

ck1 Insights

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Creating Your Future: **VISION AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE**

Change is inevitable. It is often unpredictable. It is almost always complex. It is one of the things that make our world truly dynamic, interesting, and challenging. Change is a tide, whose ebb and flow shapes our unpredictable future. Change can be scary, it can bring confusion and unrest, especially for those that cannot accept it, adapt to it, or exert their own change in response to it. For those who can, change is an intricate dance of improvisation that makes them stronger in the end.

The Challenge of Change

If change can be problematic for individuals, it can be catastrophic for organizations. The increased complexity of an organization can compound the effects of change, mask the depth of change, and inhibit an appropriate response to change. An organization's ability to dance with change, to embrace it and conquer it, lies in its ability to consciously respond. Such response invariably involves transformation; transforming an organization from one in which a changed world is problematic, to one that thrives in such a new world. Managing change through organizational transformation, however, is not easy. If responding to change becomes a knee-jerk exercise, without direction or purpose, organizations can easily find

themselves gyrating themselves off track and into extinction. Organizational transformation requires vision.

An organization without vision is much like a ship adjusting course to avoid storms, yet failing to have a final destination. Vision provides direction. It provides a destination. It provides a lens through which to view the changing world, and a framework through which to plan an appropriate response. Visionary organizations are able to adapt, yet stay on course. They change, yet stay true to themselves. They work around change through their ability to enact their own change, yet maintain direction through a steadfast adherence to their vision. If the art of dealing with change rests upon the ability to consciously transform organizations, and the art of organizational transformation requires a clear vision, how then does one define a vision?

Defining a Vision

Articulating exactly what vision is can be problematic, primarily because there are so many broad notions of what it entails. Many managers and executives view vision as simply a set of goals to be accomplished. Some consider vision to be general organizational guidelines. Still, others link vision to organizational culture and values. Though these conceptions all touch on important aspects of organizational vision, they are, in and of themselves, incomplete. Vision, in its most complete sense, involves both a conception of an ideal future—a CIF—as well as the steadfast preservation of a core ideology. In these respects, vision allows an organization to change by developing new CIFs responsive to the changing dynamics of its environment, while staying true to itself by preserving a core ideology.

A CIF extends far beyond the development of simple goals and metrics. It involves painting a picture of an organization transformed. It involves moving past short-term goals, and envisioning a reality yet to be attained. A CIF involves a mental realization of not simply what the transformed organization will be like, it paints a picture of how it will be like to be a transformed organization—it is a vibrant, engaging, specific description. It does not simply say, for instance, that in five years sales will be x million dollars, it envisions what the organization will be like when it experiences x million dollars of sales—what the climate will be like, how employees will feel, how competitors will react, how it will effect the community etc. A complete vision translates goals into a picture that people can carry around in their head.

An organization's core ideology defines the enduring character of the organization. It is the bedrock character upon which the organization operates. It is the North Star, fixed and bright, that guides an organization even as the organization transforms itself. Such an ideology involves a clear understanding of core values and core purpose. Core values are the essential and enduring tenants of an organization. As timeless guiding principles, they are largely independent of the current environment, competitive requirements, or management fads. An organization's core purpose, on the other hand, reflects an organization's reason for existence. It reflects the idealistic motivations for doing the organization's work. It is a mission that captures the soul of the organization. Together, core values and core purpose represent the unchanging ideology of an organization. It is this component of vision that keeps the organization on course even during times of major transformation.

Vision cannot be faked. Nor is it easy to develop. It must be cultivated through honest

reflection, deep introspection, and iterative development. Such a process involves a sincere effort by management and cannot be accomplished overnight. Yet once it is developed, vision can be used as an extremely powerful catalyst for organizational transformation.

Organizational Change

In a world where organizations must often transform themselves in response to inevitable change, how can management best use vision to build their organization's future? Quite simply, they must work tirelessly to reinforce and promote that vision in every aspect of the organization's work.

Communication is key. Often, management develops a clear vision and communicates it to employees through a mass e-mail, a grand power point presentation, or cute little binders labeled "employee handbook". Though such actions represent an honest effort to promote an organization's vision, they fall far short of actively communicating the vision in a manner that makes it come alive. Communicate vision constantly. Rather than a single mass email, management must tie vision into the conversations and decisions that take place every day. Rather than a single presentation, management must connect all their initiatives back to the organization's vision. Rather than an employee handbook, management must actively engage, challenge, and educate employees regarding the organization's vision. By effectively and consistently referring back to a vision, management is able to use it as a tool that motivates and inspires change.

Truly transforming an organization requires a mass movement. Employees of all ranks must subscribe to a vision if real change is to occur. In many cases, employees have no incentive to work towards transformational change. In fact, changes that challenge the status quo

may actually threaten some employees and cause them to subtly undermine transformation efforts. Thus, for transformation to be effective, employee self-interest must be aligned with the organization's vision. Employees must be included as participatory partners, and the organizational structures, practices, and protocols that serve to undermine employee subscription to organizational change must be removed. Finally, it goes without saying that management sets the tone. If managers do not walk the walk, organizational change will fail before it can start.

It is clear that vision is a powerful transformational tool. In an increasingly dynamic world, continual organizational change is necessary for survival. As such, organizations must find themselves constantly cultivating a strong, clear, and continually refined vision—a vision responsive to changing needs, yet true to core organizational ideologies—and they must steadfastly implement that vision as blueprint from which to build their future.