Value Wave | White Paper

What to do after the Search and the Passion for Excellence

The concept of organizational excellence is currently popular among organizational developers and managers. Organizations throughout the world are looking at what "excellent" organizations do and are copying many of their practices and approaches, because the "excellent" organizations are seen as delivering desired payoffs.

However, what the experts on excellence, management, and human resource development are providing are processes, not results; and processes are just possible ways of obtaining results. Emulating others' processes or simply searching and having the passion for excellence is not enough. Organizations that are continually successful define where they are going and why they are going there. Then they find proper pathways to achieve sustained organizational effectiveness. Copying is appropriate for clones but not for unique organizations with unique cultures and missions.

Rather than blindly playing follow the leader, an organization can adopt whatever works generically in all successful organizations and adapt those to the unique things that have in the past led organizations to unparalleled strength and success; for example, defining and determining (a) where society is going and why, (b) what the organization is now contributing, (c) the gaps between the organization's current and required contributions and/or results, and (d) what—including assumptions and methods—has to be continued or changed to close the gaps. This approach provides a rational alternative to "knee-jerk" responsiveness to client wishes, politics, and conventional wisdom as the basis for policies and decisions. Organizations must strive both to be responsive to current clients and to define what will be required in the future.

This article presents an approach for identifying and meeting needs (defined as gaps between current and required results); it links this model to policy implications; and it suggests ways to integrate policy, planning, and organizational success. Specific suggestions are provided for a Western alternative to Japanese management and for what to do after searching and acquiring a passion for excellence. It shows why and how to link means with useful ends.

Several options exist for the organizational developer: (a) keeping things the way they are, (b) making quick-fix changes to reap here-and-now improvements, or (c) deliberately fashioning future sustained improvements that are tailored to each unique organization and its environment. The pressures of day-to-day organizational marketplaces and political realities tempt one to substitute rhetoric for risk, but the demands for personal and organizational survival and contribution make the no-change or quick-fix options the most risky of all. Although it is convenient to be in mode with current "hot" ideas, a sensible leader will fashion responsive and responsible tools, techniques, ideas, and methods from that which is available; fit these to organizational characteristics and internal and external needs; and orchestrate these to meet current and future goals and objectives.

The Japanese Management Approach, and Western Values

So-called Japanese management has been successful. In fact, the Japanese management approach has been so successful that organizations the world over have studied it and have begun to copy its ways and means. Recent study has indicated that many excellent non-Eastern organizations have common characteristics with their Asian counterparts. The employee value systems of these excellent organizations—Eastern or Western—integrate work and meaning as the basis for seeking success in terms of world good and improved contribution to world culture. Furthermore, excellent organizations, both foreign and domestic, recognize the importance of the client and the client's welfare, involve people constructively as participating partners in the business, take care of basics, and pay close, constructive attention to the day-to-day operations. They care about what they do and what utility it has for the clients.

Both the search and a passion for excellence are characterized by sensible factors, including an emphasis on leadership over management, vision, closeness to clients, unqualified client orientation, keeping in touch with associates as well as customers, enthusiasm, trust, zest, being a good coach, innovation in terms of client feedback, and thinking small. A number of attributes (actually processes or means) of excellence and passion for excellence are discussed by Peters and Waterman and Peters and Austin.

Not all organizations have adopted the new leadership and excellence processes. Tough-minded, bottom-line-oriented Westerners still tend to target on increased productivity, efficiency, and accountability while downplaying the softer side of enterprise (such as human relations, commonly shared societal visions, group decision making, quality circles, and closeness to clients). Although efficiency and streamlined delivery count, they alone will not consistently deliver positive, sustained corporate payoff. When conventional organizations include both the softer skills and the harder ones, they often harvest success.

The Importance of a Shared Vision

Excellent Western and Japanese employees work simultaneously for themselves, their own organizations, and for the clients. Their classical-organization counterparts typically strive only for themselves; they assume that the organization can take care of itself. The conventional manager does the same, turning the organization into an adversarial battlefield.

One of the critical elements in achieving individual and collective success resides in having shared super ordinate purposes: an agreed-on individual and organizational North Star toward which all may steer. More responsive and responsible organizations can be built when organizational efforts, organizational results, and societal impacts are aligned. If East-West excellence is to be shared, it will be through adopting the concern for super ordinate goals. This shared vision provides guidance at each level of the organization concerning what to do and what not to do, and it orchestrates individual efforts and results in a larger overall good. It allows each small piece, each breakthrough, and each product to combine and become integrated into a useful whole.

Doing what it takes to be Successful Today and Tomorrow

If an organization wants to improve only in its here-and-now efficiency in meeting existing organizational purposes, it can copy the excellence blueprints and reap some quick-fix payoffs. The means, processes, how-to-do-it guidelines, and activities recommended by popular leadership-and-management authors may provide immediate results. In fact, some solid suggestions for improving here-and-now efficiency can be found in the works of Hersey, Hersey and Blanchard, and Peters and Waterman.

A first step on this road could include expanding the current planning and organizational improvement focus from a preoccupation with unitary organizational splinters to a holistic view. For example, instead of dealing with only productivity, training, or cost cutting, the organization could be oriented toward achieving positive organizational impact in and for society as well as improving organizational efficiency. By encouraging small breakthroughs and taking the advice of excellence experts, an organization may be able to make it through today quite well. However, this does not mean the organization will be around tomorrow.

Caring About Tomorrow

Improving today while building for tomorrow demands some additional concerns for societal requirements and payoffs for the future; providing what the customer wants is not enough. Drivers in the United States wanted large automobiles even though the coming high prices for fuel were visible; later, when Detroit had few small cars to offer, consumers bought cars imported from foreign countries, which had dealt with the problem years earlier. Customers ask for sweet soft drinks, empty-calorie foods, and miracle drugs; then they ask why business and government did not protect them from obesity, poor diet, and drugs that adversely affect two in one million. They opt for low-priced, low-quality gadgets and complain about a throwaway economy. They demand lower taxes and more social services. In other words, they act like people.

Although the customer is not always right, the customer is always the customer. Being responsive to them is important for today and even for tomorrow. Nevertheless, a responsible organization must define what will be required for the self-sufficiency, self-reliance, and well-being of its clients, their world, and the organization. Even though building teams, developing ownership, and being responsive to clients are important, an organization must make certain that it will have products and/or services that will be required tomorrow in a world that is only beginning to show its shadow today. Listening only to clients or doing only what they suggest means operating in a reactive mode. Making clients' visions the sole source of organizational innovations is suicide.

Perceptions and judgments must be considered, but empirical evidence and hard data must also be used in making decisions. Relying solely on perceived realities can be tragic. For example, many airplanes have crashed because the pilots—even experienced ones—refused to believe their instruments and relied on their perceptions.

Combining perceived needs and those based on hard data will help an organization to be proactive and to create new areas of organizational goods and services. "Skunks" or off-line innovators—can be valuable if they are allowed to create products, not just solve knotty problems in existing products. Creative contributions come from finding a need and filling it, not just filling needs that are already apparent.

The following guidelines will help in combining perceived data and hard data:

1. Seek and listen to the client's feedback and advice.
2. If the suggested changes are sensible, implement them. If they are not feasible, tell the client why you are not making the changes.
3. If one client's suggestion is good for other clients, generalize it.

Compare the perceived needs or wants of the client (e.g., increased production, increased sales, or more competent supervisors) with hard performance data and the resulting actual needs. (For example, the hard data may show that current profits were $100,000 when they should have been $1,000,000; forty grievances were filed against supervisors and there should have been none; or 25 percent of the shipments were rejected because of defects and there should have been none.) If the client's perceived needs and the actual needs agree, then make the necessary changes.

If the perceived needs and actual needs do not agree (e.g., if increasing sales without correcting the defects would not increase profits), then collect more data (e.g., determine why the defects are occurring and if the rejections are related to incompetent supervisors). Some sources for hard data might be production records, the file of grievances, profitability reports, and recorded reasons for rejections. Probe the data deeply and clarify points with the client. If disagreements still exist, either the opinions are wrong or sufficient data have not been collected. If it becomes obvious that the opinions are wrong, educate the client.

Politics has been defined as the substitution of power for rational, data-based decisions. Politics may be one of the roadblocks to a successful tomorrow, because politics is frequently another quick-fix alternative to rational goal setting and problem solving. Whether in government or in business, politicians attempt to move people toward a common ground—usually the politician's ground. By invoking statements designed to rally the troops and by appealing to "logic" (and carefully avoiding any recognition that the logic is not the same as rationality), the power broker attempts to bring about a solution that maintains the current power without necessarily responding to the organization's internal and external partners and clients.

Political decisions can be correct, of course, and may be useful when more reliable data are unavailable. Nevertheless, basing decisions on current crises and politicians' territorial imperatives or simply copying someone else is a poor alternative to finding a rational, justifiable basis for goal setting and operational activities.

One element that is required to replace politics with rationality is the determination of hard data on where the organization is going and why. For example, one chief executive expanded the employees' training program simply because he was badgered to do so by a supervisor. A closer examination, however, revealed that the employees were being asked to do hazardous work with malfunctioning tools and equipment. In another case, a supervisor purchased minivans with cages for luggage storage so that the company could "pick up clients at the airport." His real agenda, however, was that he wanted the company to provide appropriate vehicles for his show dogs. Clients arriving at the airport were so few that an ordinary automobile could be dispatched for each one.

Fortunately, people do not have to put up with politics and politicians indefinitely. They may choose to steer another course toward their common North Star.

Defining where the Organization is Going and Why

Organizations and their policies and goals are not perfect. Most do not have any measurable statement of purpose, nor do they have useful criteria for measuring internal contributions or effectiveness in meeting organizational and societal goals. Even the best of organizations have a mixture of politics and useful purpose. This, of course, is a description of "what is" and not "what should be".

Enduring, continuing, successful organizations require both the appropriate North Star toward which common effort may be directed and also policies and procedures that allow them to follow the star. Providing society with new and successful goods and services—not just improving on yesterday's successes—necessitates a shift from defining needs as wish lists to defining them as gaps between what is and what should be for both internal and external results. The world is not standing still for our convenience, and our tomorrow is not assured by simply increasing our current efficiency toward today's (and yesterday's) goals.

Overcoming the Passion for Process: Relating Means and Ends

Another roadblock to a successful tomorrow is the passion for process and the assumption that processes guarantee results. Processes must be chosen wisely if they are expected to deliver useful ends. When a list of sixteen processes were analyzed, fifteen of them seemed to relate best to organizational means. Four of them were linked to organizational results, and only two of the sixteen could possibly be related to client and societal payoffs. As important as means and processes are, they make sense only when they are linked with results for the client and the world of today and tomorrow. The following steps outline a way to select means that will help produce desired results:

1. Read current books and articles on improving organizational effectiveness. Abstract and list the gems of advice, methods, and strategies.
2. Divide the list into three parts: those that deal with organizational means (the how-to-do-it items); those that deal with organizational results within the organization; and those that have an impact on outside clients, customers, and the world.
3. Define the organization's mission and objectives in a short statement of where the organization is going. Then add some indicators that will help determine when an impact has been made on clients.
4. Compare the list of item 2 with the objectives of item 3. Select the methods and strategies that appear to be able to yield results important to the organization. Gain the acceptance of associates and put the methods into practice.
5. After using the methods, evaluate their usefulness in obtaining both organizational and external results. If they are not effective, be ready to change quickly.
6. Continually collect information about future requirements. Identify possible changes to the organization's goals and mission, and recommend such changes along with justifications. Care enough about the organization to take a risk and innovate for the future.

Policy, Planning, and Payoffs

Policy—the decision criteria that are used to decide what to do and deliver—should be more than good intentions. In most organizations, policy provides loose definitions of organizational purpose (e.g., "make a profit," "provide the best service in the city," or "earn our customers every day") and strict guidance only on procedures to follow. Unfortunately, policies are frequently the results of good intentions coupled with political machinations that were created when influential individuals moved into the vacuum created by the lack of rational information about where the organization was going and why it was going there.

Policies are useful to the extent to which they provide specific guidance on deciding where to go and what must be done to arrive there. Policies that restrict themselves to processes and procedures are bound to fail, because a poorly defined problem has an infinite number of solutions; or to paraphrase Mager, if you don't know where you are going, just about any road will get you there.

Planning can identify where the organization is going and what must be accomplished to go from what is to what should be. However, such planning must also identify useful and attainable ends. This does not necessarily mean compromise. Rather it means recognizing the intermediate payoffs that must intervene between the methods and the ultimate results. An organization's avowed ends may be ambitious but also attainable if all agree to eventually reach them. Attainability may simply mean that the achievement of the ends must progress at a rate that allows all the players to go from what is to what should be—often step by step with a little progress each time. Patience, policy, cooperation, progress, and payoff are functional partners.

Payoffs, including profits, usually come more easily to organizations that define useful and progressively achievable purposes and then attain them. Linking policy, planning, and desired payoffs seems a sensible way to operate an organization.

Expanding the Focus

By simply adding a positive societal impact to its current focus, an organization would be taking the stereotypical "excellence" approach (with its major concern about how to improve on "what is"). Ingenuity often achieves success by proactive and creative innovation. Therefore, organizations should continue to create a useful "what should be."

If an organization wants to develop a better tomorrow for itself, its workers, and the world, its policies, planning, development, implementation, and evaluation must include all elements of concern for the twin dimensions of "what is" and "what should be". A holistic perspective would include that which the organization uses (inputs), what which it does (processes), its en route or building-block accomplishments (products), the results that it delivers to clients (outputs), and the impact for clients and society (outcomes). Together, these five components form the organizational elements; when used with the dimensions of what is and what should be, they allow an organization to orchestrate and link its efforts, accomplishments, and societal impacts.

By seeking ways to measure societal impact, however imperfect initially, an organization will be able to provide a better target for defining and following its North Star. The basic criteria for positive societal impact is that each person be self-sufficient and self-reliant, not under the care or control of another person or agent, and not addicted to other people or agencies.