In my last blog, I wrote about the history of London and the ports that appeared on the Thames. And with the ports came change.

Change in a lot of ways: new goods, new languages, new people.

New culture.

But what is culture?

In London, there are different 'cultures', some based on age, some based on social types, some, sadly, still based on race, gender and sexual preference. But cultures aren't as simple as that. They are a complicated Venn diagram that crosses all these boundaries and more. The trick is to ignore these boundaries where they impede us as reasonable human beings. But this takes a certain amount of willpower.

In the keynote speech of the second day at the London Scrum Gathering entitled 'Choose Your Attitude', Debra Searle talked about her solo crossing of the Atlantic, in a plywood rowing-boat. It was not supposed to be a solo attempt but, unfortunately, her husband had an extreme bout of agoraphobia and had to abandon the attempt. The trip was supposed to last six weeks, but Debra was at sea for three months. Her boundaries were different from those of culture, but no less difficult to surmount. Loneliness, fear and self-doubt were among the barriers that she had to overcome to complete the epic crossing. And she did this by deciding consciously to change her attitude about her misgivings. Forging ahead with optimism, rather than letting the negative or the cynical get to her. A lesson we all could learn with respect to the way we treat both ourselves and others.

Such positive thinking is a step toward breaking down cultural barriers. And it's easy to say that you should break down these boundaries, but how do you undertake such a task? If you look at most companies, they will try to enforce a culture by way of company values. But, in truth, each department, each team, even each person, has their own specific culture.

Everyone in a team may be different but, as a group, it is a plus to have them follow the same methods, the same path and the same behaviour.

In the 'Behavioural Hypothesis of Team Formation', Petro Heiramo illustrates that such behaviour cannot be imposed. Taking as his basis the work of Kurt Lewin (who formulated an equation that stated that Behaviour is a function of Environment and Personality), Petri postulates that, for teams to having a fighting chance at survival, they need three qualities:

- A shared voluntary goal

- A goal that is not achievable by a single team member

- An appropriate challenge (not too easy, not too hard)

Around these qualities are elements that become part of a team's culture (Petri calls them Catalysts) that can then drive them to eventually achieve high performance or 'flow'. But the important thing is that this culture is driven internally.

Our own teams at Aquila Heywood have a certain amount of empowerment in this respect. They decide their own definition of when a piece of work is done. They examine how successful a Sprint (the small increment of time to complete a goal, in our case two weeks) has been in retrospectives and decide on actions to improve. These actions can often be 'intra-cultural', changing the working practices, behaviour and the culture of the team itself.

One of the points that came out of Peter's workshop was the fact that the environment alone does not determine behaviour, but it certainly affects it. London used to be a place of insular communities. There were poor areas, rich areas, business areas, tourist areas and so on. To a certain extent this is still true, but those walls are weakening. Parts of London have been revitalised: what were once segregated communities with little interaction with others have had their opinions changed by integration. Shared places to meet and interact.

The 'Three ways to build a DevOps Culture' workshop with Anil Lansing and Linda Fung gave a practical guide on how to create integration between Development and Operations departments in software development. This wasn't just a guide as to how the departments should join and work as a single entity: it detailed the culture that needed to be created in order to succeed. It should be safe to fail and learn from such failures. Such learnings that are discovered locally should be distributed globally. Exercises should be undertaken to mimic catastrophe and adopt methods to deal with large scale failures, and leaders should adopt an attitude to support education.

At Aquila Heywood, we are currently attempting to form a DevOps-type culture, utilising the ideas above to adapt, making us able to respond quicker and better.

But changes in behaviour and culture are never easy. Londoners can only do so much by themselves. Politicians and councils do their best to improve circumstances and reduce crime, but they can change education and funding only by degrees. Often, they seem to miss the mark and you may wonder how the meetings where bad decisions are made, are run and even if they have the right people in the room.

At Aquila Heywood, at least within technology, Scrum rituals and often discussions and retros outside of the teams are facilitated by Scrum

Masters. Sometimes people find these meetings frustrating and can often feel that they are 'pointless'.

So, Philly Lander's workshop, 'Transform your meetings from Pointless to Productive' gave a framework and structure so that such cynicism can be addressed. Simple ideas such as making sure that participants know why they are there and what the purpose of the meeting really is. Using a question to set the agenda forces everyone to have to try to answer it, rather than losing track of exactly why they are in the room. And finally, not just raising actions but examining the impact and timescale of those suggestions, so that teams can realistically attack them.

The ideas behind these structured meetings are the kind of things we can adopt, especially within retrospectives to aid team improvement.

So today I've learned that culture and behaviour are fluid things, especially in a city like London where change is a constant.

But while these conceptual siblings can be mercurial, that does not mean that we shouldn't try to affect their flow in such a way that they can be beneficial for everyone.