

When Vision Isn't Good Enough: The Role of Organizational Design in the 21st Century Church

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by Steve Lawson

I remember a few years ago watching a video from yet another church leadership conference as Andy Stanley said, “80% of your problems are not people problems, they are system problems.” But what Mr. Stanley didn't know was that I had some pretty significant people problems. He then had the audacity to follow that comment with, “Your ministry is perfectly designed to get the results it's getting.” I mean, come on! Didn't he know that I had yet one more employee that seemed to need me to hold his hand just so he could do his job? Looking back, I can confidently say that Andy was absolutely right, and my three-years-ago self needed to quit whining.

Strategic management experts Ireland, Hitt and Hoskisson claim that effective structures provide the stability an organization needs to successfully implement its strategies and maintain its current competitive advantages while simultaneously providing the flexibility to develop advantages it will need in the future. Structural stability provides the capacity the organization requires to consistently and predictably manage its daily work routines while structural flexibility provides the opportunity to explore opportunities and actions that the organization will need to be successful in the future. In other words, vision is no good without the organizational structure to sustain it.

So, what are we to do? How do organizational leaders respond? Do we need to change our structure? Add structure? Do you need to buy some 2x4s and a nail gun?

It may be that the organizational design you need is already in place, you just need to discover it and make it clear. That was definitely my problem.

To Thine Own Self Be True

My problem wasn't a people problem, per se'. I had a people problem because I wasn't clear about the structure of our office. After all the books I had read and conferences I had attended, I was convinced that there was a "best way" to organize things. Of course, that was my problem—that nasty word, "organize."

Our office is, by nature, a bit chaotic. We have a good time and don't take ourselves too seriously. But we have a very strong work ethic and get the job done. My personality is a bit independent. I am very self-motivated and don't need much, if any, oversight. If I take on a project, whether I know anything about it or not is irrelevant. I will read four or five books on the subject, call several people and figure it out. Because of that, I expect the same from the people that I work with.

However, everyone isn't wired like I am. Some people need more structure and hands-on leadership. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that, but they just won't get that in our office. It doesn't make one way wrong and another right; it's just different, and I hadn't explained that in the interview process. So, after the second person left, I began to clue in.

From that day forward, I made it painfully clear what life in the church office was like. I explained what they could expect from me and the rest of the staff. I was very clear about our expectations and let them know of my commitment to them and their development. But, if they were looking for a high interaction environment with lots of input and detailed instruction, then I was probably going to frustrate the dog out of them. However, my lack of input did not decrease my expectations. Because of my personality, time constraints and leadership style, I needed to be surrounded by independent self-starters that would thrive in that kind of environment.

And you know what? It worked...kind of. Evidently, in an interview, some people will agree with everything you say. Who knew? The next time around (yes, we actually made another bad hire), I made it even clearer. And I got turned down! I was fairly far into a series of phone interviews with someone who looked very promising, and one day he said; "I'm sorry, but my wife and I have talked, and I don't think this would be a good fit for us." I asked him why. "Well honestly, I don't think I would

work well with you.” He said some other things that I can’t remember because my feelings were so hurt that I had quit listening. Later on, I thought to myself, “Well I guess it worked. Better now than later when they hate me because I get to keep my job while they are looking for one.”

A couple of months later—after a few more rejections—I heard, “That sounds amazing! I’ve been looking for a job like that!” We ultimately hired him after a series of in-depth interviews, psychological tests, shock treatment, and a polygraph test (you never can be too sure), and he has become, quite possibly, the best hire we have ever made.

The moral of the story is that your style is your style. It’s not necessarily right or wrong, or better or worse than any other. It is what it is. Discover it and be honest about it. It may be that something needs to change or maybe even you are the one that needs to be looking for a better fit, but not owning up to who you are won’t help anybody.

It Turns Out “Chaos” is an Organizational Structure

I’ve always felt guilty about my lack of (some would say aversion to) organization. Then, one day, I was at a Willow Creek conference listening to Erwin McManus and my world was rocked. In the middle of his talk, Erwin went off on a tangent about leadership. Come to think of it, I’m pretty sure his entire talk was a collection of tangents. Anyway, he started talking about guys like Bill Hybels and Rick Warren, both of whom were sitting on the front row, and he said:

You know how some leaders are like eagles? They soar high, they make it look effortless. Others are like hawks, they fly a little lower, they still have a great view, then they dart down, hit their prey and get back to altitude. Me? I'm like a bat out of hell—half deaf, half blind, and I don't always know where I'm going, but I know where I came from and I'm not going back!

I was completely set free. Finally, there’s a successful mega-church pastor who thinks like I do!

Many organizations, especially churches, need to find the balance of structural stability and flexibility. One place to look for inspiration is GOOGLE. GOOGLE’s intent is to remain flexible and responsive. In terms of day-to-day activity, GOOGLE’s approach is better described as “structured chaos.” The company’s goal, according to Senior Vice President Shona Brown, is to determine precisely the amount of management it needs—and then use a little bit less. While many church leaders certainly identify with the word “chaos” when it comes to their jobs, few would say that is intentional.

Conclusion

Several years ago, Patrick Lencioni wrote a book titled, *The Four Obsessions of an Extraordinary Executive*. It is a very good book, and I still have the four disciplines memorized. They are

- Build and Maintain a Cohesive Leadership Team
- Create Organizational Clarity
- Over-Communicate Organizational Clarity
- Reinforce Organizational Clarity through Human Systems

I would like to humbly add an addendum to these four obsessions:

- Create Structural Clarity
- Over-Communicate Structural Clarity
- Build and Maintain a Cohesive Leadership Team
- Reinforce Structural Clarity through Human Systems

Don't be ashamed of who you are and the way you lead. Don't wig out if things are a little messy. Who knows, the name of your organization might become a verb (when's the last time you performed a "web search?" You didn't! You "googled" something.). Be clear about your organization's structure—or lack thereof. You owe it to yourself, you owe it to the people you work with, and you owe it to the organization you serve. If you're not careful, it might just give your vision the traction it needs to get off the ground and soar—or at least not run in to stuff.

About the Author

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