

Organizations Navigation in Turbulent Times



Navigation

Throughout history humanity developed its navigation capabilities. The development went through many stages from stellar navigation to compasses, gyroscopes and finally GPS systems. There was always the need to identify one's location in order to progress on set course and direction. To the modern GPS frequent user, it all might seem simple and obvious when the friendly voice in their car device directs them to unknown destinations with great ease. Yet throughout history, many ships, caravans and travelers lost their way due to poor navigation and the lack of technology.

In the same manner, we can say that organizations try to navigate in the sea of uncertainty that surrounds them. Navigating the organization is a complex task. It requires defining where your organization currently stands in the marketplace as well as where it is heading. All organizations have navigators, be it a board of directors, senior management or a general manager. It is interesting to note that organizations have board of directors that derive from the word "direction".

Strategy

This process of navigation is sometimes called setting strategy, vision and mission. Although this is only a partial aspect of navigating organizations, let us review this idea and its meaning.

Strategy is a Greek word that comes from the word "Strategus" – an army leader. The word "Strategus" originates from the word – "Strata" which means – plain. In ancient times, the only way to command a battle was to stand in an elevated place in order to have a bird's eye view of the entire battlefield. From this "overview" major decisions concerning the battle could be arrived at executed by the generals. So, like many other human terms, strategy comes from the military. The ability to decide major decisions by having an overall view is thus termed "Strategy".

Even when there is a strategy set for an organization, there are so many other factors that can go wrong, such as: Numerous execution issues that might make the strategy meaningless as well as; various "people issues" that might render the strategy non effective.

From my experience with many organizations over the last 25 years, setting a strategy, vision and mission is a very small part of actually navigating an organization. The present economic and social conditions, the complexity of markets, competition, frequent and radical changes make it almost impossible to navigate an organization seamlessly. Only 10 years ago many organizations could set a vision for the next ten years. Today, very few organizations bother to do that. There will be so many changes and variations in those coming 10 years that it is almost futile to try and set anything definitive for such a long time frame. In the book "Built to Last" published in the 90's the authors described companies that lasted as market leaders for many decades and were "built to last". Twenty years later, most of these companies do not exist or have lost their market leadership.

Constant navigation

So the act of navigating an organization became a process which required constant engagement. No auto pilots will do. Hands – on navigation amidst many changes and constant ambiguity is the way to go. Every decision about policies, products, development, recruiting is an act of navigation that might influence the course of the organization.

To navigate well, one needs a compass, a GPS or some other system that one can trust.

This article proposes such a navigation system. It can be used by organizations in the arena of their market or; by teams in the arena of the whole organization. Such a system needs to answer many complexities inside and outside the organization.

Navigation system

This system is 4 directional and tries to look at the various aspects that are involved in navigating an organization.

The first step in navigating is always to assess where the organization currently stands.

The second step is to assess the trends that exist in that market place.

Then thirdly, the compass can be used with reference to the 4 directions:

North: Where do we go from here?

East: Why do we want to go there?

West: How shall we get there?

South: What might stop us on the way internally and externally?

This is the simplistic version of this compass.

Now let us take a deeper look at this process.

Navigation steps

First step: To assess your organization's current position is by itself, a complex task.

One way to do it is to look at the various stakeholders of the organization. These will include: Share holders, customers, managers, employees, vendors, community and more.

Then to assess their current needs, to review how well the organization answers these needs and where there might be gaps. The appraisal of the current situation involves having a financial view, marketing view, sales view, R and D view, employees' engagement view, management stability and competency view and more.

This type of information needs to be frequently available to those who navigate the organization.

Secondly, reading the trends in your market or industry is crucial. Navigating without paying attention to currents might lead the navigators very far away from where they originally had intended to go.

The technology of the organization might become obsolete, the organization structures might become invalid, their talents might leave, and their marketing might become irrelevant. There are so many companies and organizations that have experienced this in the last few years.

So reading the trends internally and externally is crucial. It is a bit like fortune telling, as trends should be discovered early on. There is also the challenge of trying to differentiate between major trends and minor trends as they occur. As an example, the CEO of Digital company, a leader in the IT markets in the 80's said at that time: "there is no reason why anyone would want to have a personal computer in their home". Failing to read this trend caused the fall of this major corporation.

When some of that information exists, the leading team can operate the compass. This is a system used today by many teams and many organizations to navigate their way in troubled waters. It is a system of considerations for decision making that creates a complete process of navigation.

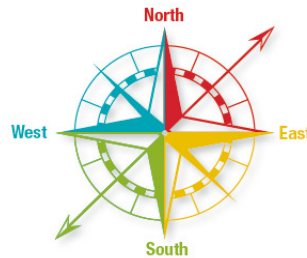
The NEWS™ Compass

WHERE TO?

Where is the organization going?
What is the organization's
direction?
What is the organization's vision?

HOW?

What is the organization's plan?
How will the management team
execute it?



WHY?

What are the organization's values?
What is the meaning of what you do
as an organization?

WHY NOT?

What is limiting/stopping the
organization?
What difficulties is the organization
facing?

North

The North process takes into account the current location and the trends that take place and asks the question "Where to?" It tries to answer three main topics

1. The best future direction for us as an organization. This should be a direction that puts to best usage our core competencies and core drivers vis a vis the market, current and future needs.
2. Setting a strategy – a practical model that will allow us to move in the next step of our progression.
3. A vision – a best case future reality along the axis of the chosen direction. Nowadays for most organizations setting a vision for three years is a far reaching task.

Some might argue that a vision should come first. And; sometimes it does. However, in this ever changing world, setting a direction and updating it from time to time should happen before a vision is reset. This is because very often the vision might not be relevant to the organization competencies, drivers and resources.

East

The East process tries to work out the question "Why?" It tries to locate the core drivers, motivations and engagement of the organization to be able to work out its direction, strategy and vision. Without the existence and empowering of these engines, the organization will not be able to fulfill its intentions. The main topics here are:

1. Do we have the drivers and motivations needed to succeed?
2. Are the people in the organization connected and engaged with these motivations?
3. Are the core values of the organization defined and embedded in the minds of its people?

West

The West process tries to work out the question "How?" How shall we get there? How shall we plan the next stage? How shall we execute it? This is a well known process; however it is rarely done well taking into account all the relevant factors. So we look here at two stages:

1. Planning
2. Execution

The planning phase should include short term goals; reviewing all the necessary resources, skills, teams etc; building realistic consequential steps; setting time lines and milestones.

It takes the ability to break down the strategy and vision into bite size manageable chunks of activities, roles and responsibilities.

The execution phase requires great discipline and consistency. Most organizations fail in this stage due to poor communication, lack of follow up, insufficient training and most frequently, dispersion. This dispersion occurs due to endless distractions, such as: Too Much Information and Acquired Attention Deficiency Disorder. So many people run all over the place, exchanging hundreds of e-mails a day, bombarding each other with information and not involved in much productive work. So, disciplined execution is a serious challenge.

South

The South process looks at the more hidden level and asks "Why not?" what might stop us from within and from without to reach our vision and execute our plans? This process tries to analyze:

1. What might be the external difficulties or stoppers that might hinder us?
2. What might be the internal limiting factors that might stop us or slow our progression?

These issues are usually not looked at. Many organizations often prefer to ignore them. External difficulties are easier to observe – competition, regulations changes, price wars, change of markets trends, recession etc. These difficulties can be leveraged to improve the resilience and flexibility of the organization and its people.

The internal difficulties are more difficult to observe. They can range from limiting beliefs, historic anachronistic perceptions, comfort zones, interpersonal issues, lack of engagement or cooperation and much more. To navigate without paying attention and handling such issues is like navigating the Titanic after colliding with the iceberg. These situations create a leakage in the energy of the organization and sabotage its ability to succeed.

Leadership

It takes courage and leadership to admit the internal limiting factors of an organization. It then requires great skill or external assistance to be able to improve that situation.

These four directions include a broad view and a holistic approach that is necessary to be able to navigate an organization in an ever changing reality.

With the constant increase in change, the next few years will be crucial for many organizations. The difference between success and failure will be determined by "wise navigation".

Aviad Goz
8.5.11
Cesarea