

Here Today – the World Tomorrow: Transitioning Your Organization to Go Global

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by Allen Quist

What a world this has become – a world where distance and borders are no longer barriers. Local and international are continuously intersecting each other. Needing help with my software, I phoned a domestic phone number and within minutes had my problem solved by a technician in India. A book ordered from Amazon in the United States arrived from Singapore within 48 hours. Worldwide ATMs from downtown Caracas, Venezuela, to rural Mexico automatically deduct from my hometown bank account to provide me with a handful of local currency. Every day we experience a shrinking world linked by a growing global network of technological systems, social systems and communication systems. Our everyday world is quickly becoming deeply global, pressuring us to adapt.

Pause for a moment and consider your own organization. How are you reacting to these intrusions into your local and predictable organizational patterns? Are you transitioning to or ignoring the growing global systems of changing technology, communications and international social interaction? What barriers to adaptation will your organization need to overcome to compete in our rapidly changing world? How will you lead your organization through the needed metamorphosis to become a more globally systemic organization? To address these questions, this article will consider:

- The systemic global socio-technical organization;
 - Barriers that can stop you;
 - The key to transition;
 - The global challenge.
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The Systemic Global Socio-Technical Organization

According to Marquardt and Berger (2000), as we now move into a time of increasing “global interdependence,” leaders will have to change from thinking of their environment as predictable and their organization as a self-sufficient unit. Successful leaders will need to create a systemic organization, where they see the “whole rather than just its parts” (p. 24). This thinking resembles a cognitive map approach: looking at the parts (individual aspects of the whole system) while seeing the whole system with the related pattern of relationships between the parts (Sanders, 1998).

Overholt, Connally, Harrington and Lopez (2000) describe a systemic organization as a “living system.” Think of this as similar to our human body and its related systems. Each part plays a vital role, yet is in constant cooperation and teamwork with the whole body. Each part’s contribution adds to the strength and vitality of the whole. In other words, while there may at times appear to be a champion, in reality the seeming champion could not perform without the participation and support of other parts of the body (Marquardt & Berger, 2000). A cybernetic organization would continuously read its internal and external environment, interpreting what it learns and then aligning or transitioning its subsystems to deal with the environment in order to not only survive, but to thrive (p. 39).

Two thousand years ago the apostle Paul compared the human body to an organization, describing how the individual parts play vital and necessary roles in the functioning of the whole (1 Cor. 12:12-27). God created the human body to be a cybernetic systemic organism. Our body continuously observes and learns from its environment through our senses, interpreting what we have learnt and then adjusting or taking action to protect us from, or capitalize on, the situation. Similarly, a healthy organization must continuously read the environment, interpret the information and then align or transition itself to take the necessary steps to survive and thrive. Is your organization interpreting and transitioning to thrive in the growing global environment?

Barriers That Can Stop You

The greatest barrier an organization faces to becoming a more global organization rests not in some external force, but rather in a lack of internal effort. According to Naisbitt (2006), a moment-by-moment awareness of the environment protects an organization from damaging emerging situations which can be avoided. What changes have you observed today in your organization’s environment?

Has your competitor linked to new communication technology? What did you hear on today's news that might affect tomorrow's customer? Will those severe weather conditions affect your suppliers' projected delivery schedules? What new discoveries or legislations will force you to alter your products or staffing?

Your business environment is no longer merely local or national. New discoveries, new products, new services and new experts from around the world can be in your backyard tomorrow. Because of the rapid change involved in the global environment, there can be no time when your organization is not cybernetic in its approach (Morgan, 2002; Sanders, 1998, p. 74). Not keeping vigilant could result in unexpected influences from anywhere in the world overrunning your organization.

Another barrier in an organization's quest to become global could lie in the tendency to see themselves as only individual parts or subsystems, rather than seeing how the interrelationships of those subsystems make up the whole. This is thinking in terms of its "detail," rather than its "dynamic complexity." The global organization must see itself more as a movie and less as a photograph (Marquardt & Berger, 2000, p. 25). Think of Starbucks – from a small local store selling coffee beans and coffeemakers, it morphed into an international chain of specialty cafés (Schultz, 1997). Think of Nokia – from a multi-faceted failing company producing a wide variety of products, to a world-wide leader focusing on digital technologies (Marquardt & Berger, 2000, p. 164-166). You don't have to limit your tomorrow by what you are today.

The Key to Transitioning

The key to transitioning into a global organization lies in becoming and staying what Daft (2004) refers to as a "learning organization" (p. 28), always scanning and learning from both its internal and external environment. A learning organization will be "flexible, nimble, responsive, non-bureaucratic – adaptable" (Brown, 2007, p. 38). You can do this by:

- Growing all levels of your organization into inquisitive teams who constantly ask "what if" and then applying the answers to your organization's particular needs.
- Searching internationally for organization-specific answers to emerging opportunities (Naisbitt, 2006).
- Constantly brainstorming "impossible visions" with everyone (Mehlhorn, 2006).

- Using stories that visualizes your organization competing successfully in a future global setting and thus inspiring your team to move toward your vision of the future (Denning, 2001).

The Global Challenge

Today, the world is not just at your doorstep, it is on your computer, your phone and woven into your complex system of suppliers and customers. You may see the final destination of your organization's product as the large city in your neighboring state, but that city may be just one link in a global marketing system. Now is the time to examine those links. Could you integrate them into your organization's vision for future expansion? Consider expanding your global presence through associates who currently use global contacts.

Today, international business connections may be more logical than your traditional local and national connections. At the same time that I ordered the book that arrived in 48 hours from Singapore, I ordered one that arrived in two weeks from across the United States. Don't let traditional boundaries provide barriers to your vision.

Remember Starbucks and Nokia – you don't have to be the same tomorrow as you are today. As you develop your responsive, systemic organization, all members of your team can continually brainstorm new possibilities. Challenge each team member to be constantly learning and developing their skills for the increasingly global challenges in your organization's future.

Begin today. A journey begins with the first step. If you never do anything different, you will never change. Walking in your traditional ruts, you may be surpassed by commerce on the global digital highway. Accept the challenge to change with the rapidly changing world around you.

About the Author

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