What Matters in Workplace Strategy

Goal: Alignment

This is the second in a series of papers about workplace strategies and what goals they can and should successfully achieve: Alignment ensures workplace is in context; that it supports and reflects an organization's business strategies, economic realities, and organizational culture, as well as demographic and social changes. The other three topics – Effectiveness, which covers performance of the workforce; Efficiency, about using space, capital, or any other asset as wisely as possible; and Agility, the notion of "future-proofing" the workplace to easily adapt to change – will be covered in subsequent papers.

Alignment is the "fit" – the customization of a workplace strategy to the organization and its unique set of circumstances. We start by understanding the business, economic, cultural, and social context in which the workplace will exist. An organization's business strategy might include greater speed to market, fostering innovation and creativity, operational excellence, or attraction and retention of top talent. Our job is to help identify what's current state and what's the desired future state.

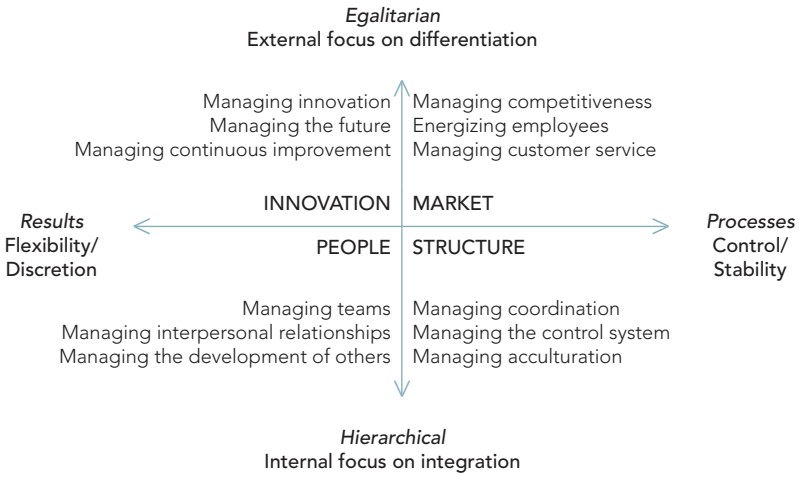
The process Sun Microsystems, a leader in this area, has effectively used is to brainstorm with their internal customer to identify the key factors that will bring about their desired future state – the "how we get there from here" – whether it's co-locating product development teams or, as WL Gore does, allowing employees a half day a week for "dabble time" to explore new initiatives.

Sun's process then identified the behaviors or activities that are needed to support the key factors, like holding formal and informal cross-functional team meetings, for example. From there, they identified the attributes of space, policy, and technology that are needed to support those activities. In this case, this included nearby project rooms the team can "own" for the life of the product development project.

What makes Sun's solutions appear different from other Silicon Valley companies, or from a consumer products company or a law firm, are the other context-setting elements. These usually include the state of the economy and other business and industry conditions they may face, their culture and organizational maturity, and ever-changing social norms, like what each generation of workers values.

The hardest of these to pin down is organizational culture. We all know it when we see and feel it, but without specific training to recognize and, most importantly, interpret its components and dynamics, we have a difficult time being sure our recommendations are appropriate. Several of the experts in organizational culture and development have given us clues about how to identify organizational cultures, and even better, how they evolve over time in predictable ways. They suggest that when you simplify it, organizations vary in two basic dimensions: how the organization materializes power and how they handle uncertainty.

The chart below is adapted from three similar models and shows how companies materialize power on the vertical axis and how they handle uncertainty on the horizontal axis, as well as aspects of an organization's focus at each intersection.



My favorite source for insights into organizational culture – Cameron and Quinn's book "Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture" – suggests that every organization has some aspect of all four of these quadrants in their culture, but that each organization will pass through predictably sequential phases where one of these is most dominant and the highest priority or focus.

The phases start with Innovation being dominant (picture a start-up focused on what they could bring to market that's different and compelling), then move to People (and what kinds of know-how are needed to build a successful enterprise), then to Structure (the systems and operations needed to manage the complexity or achieve operational excellence in the now larger organization), then to Market (to better understand clients and competition to successfully compete).

A hypothetical example might be Amazon.com. As a small start-up, Jeff Bezos initially focused on the "big idea" – the breakthrough concept that would revolutionize shopping. As he attracted venture capital and added staff, it would have been important that he do two things – hire people who could bring expertise in needed areas to build internal competencies, and make sure they communicated very effectively as the team grew and no one person could know everything that now needed to happen.

As Amazon grew to thousands of employees in multiple locations, operating processes had to be added to manage the growing complexity of an organization that size and to find efficiencies to drive profitability. Then came growth in what they offered the market and expansion into electronics, apparel, and even groceries. Now Amazon's task is to once again understand what's next before someone else beats them to it.

If we apply this model to the workplace, it's easy to imagine how Amazon's facilities priorities would also change from unfinished doors on saw horses to more familiar office furniture and "corporate standards" to "how do we get the best and brightest thinking creatively about what we should be doing next?"

This paper was adapted from an article that first appeared on the CoreNet NYC Chapter website in 2008.

About the Author

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