

Creating Seamless Behavior

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Whether it's human physiology (movement relative to skeletal design) or a building design (conduct relative to privacy, comfort and security), human behavior is indelibly linked to and affected by structures and processes. This relationship between structure and human behavior is as old as creation. The design of one river becoming four rivers, flowing out of the Garden of Eden, provoked and supported exploration and communication behaviors necessary for global replication. The global mandate given to mankind would become realized through a reciprocating relationship between geographical structure and human behavior. This article explores the reciprocity between organizational design and team behavior. More specifically, how the organizational design process can create seamless behavior for improved team effectiveness.

The Starting Point for Organizational Design

According to organizational guru Richard Daft (2001), the starting point for organizational design is strategy. He said, "Organizational form and design are the ultimate expression of strategy implementation" (Daft, 2001, p. 556). He also stated that the first task of organizational design is to develop the governing ideas of purpose, mission and core values by which employees will be guided. Jesus modeled this point at the beginning of his design process. The Beatitudes, from the Sermon on the Mount, are governing ideas that were designed to shape both team behavior and church structure. According to Dr. Bruce Winston (2002, p. 28), the beatitude "blessed are the pure in heart" highlights the role of having a focused purpose. Throughout the book of Acts, the subsequent church design (house-based, small groups, community gatherings, team diversity, vertical and lateral accountability, teaching and empowerment, fellowship and missions) served the focused purpose of making disciples of nations. Any strategy implementation (structure, processes and systems) must support a seamless flow of coordination from intentions to actions. Team behaviors and practices such as information sharing, rotating leadership roles, joint-decision making, mutual and individual

accountability, discipline and personal responsibility grow from the strategy side of organizational design.

The Boundary-less Debate

Jack Welch (2005), former CEO of General Electric (GE), called “boundary-less behavior” the soul of GE. He underscored the point that traditional organizational structure, by its very nature, imposes layers and walls between people. Everything from the flow of information and communication in decision making to the design of office space contributes to the feelings of disconnection that often plagues organizations. His goal was to minimize the sense of disconnect by creating a “boundary-less” work environment. For Jack Welch, promoting the concept of “boundary-less behavior” meant blasting through the walls of century-old fiefdoms called engineering, manufacturing and sales and developing cross-functional teams to solve problems and come up with new ideas. For GE, boundary-less behavior described “an obsession with finding a better way, or idea” (Welch, 2005, p. 185).

As successful as this GE maxim and strategy was, at times, it couldn’t go far enough to prevent fatal behavioral conflicts. When GE merged with Kidder Peabody, they had an overall strategic fit plus a good return for the shareholders, but it became an exercise in crisis management (Welch, 2005). In the words of incensed Jack Welch, the bottom line was that, “a company with GE’s values of boundaryless-ness, teamwork and candor could not merge with an investment bank with three values of its own: my bonus, my bonus, and my bonus” (Welch, 2005, p. 225). In other words, the fit of governing ideas, which is the first task of organizational design, was somehow missing from the equation of the merger. GE’s noble ambition of “it’s not somebody’s job, it’s everybody’s job” lost traction before it got onto the track.

From Boundary-less to Seamless

Equally true, boundaryless-ness can be a bit of a misnomer. The purpose of boundaries is for distinction, focus and accountability. Without boundaries we have disorganization. In living organisms, like the membrane of a cell, they are permeable. Meaning, they allow free and fast exchange of vital ingredients that are common to the whole. According to Ashkenas, Ulrich, Jick and Kerr (2002), a boundary-less organization has definition and distinction (boundaries), yet resources (ideas and energy) pass through quickly and easily so that the organization, as a whole, functions

effectively. That place of passage (permeability) is a seamless stream from one part of the organism to the other. In order to achieve effective team behavior, ideas, energy and resources need to pass quickly from one team member to another. That seamless connection is generated at the earliest stages of the design process.

In clothing fabric, a seam is where two separate pieces of material have been joined. The seam is the weakest part of any garment because it is usually held together by only one common thread. In other words, there is a shared extrinsic connection but not an organic intrinsic one. The seam is not an implicit no-go zone, but rather a connection with less quality and substance. Under the right pressure and stress, it will come apart. In like manner, shared organizational structures and processes among group members do not provide the intrinsic material needed to avoid stress-induced fracturing. Ferreting out an appropriate team structure means answering intrinsic questions like: What are we called to accomplish? How do we make decisions? Who should do what? How do we determine success?

In their book *Reframing Organizations*, Bolman and Deal (2003, p. 98) said, “Creating effective teamwork requires a design of roles and relationships well suited to the situation.” In organizational design, this is where the strategic process makes all the difference. It’s where personal connection and contribution is more than just sharing office space, performing uniform tasks, meeting deadlines, getting a similar pay check and going home. It’s where each individual team member is part of the same seamless piece of fabric. Jack Welch once commented that company decisions do not consist of two people making a deal, but rather of every member in the organization making a commitment (2005).

The Strategic Link

Team effectiveness can be defined as accomplishing performance goals within a collaborative environment of common purpose, complimentary skills and mutual accountability (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). Richard Daft (2002) noted that goal incompatibility is the single greatest cause of team conflict. According to Katzenbach and Smith (1993), if a team fails to establish performance goals or if those goals do not relate to the team’s overall mission, team members become confused, pull apart and revert to mediocre performance. On the other hand, when the mission, strategy, structure and processes are clear and congruent, seamless behaviors like open communication,

constructive debate, active problem solving, collaborative decision making, goal setting and results monitoring become ubiquitous.

The successful rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem under the leadership of Nehemiah reflects this point. Nehemiah and his team (priests, nobles, officials and the rest of the Jewish community) enjoyed seamless behavior from strategy to structure to process. Nehemiah and the team first signed off on the values, mission and overall strategy (Nehemiah 2:17-18), then created a seamless structure and process for repairing and building the gates and walls (Nehemiah 3). Even when faced with new environmental threats (Sanballat, Tobiah & Geshom), there was a seamless exchange of new ideas, energy and action, which translated into a new structure (family-based labor), flexible processes (working with one hand and fighting with the other) and improved warning systems (the trumpet sound). Buy-in at the strategy level was the key to their seamless behavior and subsequent success.

A recent organizational redesign of a large church in Cape Town, South Africa, underscores this point. One of the biggest challenges during the redesign process was conflict-behavior, which was systemic among both the administrative and pastoral teams. Although there were many nuances to the conflicts, the primary catalyst was an ongoing contradiction between values (expectations) and processes (actions). The intrinsic values of trust, serving, empowerment and productivity were stifled by an organizational structure dominated by both hierarchy and fragmented vertical decision making. Goal incompatibility was rampant. The control and maintenance goals of the church's organizational structure clashed with their mission goals of loving God, serving people and sustaining productivity. This incongruence, coupled with minimal lateral decision-making ability, caused a great deal of interdepartmental and interpersonal tension and frustration.

The primary reason for this incompatibility was the missing strategic link. As Galbraith noted, once the strategy is established the structure can set the framework for other design decisions. For this South African church, there was very little strategy and few guiding ideas and goals that could foster healthy collaborative behavior and shape organizational structure to be a servant, rather than a tyrant to be served. A recent strategic planning process has brought substantial positive change to the organization. The change in attitude and behavior has been noteworthy. The hierarchical bottlenecks in decision making and the disjointed team behavior that led to leadership frustration, diminished staff morale and major indecisiveness are being replaced with seamless behavior.

With the new generation of adaptive organizations (learning, ambidextrous, networks and virtual teams), the concepts of strategy, structure and systems place a much greater emphasis on human values, purpose and goals. It creates legitimate sharing of organizational objectives and workforce capacity. It reduces dependency on hierarchy and maximizes buy-in and productive participation. Herein lies the secret to seamless behavior: shared purpose, goals and approach. Any organizational design shaped by this team-DNA will have seamless qualities capable of successfully navigating continuous and discontinuous change. According to Katzenbach and Smith (1993), common purpose, goals and approach turn ordinary work groups into high-performance teams, and those high-performance teams will become the primary building blocks of company performance in organizations of the future.

The Social Link

In general, the concept of approach includes economic, administrative and social aspects but in the case of seamless behavior for team effectiveness, the social characteristics are of greatest interest. Overlooking the role of culture and behavioral patterns is a classic mistake made in the organizational design process. How people relate within the social structure is as critical to successful design as strategy. A recent organizational re-design of three regional educational institutions merging into one global, standardized model illustrates this mistake. The application of the global model floundered badly in one particular region, compared to the success of its previous regional model. Although the new, global structure suited the educational objectives of this particular region, it did not consider less obvious questions like: How will existing people fit into the design? How will the design affect power relationships among different groups? How will the design fit people's values and beliefs? How will the design affect the tone and operating style of the organization (Nadler & Tushman, 1997)? Specifically, the motivation behind the previous model was local ownership of curriculum development. It had a home-grown, personal feel in that particular region. When the locus of control shifted to a distant global forum, seamless behavior among the multiple stakeholders utilizing the educational services in this particular region ceased. Some have rejected it entirely, while others have opted for other options. For those currently using the new model, the jury is still out.

Organizational design that creates seamless behavior for team effectiveness balances a strategic/task approach with a social/cultural perspective. The previous example of GE's failed merger with Kidder Peabody underscores this point. The teamwork and candor culture of GE could

not create seamless partnerships with a group of leaders who were more concerned with their bonuses than with the quality of service provided. When the Apostle Paul wrote, “Do not be unequally yoked,” he was addressing this fundamental issue. When strategy (mission, values and goals) is congruent (equally yoked) to a shared approach (culture, interpersonal forces and behavioral patterns), energy, ideas and resources can move freely and quickly between various team members making effectiveness and productivity normative. A helpful first step for any design change is answering relevant questions like: What changes will the new strategy require in the core work of the team? Do the team members have the skills, interest, characteristics and capacity to perform according to the demands of the strategy? Do the values, beliefs, behavior patterns and leadership styles associated with the team culture aid or hinder performance?

Conclusion

Seamless behavior for team effectiveness is not just another word for good communication or the sum of “individual best” efforts. It’s an unimpeded exchange of energy, ideas, resources and commitments that translate into high performance. It is found within the sharing of both strategic content and social context. The genesis of organizational design is found at the nexus of a strategy and culture. It is during this early stage of organizational design where the patterns are set for future team effectiveness. When the ‘what’ of strategy is collectively owned and the social “how” of culture is understood and engaged, team behavior becomes seamless and satisfying.

About the author

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