

The Power of Culture



We start with a cage containing five apes. In the cage, hang a banana on a string and put stairs under it. Before long, one of the apes will go to the stairs and start to climb toward the banana. As soon as the ape touches the stairs, spray all of the apes with cold water.

After awhile, another ape makes an attempt with the same result—again, spray all of the apes with cold water. This continues through several more attempts.

Pretty soon, when one of the apes tries to climb the stairs, all the other apes try to prevent the act.

Now, turn off the cold water, remove one ape from the cage, and replace it with a new one. The new ape sees the banana and wants to climb the stairs. To his or her surprise, all of the other apes attack it at beginning of the attempt. After another attempt and attack, this ape “knows” that climbing the stairs, will result in an attack.

Next, remove another of the original five apes and replace it with a new one. The newcomer goes to the stairs and is attacked. The previous newcomer takes part in the attack with enthusiasm.

Now, replace a third original ape with a new one. The new one makes it to the stairs and is attacked as well. Two of the four apes that performed the attack have no idea why they were not permitted to climb the stairs, or why they are participating in the attack on the newest ape.

After replacing the fourth and fifth original apes, all the apes originally sprayed with cold water have been replaced. Nevertheless, no ape ever again approaches the stairs.

Why not? Because this society of apes now operates on the basis of "that's the way we've always done it around here."

That's how a culture evolves and perpetuates itself.

Sometimes we call it policy; sometimes religion; it is just how things are done in this particular society.

In any case, it is powerful and self-perpetuating.