

Time, Narrative and Organizational Culture: A Corporate Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a generalized discussion related to the nature and implications time, story and organizational culture play in corporate decision-making, CEO selection; treatment of long-term employees; the change process and the language used to present and promote the corporation. The paper provides a beginning point for revisiting how unrecognized (societal and individual) assumptions affect choice and decision-making. Practically, the paper also provides a starting point for organizations to self assess their external and internal approaches and whether they align superficially or whether the mission and vision are lived in mundane daily activities. The paper is based on qualitative, experiential and anecdotal evidence gathered by the author.

UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

The corporate and organizational issues discussed in this paper are based on societal beliefs and underlying assumptions that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They are, a faith in science, from which emerged a greater confidence in the future, which engendered a belief in unlimited progress.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries because science could produce material benefits and knowledge, it replaced religion as the most popular faith system. The growing confidence in knowledge and the “present”, resulted in a pervasive belief in progress and a break with the past. The intellectual belief in a progress without limits came to dominate social, political and economic development and discourse. European and American governments encouraged progress and it's by product, growth. This growth, combined with the confidence and optimism of progress, led to a belief that the future was more relevant than the past. The assumption underlying this belief was that modern people had surpassed all previous generations in knowledge, wealth, technology and social institutions. The past was no longer the place to look for knowledge,

understanding or answers. The focus was squarely on the future. Progress and growth was the solution to all human problems. (Kramer 2002)

The residual nature of these beliefs is still evident in corporations today. Unlimited growth, progress and a future orientation still affect corporate expectations and decision-making. These beliefs and choices create the organizational narrative and culture.

CORPORATIONS

Besides the historical issues discussed above, there are additional issues related to the present day memory of corporations. In this discussion, I propose a different view for the word corporation. In this view corporations are living breathing entities. They are human. The dictionary suggests that corporations don't have souls. Yet the bookstores are crammed with books on corporate “soul.”

“Corporate” means “body” whether that pertains to a human or an organization. Writers have a “body of work.” That too, is “corporate” in some sense. It assumes an integrated, albeit perhaps not evident whole. This “body” is created over time. It can be physical or invisible. It can be

collective, individual or both.

Humans create in the physical, visible and external world. This is evident in the creation of art, societies, governments, countries, and corporations. All reflect human consciousness, the best and worst. And as humans change so do their creations and manifestations.

Corporations are organic. They mirror societal trends as seen in the beginning of this discussion. They are reflections of society and the individual. Corporations are us. Some would argue corporations are “other”; shadows, symbols of the worst part of humanity. But that is a limited view. The history and legacy of industrialization, from which corporations were born, reflects the human struggle to make a mark on the world, to become an individual. Corporations, with the help of governments (also us) and societies increased the desires and wants of the masses. The strengths of progress, growth and a total focus on the future creates unforeseen consequences. In the process corporations have become the shadow of society. They have become “other”. They became to represent all that society hates — dehumanization, environmental degradation, loss of individuality and control; and all that society strives for; wealth, property, control, progress.

Corporations remain the target of special interest groups who attempt to wrest back control from a Goliath they helped create. In the struggle, the individual is battling with the collective (corporation), which has been defined as “other.” The other is not “us” therefore there is no emotional tie, which allows uncensored and emotional judgments. To slay this dragon, the knights generate enthusiasm, rally support, and energize the base through passionate speech to inflame the masses. This is not unlike war rhetoric or political posturing. However, there is a line where the challenger comes to believe the “other” is evil. Once that line is crossed the societal residue is lasting. This is evident in W.W.II veterans who still harbor skepticism and hatred of the peoples living in Germany and Japan.

Corporations are not evil. Nor are they “other.” They have done atrocious things, with the blessings of the government. But they did it because of what society wanted either out of ignorance, neglect or desire.

Society and the individual have the power to change a corporation. The first step is recognizing that corporations are representations of society. They are us, which means recognition, acceptance and changing the interaction with self (individually, societally, corporately). This subtle recognition begins the process that focuses efforts on changing the motivations and values of an organization. If corporations are recognized as physical manifestations of society then a basis for reevaluating their purpose and role emerges. The one-sided “other” belief is replaced with a more integrated understanding of how societies, governments, corporations and individuals interact. The “other” is no longer evil or “other”; it becomes shadow, the unrecognized and unassimilated portion of the greater “corporate” reality.

TIME, IDENTITY AND STORY

Corporations, like individuals, have life cycles. Both are affected by previous interactions and both hold onto experiences that form them. Corporations still reflect the societal interest in a mechanistic worldview, which is evident in the structures, language and metaphors used in daily activities. The use of mechanistic, war and computer metaphors form the basis of thought. The metaphor of the corporation as a machine or production line is limiting and dehumanizing and revered. The focus on growth and progress is reflected in the current business language.

Hollywood has always been a harbinger of societal shifts. Recently it has moved from stories about the horrors of over-mechanization and war to one of humanizing technology. The subtle shift from one extreme to the other reflects a growing integration of the shadow/soul with the greater possibility. (Movies: A.I. and Renaissance Man). While many get excited about A.I. and ethical dilemmas regarding machines, overlooked is the

link between machine as “other” and corporation as “other.” Is a greater understanding and integration for corporations on the horizon? Time will tell. The lag time between recognition and integration into daily choices can take generations.

Corporate and product life cycles are based mostly on the mechanistic production process quota as defined by market needs. Bell shaped curves and time cycles reflect the accepted “time sequence” or reality of the industry. The computer changed the nature of how time is perceived. With the advent of the computer, the perception of time having speed, direction, quantity and the ability to be compressed was liberating and concerning to many. Combined with the explosion of media outlets there was an ability to have constant, immediate and uninterrupted, “real time” experiences. This subtle, shift from a focus on process and structure to stream of consciousness, creates a psychological time crisis. As time became quantified into a scarce resource this generated a need for “more.” When something becomes quantified, it also acquires movement. Time is fleeting. The corporation simultaneously, as a mirror to society, assimilates this belief. The need for immediacy and speed conflicts with the residual mental model based on the previous production psychology, which creates frustration. This generates a need for change.

Natural outgrowths of this belief structure:

- First to market is better than quality;
- Multiple iterations (of buggy software) are more important than having a solid workable product;
- Bigger, (smaller), faster and better drive choices.

Byproducts of these belief structures are:

- Attention spans dwindle;
- “Doing” becomes more important than being;

- Speed is more important than quality.

These outcomes force corporations to focus on immediacy of experience, change, creativity and the ability to manage chaos (due to time compression). Neglected in this movement is the focus on previous values of internal reflection, long term quality and delayed gratification. Delayed gratification assumes a value and focus on long-term achievements. It also assumes that choices build on themselves. Time urgency forces CEOs to use language for their personal benefit. They may talk about the long term, but the choices are often short term in nature, reflecting today’s market and society. Definitions change but aren’t shared for the broader audience. The short term becomes an end in itself, not a building block toward the future. The focus and the action are now.

The focus on the external is valued over the self-reflective tendencies of the internal, mostly because there is “no time.” In the quest for immediacy and self-absorption in the now, identity is lost. Bearings are skewed. Reality is altered for the individual, society and the corporation. Lost is the internal “corporate” reality, the organizational narrative or story. So, if by chance, the focus does turn inward time urgency requires selection of the easiest solution. This limitation is manifested in corporations discussing consolidation rather than integration because it is easier. Mergers are usually in name only, the cultures remain separate. This is representative of an approach that resembles the colonial conqueror rather than the integrator and celebrator of diversity.

CREATING IDENTITY

Corporate culture is created by intentions, actions and choices made during each day of existence. The culture forms the corporate identity. Identity is perceived to be the external illusion created in the press. Identity is a corporate becoming and a way of being-in-the-world. It is created over time. Today, identity is limited to issues of quantity, doing, and accomplishment. It is evident in the CEOs selected and the attributes many

corporate boards seek in leadership searches.

Many of the crises facing organizations (non-profit and for profit) are identity and values problems that emerge and manifest in the financial and competitive arenas. The foundational business premise is that growth is good. Success is defined as the ability to grow. This societal belief never addresses the deeper question. How much and what kind of growth is really necessary for the fulfillment of the organizational mission? More is always better and becomes equated with success and quality.

The constant need to grow requires that organizations either abandon the original corporate narrative (“story”) or take the road less traveled and swim against the tide of modern business acumen. The organization’s story, culture and life are brought to life in daily activities. The legacy and history, if used, help guide decision-making. The narrative is the reason for being and doing. If neglected, forgotten and not nurtured organizations wander through a wasteland seeking direction, focus and purpose. Unanswered, or more aptly, unasked are the questions,

- who are we?
- what is our business and purpose?
- what is our role as good corporate citizens?
- what is our uniqueness and what values drive our decisions?
- what is our passion?

A singular focus on financial viability, is appropriate at times, but not when it confuses or extinguishes the original passion that created the story, and the organization in the first place. This leads to corporate amnesia. This is an inability to remember with any sense of accuracy, conviction and passion the history or story of the organization. The organizational memory is held simultaneously in the employees. If they leave, have been let go, or the “new” has obliterated the past, recapturing the story becomes difficult.

Passion (not enthusiasm) and conviction

come with belief. Both require time to create. If the core people are new, how can they rekindle, recreate, motivate and integrate an organizational narrative of which they have no knowledge? How can the organizational culture change and become aligned quickly enough to compete in markets where time and output require immediate results? They can’t. In these instances, there is “no time” to reconcile the internal with the external environment. And that assumes the internal is known or even valued.

The internal is oblivious, neglected, and not seen as the keeper of the passion and purpose for existence. As management decisions are made to satisfy external conditions, the result is an undermining of the original story and the culture. These decisions (and resulting consequences) are not understood because there is “no time” or interest in understanding the implications. By default, the history, narrative and the internal culture are forgotten. The corporate body suffers in the same way that the human body suffers with years of ingesting an overabundance of sugar, sodas, fatty foods, alcohol or tobacco. External choices affect the internal body. Health is slowly destroyed in the same way that corporate decisions affect the original narrative of an organization. It is just a matter of time before the consequences become visible.

A limited story (passion) and corporate body, may ultimately result in a diminishment or loss of soul or an end to the “corporate” life. If this occurs, the eulogy cited most is, “we ran out of time.” Nothing is ever mentioned about what was done with the time and opportunities that did exist. The belief assumes there are always more opportunities and resources to use up. The corporation becomes disposable.

The external orientation is visible in the focus on media, advertising and public relations efforts by corporations to engender sympathy, differentiate the competition or create an image. The image machine is for the external audience and does not necessarily have to align with the internal reality. Perceptions — in a superficial, image oriented and time compressed situation

— are reality. The medium, as McLuhan surmises, may be the message, but is it? This is a natural result for a society that focuses on the visible. This is reflected in the obsession with looks, image, liposuction, implants, and cosmetic surgery. These are external illusions that over time can dampen the internal life story.

As the tools of communication and management increased exponentially, the knowledge on how and when to use them diminishes just as much, further separating the image from reality, the illusion from the story.

ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY

Businesses start for many reasons. Usually it entails focus, passion and commitment. There may be a goal and mission or either. Both are developed over time. If an organization succeeds in surviving, missions emerge as a beacon for the future and as a way to capture the essence of creation. In the process missions also create space, help nurture relationships and create a life and identity with a specified place. This is the nature of creation. Success occurs when the story and corporate life find a way to stay aligned, relevant, important and viable over time.

As businesses become successful and history and time begin to form a narrative and an identity; deeper questions arise. This gives rise to written documents, missions, visions and values. These documents attempt to provide guidance for future decisions. They attempt to create a roadmap for better aligning today's decisions with the original narrative.

Many missions, visions and values are hollow. They are words on paper. The rhetoric and story presented to the external audiences are not the story or culture reflected in the day-to-day activities and decisions.

ORGANIZATIONAL CREATION

Start-ups (and smaller companies) have an exuberance and youthful freedom driven by

survival. The time focus is here and now. The goal is to keep the doors open. There is no identity, history, culture or story. That only comes with success or survival over time. After survival, comes the struggle for existence and identity. As the organization matures and becomes more complex, an identity, personality, a history and culture arise. With it come different priorities, and different motivations, which challenge the very nature of the organization. This requires fluidity, awareness, wisdom and a constantly changing skill set.

Inherent in the management of organizations is the ability to recognize, define and understand organizational culture, story, memory and values. Organizational culture is the sum total of the daily interactions, experiences and decisions made over time. It is created by actions, choices, resource allocations and day-to-day operational decisions. It is not created by rhetoric, dreams, words or promises. Organizational culture is only created by decisions and choices. Organizational values emerge based on where management chooses to allocate resources and spend time. Values are created by choices. Actions and decisions over time create an "organizational memory" which results in an organizational conscience, which manifests organizational values. The organizational story is the sum of all these decisions and asks how past and present decisions further the mission and vision. It answers the "who and what are we" questions. It is a wealth of wisdom and a reality check on the future. The story (strengths and limitations) is present in people, policies and everyday decisions. It is not grandiose, but rather hidden in the mundane. There lies the passion and potential of the organization. As we will see later the "new" does not recognize, or value these aspects because they view the world differently.

The creation of the corporate story, its history and choices, manifest a culture founded on values created by the day-to-day choices made in and for the organization. These values and the history of the organization create the reputation that communicators attempt to parlay

in marketing and promotional programming.

In the struggle to survive and build an identity and name, the original mission or passion of an organization is challenged, questioned, evaluated, neglected, refined or discarded. This usually creates a crisis of identity. Questions regarding purpose, mission, direction and values all ask for an answer.

Organizations that make it through survival and identity building, move into a growth, progress/future orientation. In each stage choices are made that enhance a solid foundation or furthers a house of cards.

Organizations in the hyper growth, nation-building mode (colonization of the markets) require more need for organization, capital, financial management, and control. To achieve growth (type and style; was it imposed, selected or did it just happen?) different skills are needed. This may result in original owners leaving, selling, or being forced out. In mainstream corporate America, owners (the original heart and soul of the organization) are replaced by "new" leadership whose focus is strictly financial — thus a need for MBAs.

Increased demands can result in movement away from the original intention to one of seemingly arbitrary quantified financial outcomes. Structure is imposed to manage the growth, and meet financial expectations of shareholders, board members or the community. The purpose of the business, the original story, shifts from passion for life and work, to one of exacting and calculating measurable outcome. Success is based on standard quantifiable measures. Playfulness, camaraderie, even joy are replaced by strict standards of efficiency and ROI. The corporate body becomes machine, or the "other." It is separate, it becomes a means to an end rather than being seen as an organic entity. That inability to perceive the difference is inherently where the "new" goes awry.

Owners who desire more growth can fall prey to the lure of earnings potential. If pursued,

what is sacrificed is the story, culture and mission. Growth and financial return replaces the mission. The original goal is used in advertisements as a means to create an image, not as an energetic force. Resource allocation is determined on financial outcome, not citizenship or passion. The original intent or organizational story changes yet few notice, even fewer understand why or how.

SOCIETAL TIME

Societal time is reflected in many business choices. The current view is one of time as a commodity, a quantity. It is also assumed to have movement and a linear quality. The Past is behind, the Present is now and the Future in out there along some continuum.

Organizations in this time view tend to manipulate the present as a way to reach a future objective, which may only be three months out. The "Past is Past" as the cliché goes, "you can't change it." The past is equated with the "old." The focus is ahead and not behind. As a result, history is not valued; the past is irrelevant. The direction is energetically forward, toward a future that is equated with the "new."

Some organizations are oblivious to what role time plays in their strategic and everyday decisions; from CEO selection through product development to organizational culture. Several internal organizational frustrations can be traced to differing time expectations between staff, management and the external environment. This leads to misunderstanding and miscommunication.

Successful companies knowingly (or intuitively perceive), and manage time differently. They tend to view time as simultaneous. The past, the present and the future are interrelated. Yes, the focus is on the present and the future, but the past is recognized and valued. The past is valuable in that it might be the seed of current problems, misunderstandings or errors. It is also the place where the passion and the original intent of the organization lie. It is where the organizational story is created and where the

culture emerged.

The view that time is interrelated suggests the past can be changed. This happens everyday in archeology and historical scholarship. New discoveries help society refine “old” stories or help better understand a specific time, place or people. Understanding the past, affects how the present is lived and affects the choices made in the present and future.

In cases where time and story are not fully understood the past is used as a selling point, an advertising approach, not as something inherently valued. This is also present in organizations using the logo (story manifested) not as valued icon but as a graphic element. Financial institutions are interesting examples. They sell the past, as the future. But as the asterisk says, “past returns are not indicative of future results.” Are they selling stories, products or illusions?

Organizationally, time is a situational manifestation of a competitive environment, society at large and the internal culture. Each time view (fast, slow, timeless etc.) affects management structures and organizational decision-making. A fast paced industry like the dot.coms requires speed, a health care facility might have a less hurried time sense. Speed, as the police say, kills.

The board and management inherently determine time selection. They control whether the decisions are based on an external or internal time reality. They also determine the speed and direction. An external focus with little internal anchoring eventually results in an organizational loss of direction, time, identity, passion and story. This situation occurs when there is an over reliance on key individuals, the market, or industry trends rather than the internal direction and purpose of the organization. What is lost is the organizational uniqueness and inherent understanding of the strengths and limitations of the corporate entity and how that manifests in a clarity of mission, or sense of purpose.

Time and narrative play an important part

in the success and longevity of an organization. They are integrating agents that affect all aspects of the corporate environment including productivity, morale, working relationships, decision-making and priorities. They are also components by which organizations can judge progress (however defined). They create and maintain the parameters, patterns, legacy, and values that drive the organization during storms of discontinuity. The impact of time, narrative (story) and language on organizational culture are misunderstood by many management teams.

Managing and understanding time and the organizational story (culture) are key determinants in the success of increasing organizational lifespan. Time and story are also key factors used to judge the success or progress of an organization for they require an integrated, simultaneous understanding of time, story, process and product. This understanding results in the movement from ideas to physical manifestation in the form of processes, strategies, market parameters and daily organizational reality (organizational culture), becoming the reasons and values by which the organization lives and interacts with its environment.

Corporations constantly struggle for ways to clarify and communicate organizational identity. If there is not an integrated understanding of the corporate entity, the tendency is to promote what is known, a superficial image, which has little connection to the deeper internal identity/reality.

How an organization manages risks and rewards is also valuable in assessing whether true integration is present in an organization. If the CEO and board members are rewarded for poor decisions with huge golden parachutes this can lead to a weakened reputation, identity and create unrest in the internal organizational culture. In these instances, the “leadership” ultimately defaces the organization, and the historical identity. Essentially the values that formed the organizational story are tarnished or replaced with individual self-serving rhetoric and decisions.

As the organization moves into maturity

it's identity and story are captured in its history. The history becomes the organizational story, complete with lessons learned. How that story is nurtured and supported affects the organizational future. In the journey of becoming every organization develops bad habits, is lax and has blind spots. These are normal cycles that provide opportunities for change and focus and recommitment or changing of direction. Size also provides its own set of unique challenges. However the character of the organization will determine whether their values are in sync with the people and customers that determine their success.

In times of crisis there is always a wish to return to a golden age. These laments are present in history, politics, philosophy, and business. In the case of organizations, the lament is to be nimble and carefree, to return to the excitement of the original days, to be free of structure, responsibility and bureaucracy, to recreate the original story or create a new one.

Stories change, needs change, wants change. Like individuals, organizations must monitor needs, wants and responsibilities, for commitments of time and resources are part of organizational life. Organizations often don't appreciate self-reflection; it is too hard, takes too much time and is perceived as not being productive. The preference is to have cosmetic surgery, which is to avoid the negative or focus only on the "new". Avoidance is considered a strategy because if the problem can be put off for long enough it is someone else's issue. This reverence for the new is evident in the selection of CEOs.

TIME

In a state of hyper-growth or acceleration, time becomes an enemy. Time becomes simultaneously a reason to do, to not do, an excuse for failure, for not being patient and doing due diligence. It is reduced to a fragmented resource. It is an arbitrarily created scarcity. There is no time. Time is running out. This hypersensitivity to time speeds up decisions.

There is more data but less information. There are quicker decisions, but less realization of the implications. There are more decisions, but are they better? Quality is reduced to quantity.

In the acceleration of time, a fear of being left behind arises, so CEOs make decisions. They are trained and rewarded to be responsive to time and the volatility of the market. Thus the decision focus narrows. External factors, and the present become more important. In this time compression CEOs only focus on the immediate, that which keeps the key stakeholder or shareholders happy. This is called job security. Since the tenures are short term, the long term is forgotten or deemed irrelevant. And in the struggle, passion, integrity and organizational story are in danger of being lost because they are no longer valued, mostly because they lack importance.

CEO SELECTION

Boards and senior managements tend to pay little attention in their selection process about what type of individual they need. Yes they have criteria and go through methodical processes, but what is not addressed is how does the CEO fit with the day-to-day organizational culture for it is here that the success or failure of any CEO resides.

CEOs usually fall into three general categories; those who focus on status quo, those better at general change/modification, and those who work best in turnarounds or transformation. If the board is clear on what is needed, the CEO selection is easier. However, what boards think they want and what they need are often two different things.

Boards are influenced by business pressures and by unrecognized societal assumptions. They hire on perception rather than need. Thus, seeking younger management is perceived as being rational when, in fact, it is not.

In larger corporations the focus is often on pleasing Wall Street, which means a focus on the short term, which may not be in the best

interest of the organization in the long run. Societal parameters and business expectations factor into many CEO selections. Business seems stuck in adolescence, where a “me focus” and “immediate gratification” are paramount. Isn’t this the same discussion had with individuals regarding smoking, drugs, diet or debt? Are societal expectations for people, different from those of adolescents or corporations? Aren’t both merely reflections and manifestations of societal values? Immediate gratification at the expense of the future is a societal and organizational norm.

This is evident in CEOs furthering their reputations at the expense of the corporation. In fact it is expected. They enter and leave with great fanfare, but their accomplishments are little more than ideas, which are easy to espouse and difficult to implement. Many CEOs are gone before the real results of their actions are evident. Because CEO tenure is short, action is prized over thoughtfulness. There is no need to be thoughtful because there is no need to implement or see projects through. Having the idea is perceived to be enough.

The introduction of a new CEO can lead to personal chaos for some employees and the same effect on departments, business units and the organization itself. As representatives of the culture and keepers of the history and corporate story these groups are bellwethers of future successes.

Inexperienced CEOs are naive. They are unsure of the terrain; the interplay and the complex nature of the organizational culture. Nor do they understand the implications of their actions or policies on the organization or the culture. Their choices lead to dis-ease, disorder and discord. How quickly they learn and are accepted by the organization determines their longevity. Whatever the outcome, the price paid in real dollars, political and cultural capital is enormous.

Board involvement is crucial to future direction, because they are the stewards of the organizational resources that include the story

and culture. Their CEO choices have huge implications. Boards usually seek energy, enthusiasm, personality and ideas from CEO candidates. This approach parallels societal values, but is that what the organization needs? CEOs in general should provide the necessary skills to enhance or compliment the organizational culture while at the same time addressing the organization’s point on the change continuum.

This assumes awareness of organizational culture, placement in the competitive environment, and where on the change continuum the organization rests. Successful CEOs know when entering an organization success is determined by assessing where the organization is and how their skills can help achieve new outcomes. Newer CEOs unsure of themselves and their skill set, can enter a mismatched situation which proves detrimental to both the organization and the CEO.

Good CEOs are insightful. They can assess organizational strengths and provide resources to key areas of improvement. They create a direction that honors the past, energizes the present and clarifies the future. They constantly struggle to ascertain how day-to-day decisions integrate and move the organization closer and maintain alignment with the organizational mission. They deepen the story, manage the growth and time elements and do so with deftness and passion. This is true leadership, but it is rare.

Good CEOs, through experience, have intuitively developed a sense for aligning direction, people, resources, priorities and mission/vision. Rather than imposing from the outside, these individuals are excellent at working with what is given, understanding intimately where opportunity exists (organizational character, story), where it needs to be nurtured and where it needs to be created or restricted. These CEOs are prudent with people and ruthless in challenging organizational assumptions. They see through the obvious and focus on the everlasting. Poet David Whyte offers a phrase useful here. He calls it an innate “economy of presence.” He says, “

We might envy the energy of the young, but there is as much envy in the learned simplicity of those who know the essential relationships well enough to do the job and to do it with the lightest touch.” (Whyte p.122)

OLDER EMPLOYEES

Young and new CEOs often clash with older employees. Older employees are not seen in their fullness, as the keepers of the organizational memory, consciousness and story. Older employees prize logic, meaning, process, and clearly defined goals and the resources to make them happen. Change for the sake of change is not valued. They demand commitment and support for ideas that serve a grander organizational purpose, that align with the history and tap into the passion of the story. They believe in the organization because they are the organization. Older employees uphold the traditions and values and hold management accountable for their actions and rhetoric. New CEOs are outsiders until their worth is proven.

New CEOs have a tendency to view internal challenges from older employees as being unsupportive rather than as a question of how the new aligns with the old. The most common solution is to get rid of the elders or bury them lower in the organization with little responsibility. Meanwhile, younger, more impressionable individuals are brought in as managers with the expectation that the older employee will train them. This lack of respect causes a strain on the organizational culture, and the values supported throughout the history of the organization.

Older and longer tenured employees are often misjudged, categorized and labeled by the “new.” They don’t change. They are “deadwood,” and they inhibit change.

These are categorizations that result in stereotypes. Misunderstood is the context of the older employee’s questions, actions and hesitancy to fully commit. Those judging don’t understand the history from which the employee’s views emerge. It is assumed that these

employees are adverse to change. Why do older employees question the “new”? Why is support earned rather than immediately given by this group? Probably because older employees have been through the ups, downs, lean and prosperous times, and have a personal stake in the organization. Something “newbies” lack. It doesn’t help when the “new” has no time for, or appreciation of, the “old.” This leads to frustration on both sides. Older employees are less likely to fall prey to the “Pied Piper” effect. This is where reverence is paid to personality and blind enthusiastic support for the latest trendy industry idea. This employee group seeks substance and integration of all aspects of the corporate environment, not just the obvious, the short-term or the superficial. Older employees (OEs) have intimate knowledge of the organization, the culture and the history. They have experience which if disregarded. OEs want inspiration, coupled with true understanding. They want to know where the organization is, where it is going, how it will get there, and what role they personally play in the future and the present. OEs intuitively seek integration. Their traditions and experience must be assimilated rather than eradicated by the “new.”

Whyte offers an interesting insight related to issues of youth and age, new and old. “When we are young, we imagine that we are doing everything ourselves. We have our work because we deserve it. We believe that we generate our opportunities, our own luck, our own unstoppable bodies. There must be something to this, we intuit that our fate varies according to those powers of attention which we bring to the frontiers of our young lives. But as we grow older, we grow wiser as to the extent of those powers; there is another profounder way, in which we are dependent not only in invisible ways on the inheritance of others but literally and physically on what we have been given by those who have gone before us.”

PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

The introduction of the “new” also means that *change* is required. The “old” is assumed not to want to change. The “new” wants to change

everything. The new is equated with innovation, the past with the old. Change is the yardstick by which business and organizations are measured.

Academics are prone to study the change process. Business people want to know how to harness and use change for competitive advantage, to make things more efficient and cost-effective.

In the business world, when change is discussed it is usually offered in the context of a solution. It is usually top down. Change is what others do to accommodate an administration's needs and wants. This view is a natural outgrowth of a society that values doing and "the new" at the expense of everything else. As a disposable society "the new" is equated with better. Thus the simple fact that something is new, means it is given more worth or value than the proven. One only has to look at the salaries of NBA, NFL and MLB players. Teams pay more for perceived potential than they do for proven skills. Why? Because this society tends to believe that nothing lasts, everything changes and time is fleeting. This self created urgency and impatience focuses more on solutions than on processes. Thus it is natural to have the corporate issues evident today. With the focus on the new and different, less of a voice is given to critical evaluations based on use, value and longevity.

In the corporate world, managing and directing change assumes a prize of power. The inability to manage it leads to frustration and subservience. Careers and organizations succeed or fail as a result of this basic assumption. Change by itself is difficult to understand and manage. However when it is combined with the societal pressures of time a complex interplay begins to unfold that challenges the very premise of modern business...control.

Change in this society and its manifestations (corporations) is valuable only in as much as it can be harnessed and used for achievement. Change and time in this arena manifest the familiar clichés. In combination, and taken to an extreme, feelings of loss, alienation

and a strong need for control are created. This naturally leads to a search for meaning in an aging society. This is visible in corporate executives and middle managers "dropping out" to pursue other vocations, or situations more in alignment with their personal needs.

Organizationally, this loss, lack of control and unpredictability has created a perceived need and increased use of consultants. The goal is not to understand the "why" but the "how." How can they retain better employees, and get employees to clearly understand the organizational or management viewpoint? The salve used is money, position and perks, yet the solutions are few and far between. The problems grow because there is "no time" to deal with qualitative and marginal issues that don't support immediate and productive outcomes.

Additionally, there is a propensity in society to feel more comfortable in "crisis mode." This is evident in the value placed on immediate action. The ability to decide, to act and to do so quickly is valued over thoughtful assessments in many professions. In fact, thoughtful assessments are considered "wastes of time." Why? People are rewarded for quick action. Businesses have built-in short-term memory loss (at the board and shareholder level) if a situation is bad this quarter and good the next, all is forgotten. However there are unseen implications with this approach. The members of the "new" class of executives are short-term contract players, rewarded for their "reactionary" management style and short-term solutions. They respond to crisis. If no crisis exists, their style eventually creates one. When the crisis arises, they respond and are generally rewarded for solving the problem. Those who offer thoughtful insights that might avoid the crisis in the first place are not heard, or valued. This causes immense strain on the organizational culture, and results in alienation and numbness.

COMMUNICATION

Communication between management and employees is often couched as an equal exchange. The goal of internal communication is

to appease employees and customer groups without making many promises. Listening is equated with meeting. Management, when confronted with questions of miscommunication, cites the number of meetings they have had with employees and stakeholders. What is left out is what substantive issues were discussed resolved or changed. The “new” executives work with a self-created illusion, where a meeting implies behavior change and understanding on the part of the other participant. But the lack of time does not allow for confirmation of the facts. In this view, tactics and checklists are used in place of strategy, process and understanding. The rut becomes the horizon.

Corporate communication is an extension of this view. Words are used to create impressions rather than to communicate. Definitions are assumed. Words take on different meanings in different situations that lead to a lack of communication. In fact, disinformation or restricted information dissemination are standard procedure for creating and shaping perceptions. These tactics might be acceptable in narrow competitive situations and proprietary development, however, the same tactics have crept into communications with employees, boards, stockholders and key customer groups. Truth, meaning and understanding suffer in the process. The end justifies the means, if control of the situation is achieved. This charade is infinitely easier to accomplish when the “new” executive knows their tenure is short.

When these communication tactics are used with employees, especially those who ask the “why” question, it results in reduced morale. Lack of time or tenure does not allow for a true exchange of ideas to occur. The “why” employees are considered renegades or misfits. Yet as the organizational conscience, they hold the past and present. When they begin to leave or go silent the organizational story suffers, but few notice.

When confronted with such situations, executives imply there is a communication problem, or the employee doesn’t understand. The responsibility is on the employee, not the

executive. This is where the number of meetings and newsletters is cited as proof that communication was provided. The very nature of defining a situation in that manner makes it difficult to address viable options. The act of “doing more” is assumed to increase understanding among targeted audiences. Quantity of expression is equated with truth and communication. Is it any wonder why business has difficulty coming up with creative solutions?

CHANGE PROCESS

Change and time drive the future. These assumptions suggest that by not acting (which is a change), or by not changing, the individual or corporation will be left behind. Nike’s “Just Do It” seems to encapsulate that belief. This sense of urgency forges a future based on the limited awareness of implications, and/or the original intent of the belief or action. Rather than being the master of nature, nature is molded by the self-generated urgency of time. These core drivers invisibly affect key decisions and perceptions for corporations, and individuals.

Employees must be flexible with change; however defining the term has proven difficult. Internally, this leads to frustrated employees who can’t decipher what is really being said. They don’t understand the vocabulary; they don’t understand the intent or the meaning of management. The assumption being what is said is so familiar that no explanation is necessary. This problem is not addressed until it affects efficiency, productivity or the bottom line. The lack of clarity and definition usually filters into organizational policies and procedures further perpetuating confusion.

The lack of definition is the result of a cultural indoctrination into a set of assumed values and usages. This is true of change and many other words. The added technical ability (Internet, satellite, etc.) to communicate has not not resulted in an increase in meaning or understanding.

Miscommunication? The answer is increase the number of meetings and

newsletters. No one seems to ask “what does miscommunication mean in the organization?” Senior managements don’t bother with “why.” There is no need. Just apply the next solution. They focus only on “how.” The pace is too fast; self-reflection is perceived to be a weakness and creates a loss of momentum. It is indirectly viewed as non-supportive. Management tends not to see their complicity in the organizational problems because their focus is mostly on other competitors and not the internal audience. Creating a viable and clear direction that others can feel engaged in, passionate about, and willing to follow is assumed to be a byproduct rather than a specific goal to be nurtured or story to be told.

Senior leaders are unaware that lack of success is directly related to how they have mistaken tolerance for approval, misunderstanding for communication, and deference to power for support. Essentially, CEOs and senior administrators often adopt the form and not the substance, the word and not the meaning and the idea and not the commitment. Employees inherently understand this and older, longer tenured employees see through the superficial illusions. Often this is what creates the unease, questioning authority and lack of support new CEOs, and vice versa. This results in an organizational blind spot.

END

Issues facing organizations today are manifestations rooted in the societal consciousness with value placed on action, youth and time. This affects language, definitions, change, assumptions and beliefs. This focus rewards “doing” more than critical reasoning, evaluation or process.

Revisiting assumptions, perceptions of time and how narrative is created, treated and nurtured in an organization is a starting point for recreating or realigning with the original passion present in the organization.

In the end, assumptions lead to manifestations in the concrete world. It is time

organizations and individuals revisit the use of language, definitions, and metaphors for they create history, story and today’s reality. This awareness can provide organizations with a context and perspective not previously available.

What is evident in organizational change is how culture, process, power and communication play vital roles in determining whether ideas represent the status quo, incremental change or result in the transformation of an organization.

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