that comes to mind: you start to see a lack of innovation.

There are lots of stories about this in the world of tech. Everyone back in the day migrating to the world of the cloud and for the leaders of some companies who couldn't get behind that couldn't let go of what was and what actually led to their success. That wasn't the cloud. They ended up losing the race of what could be. And of course now we know the world is running on iOS and Android and others

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are left out in the cold. And for those companies that were left out in the cold it truly gets down to a sense of what their culture was.

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**Rick:**

So what are some other things that we should be looking for?

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**Kelsey:**

...This idea of, your organization is very siloed. With silos comes interdepartmental blame – teams that are quick to point a finger on what's wrong, but not very quick to take accountability for any type of mistakes. There might be some decision-making challenges within that type of company, you know where everyone has the power to veto but no one actually has the power to approve and finalize what that decision is.

And throughout these types of companies, it's this sense that we're not engaging the right people to get to the truth, to get to alignment on what that decision is.

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**Rick:**

You know, some of the best advice that I got as a new leader, kind of when I was making that switch from leading individual contributors to leading an organization, was... I had an executive coach tell me from now on, your peers are your team, the people that report to you are no longer your team.

Obviously, it's something that's still very much on my mind almost 20 years later.

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**Kelsey:**

Absolutely, I'm sure it shaped how you made decisions with that kind of mindset shift.

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**Rick:**

The other thing that's on my mind so much in what you are saying here was... All the work that was done as the millennials entered the workforce to be inclusive and accommodating.

And also, unfortunately, I saw [a] lot of organizations create silos based on time and career, or time in the organization. That, I think, for a lot of companies, became very destructive.

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**Kelsey:**

Yes, and if over time you don't address those or bring them out, that's where we start to see it inhibiting you being able to actually execute your strategy, or worse, those companies with, you know, toxic cultures, where we see a really high level of

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attrition.

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**Rick:** Well, it's interesting that you mentioned strategy, because I would think that a company's ability to launch or shift strategy might be one of those changes that could really be an indicator of the health of their culture.

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**Kelsey:** Yes, yes. You hit on a big one for us – that's a warning sign of those types of expired cultures, and it's this idea that if you've launched a new strategy and you're expecting, you know, all the organization to get behind it and to begin executing the great plan you've put in place, that actually doesn't happen.

One of the main ingredients for that successful strategy execution is to, in fact, approach your culture as that strategy accelerator.

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**Rick:** Oh no, that's a very interesting concept. Can you dig into that a little bit more?

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**Kelsey:** Culture and strategy – they're either mutually reinforcing, or simultaneously defeating.

And this idea that culture should be viewed as a strategy accelerator that is tightly knitted with the business strategy – this helps create that business case for change, and help[s] employees identify what needs to be addressed first.

I mean, we can go back to the tech companies as a big example. Part of what shapes culture or what shaped culture in a lot of those organizations was what got rewarded in the first place; a lot of those tech companies, maybe historically they had a culture that valued expertise, and they were rewarding those who were doing great work on the old technologies. So, for them, you know, that type of reward system was actually a derailer to innovation, and to support that change in strategy, they needed to reward outside of the box thinking: the sense of learning to fail fast and cheap. That's how they would become the market innovators.

So, position your strategy in the... **Position culture in the context of your business strategy.** That allows you to answer or rather allows your employees to answer why this and why now. And then it makes culture less of a fluffy side project, and more a

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critical business initiative.

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**Rick:**

Oh, I really love that, 'cause you know, anyone that's listened to this show more than once knows that I have such a strong belief that nobody wants to go to work and be terrible. So, if their performance is poor, they either don't know what the right thing to do is or they don't know how to do it.

I mean, the last thing I want to be told all day is that I'm doing the wrong thing, or I'm not quite measuring up. I would think that becomes so much more important in the context of a strategy shift, where we maybe need to work differently, and we may need to shift or deprioritize things that used to be super important in the past.

Most of the time, in my experience... When people think culture, they think engagement. And so, when we see the warning signs that we're talking about right now, everybody wants to jump on like the employee engagement survey and the latest data there and just based on conversations we've had in the past, that is not your best advice!

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**Kelsey:**

No, no, it is not. And it's a misconception that I think we really wanna burst.

You know, don't get me wrong, engagement surveys they're necessary, and there is a place for them. But, I think what we believe is that alone they are insufficient. Sometimes questions are like: Leaders of my company are receptive to new ideas. And if that is an area where maybe you see an issue, companies might be tempted to go out and solve that problem, perhaps by, like, launching a new technology that enables employees to easily share those ideas.

And what we find is, that's actually a red herring. Perhaps those leaders aren't surfacing the ideas in meetings because rooted within this culture is a strong bias for action. Employees know that as soon as something's been said they wanna go out, leave the meeting, and they have a strong bias to act, rather than sit in this state of diversion thinking for a while and surface new ideas.

One of my colleagues put it very eloquently as, "Engagement surveys are putting sunglasses on a blind spot. You know, it's not actually gonna solve

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the real problem.”

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**Rick:** Yeah, or as long as I don't check my bank balance, I got plenty of money.

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**Kelsey:** Yeah, just stay away from it. Don't look at the 401ks these days.

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**Rick:** Well, so if engagement surveys aren't the answer, what potentially could or should we be looking at?

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**Kelsey:** Go back to that definition that we started with, Rick: this idea that culture is a set of deeply-held, organizational mindsets. Go beneath the surface and focus on what those organizational mindsets are. We think about that for culture on four different levels.

First one, being the individual. How are you within your team actually building trust?

Second one, be the team. How are you actually making decisions within a team? How are you holding people accountable?

And then as we go to the top, you know, organizationally, what is driving action?

And then around this, a big bubble around the individual the team and the organization: It's the environment itself. How is the company dealing with change, and how are they dealing with uncertainty and complexity?

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**Rick:** Looking through all of those lenses is completely essential.

So, if I'm just kind of working through the hierarchy, I've realized I have a problem. I've dug in a little bit deeper, looking through those four lenses you just described, discovered some things... Now what?

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**Kelsey:** Rather than going back to that room with a small team to envision that future, shift to actually co-authoring what that future is and intentionally engage with the organization.

**Authorship is ownership.** It's very important in getting this right, and primarily because people lower in the organization not only can help contribute to shaping the *what*, but they're often in a better position to identify the *where* and the *how*.

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And I think the first question we get again is around time. This will take a lot of time. But remember this authorship is ownership doesn't mean you have to ask everyone – strive for optimal inclusion. And oftentimes, that will lead to getting more of a diagonal cross section of the organization. You know, going from top down to bottoms up, but diagonally so you're not truly reaching everyone.

And this can be done through surveys, through focus groups, you know; leveraging, even, existing meetings so that you're efficient in the ways in which you ask for that authorship.

And the beauty of this is that in doing it you're actually already proactively uncovering and tackling where you might find resistance.

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**Rick:** To me, what you are talking about is, at the same time, really obvious common sense, and completely revolutionary. The common-sense part is no one's culture was created by five people in a windowless conference room.

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**Kelsey:** Right.

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**Rick:** The revolutionary part is, if we think we've got a culture problem we need to keep it under wraps, and keep it with the executive team, and maybe do an offsite. 'Cause we don't even want people walking by or hear, you know hearing through the walls versus standing up and saying, "Hey folks, we can do better, and we want you to be a part of helping us figure out how to do better." You know, if you still value engagement surveys after what Kelsey said earlier, that helped the engagement survey a lot, I would assume.

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**Kelsey:** Yeah, and I mean I think you hit the important part there, Rick, because it's the invitation even that will have an impact.

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**Rick:** So, this is the question: What can I go do just to even start moving my little part of the world towards a better culture?

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**Kelsey:**

**Focus on what you can control. So, that would be yourself and your team.** So, this might show up, you know, within your team in what you reward, thinking through who you make the heroes of your organization, of your distinct intact team *be*.

What comes to mind for me is maybe if you've praised people in your team on the past for going above and beyond for maybe doing whatever it takes to get the job done, and now you're really wanting to shift to more of a culture that doesn't accept this kind of burnout, maybe you begin to reward those innovations that save time.

And then, I think, Rick, you know, based on what you shared earlier is a key thing as well. How you make decisions; who you're thinking about as your team. That would be a great one as well.

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**Rick:**

Great, great, great advice.

I mean, again, spending most of my career in commercial organizations, I just can't tell you how many times I saw somebody win a sales award and every person in the room knows that that seller leaves a path of destruction everywhere they go but they hit their numbers, so they won. And it's just, oh, so disheartening and so damaging. So, even just that small advice of "Think about what you're rewarding – are you rewarding hero efforts that cause burnout, doing things to get their own objectives hit, but not necessarily continuing to lift the whole?" So great, great thinking.

Well, it was an absolute joy visiting with you today. Thank you so much for sharing your wisdom, and we'll talk soon.

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Kelsey: Great to chat with you Rick. Thanks for having me.

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