

## **Anchoring Organizational Clarity**

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The words brand and strategy are perhaps forerunner buzzwords today that echo through the halls of many organizations and executive offices. They unfortunately are used synonymously with terms like goals and objectives and although they may sound better they really don't create any difference. What is it that brings a brand to life inside a company? What is it that causes people to mobilize around its strategy? Clarity is the imperative that generates greater strength and cohesiveness within an organization. It is what connects the brand and the strategy to the vision and makes them meaningful and compelling. The degree that clarity is created and people are able to align themselves with it is the degree to which the organization experiences consistent growth and success.

### **One Organization's Experience**

Last year a colleague and I started work with a large healthcare provider in the Southeast. They were exploring a fundamental shift in two key areas, their brand and their strategy. The brand, which is the experience that their customers and patients were having, needed to be evaluated to really understand the gaps in building a stronger connection around loyalty and trust. Secondly, they were evaluating their core strategy of how health services could be delivered in the region, this included issues around efficiency, affordability and accessibility. The integration of these two core areas, brand and strategy is what we call *strategic clarity*. The strategic clarity work was initially being driven by some very compelling research that exposed a growing disconnect and mistrust of the healthcare system among patients and customers. The organization was highly committed to making a shift around this disconnect and they wanted to do it while maintaining a solid foundation of clinical excellence.

As part of the work we also did an internal assessment of the organization and its culture to better understand the organization's ability to respond and drive real change with their customers and patients. What we found as a result of the internal survey and

the internal focus groups was quite sobering but also motivating for the senior leadership. The organization has a highly competent and committed work force that was also overwhelmed, confused and feeling very disconnected and siloed. They didn't understand where the organization was going besides the short term, they were confused about what growth really meant; was it geography? Was it more specialties or different services? Was it more customers. In addition, a high level of cynicism surfaced around the topic of priorities, people were highly skeptical and not very committed about priorities since they seemed to have a new set every other month; *"I don't need to worry about that since it will probably change in a month or so,"* was a comment that was shared in one of the forums.

Although the organization had a highly skilled and competent culture it was not very committed to more change, a new direction or another set of undefined priorities.

People wanted to know how and what they do added value, what is really expected of them, not just from activities but also from a performance standpoint. They wanted to know what the company really valued, not what is posted on the wall.

Fundamentally the organization needed clarity and a sense of alignment to be committed to driving the level of change the company envisioned for the region. It also became very evident to leadership that the potential acquisition of an outside clinic, and the strategic partnership of another facility could further erode the organization's success if it were to try and integrate these entities into a confused and misaligned organization.

One of the significant outcomes of conducting the internal focus groups was a palpable level of appreciation that managers and employees expressed by being included in the dialogue. They also valued the ability to better understand the thinking that was happening at the senior level of the organization. This experience from the manager and employee focus groups demonstrated an organization wide

desire to be more connected and better informed and to do it through a higher level of engagement.

The COO in one of our senior strategy sessions paused and said, *“I realize that one of the biggest fallacies inside leadership is the belief that good strategy is what will make the company successful. Strategy is only as good as the people who own it and execute on it, so this has to be one of our key objectives, to better align our organization.”*

## Going Forward

Part of the strategic clarity process was to craft the top-level three-year priorities or what we call mandates. These mandates give direction to all company wide planning and initiatives. One of the three-year priorities was to evolve the organization around a discipline of clarity and alignment. That single priority was distilled into the following initiatives.

- Breaking down the silos in key areas of the organization to create stronger integration of services. To support this level of integration and interdependency between divisions a joint planning process was established between interdependent divisions.
- To help rebuild the trust and consistency around how communication is experienced in the organization, HR and Communications developed a set of culturally relevant protocols and communication tools that would start shifting the internal experience around communication. They agreed to a simple set of criteria; communication efforts needed to be highly *transparent*, *very informative* and extremely *accessible*.
- To help calibrate the organization around a new refreshed and committed direction, leadership decided to kick off the realigned brand and strategic direction with a symposium for all the management and supervisors in the organization. This symposium was designed to include full transparency on how leadership arrived at the brand and direction, what the trade-offs included, and what the leadership commitment was to the organization going forward. It was an opportunity to engage management in real dialogue around what this meant for them individually and collectively.

## Common Organizational Patterns

The most frequent and wide spread feedback that we witness inside organizations is tied to the patterns around lack of clarity, inconsistent communication, and not feeling connected to the who the company is (its brand) and where the company is going (its strategy).

Knowledge and insight around lack of clarity and alignment typically surfaces as the result of failing performance standards, declining customer satisfaction, difficulty in creating traction around new initiatives, or problems integrating a merger or acquisition.

Clarity and alignment are critical strategic imperatives if a company wants to have an organization aligned around its core brand and clear about its strategic priorities.

## What Drives Internal Clarity

There are three fundamental dynamics that drive clarity and alignment in organizations.

### Connect

Organizations are business ecosystems, which depend on human systems. To be truly effective we have to connect with each other to leverage intellectual capital, share ideas, solve problems, build efficiencies and innovate. Employees place value on where they feel connected and a sense of community, and as a result they express higher levels of commitment and personal ownership around their work.

*Make people, their ideas and talents accessible*

Some organizations are so committed to building connectivity that they have built social networks within the organizational community to build a more connected culture, leverage ideas and build stronger sense of ownership within the company.

*Create rituals rather than transactions*

Every organization has rituals. Something as common as a year-end sales meeting can be a ritual. These rituals are opportunities to build stronger connections and alignment in the organization. Consider making an event an experience rather than a sterile transaction.

## Inform

A common fallacy is the belief that communicating is the same as informing. Informed people act differently — they understand context, and they are able to operate out of more grounded assumptions so they trust their judgment and as a result have more confidence in their decision-making. People are also more likely to take appropriate risks when they feel confident and informed. They understand what they are doing and how their role connects to the bigger picture. The intention behind informing is to build depth and meaning behind the information so that people can actually own it and codify it into something that is meaningful and purposeful.

### *Make information accessible, useful and interesting*

- How easy it is to access important information by the people who most need it. Is it easy to assimilate? Give it context and meaning, put a story around it.

### *Resolve the tension between words and actions*

- Part of building a more informed and unified culture is to build stronger trust.
- What is the story behind the brand?
- Have people share how they own the vision around the brand.
- What do the values mean besides words on a placard on the wall?
- Find out where inconsistency exists around what is said and what is done, what is done is more important than what is said.

## Engage

The art and science of engaging is most frequently where the magic lives. The ability to increase the level of engagement inside the organization can be a powerful change agent. I remember an incident when I was a part of an executive team with a global company that had offices in six locations around the world. I made a special effort to visit two of the offices because of an important initiative that we were rolling out. After my visit I had expected to do a lot of hand

holding to get this effort integrated. When I returned home I received separate notes from each managing director expressing their appreciation for my efforts in spending time with them. They acknowledged that I could have conducted a conference call and sent a memo, but instead I invested time to personally engage them. They expressed full support behind the initiative. It was clear to me that the support came out of their trust and confidence in the relationship.

### *Get out of the corner office*

- Walk the halls.
- Talk to people who don't report to you.
- Invite a cross section of people to meetings who might not regularly attend.
- If there is a critical initiative or change being kicked-off, invest in getting it integrated through a process of engagement.

### *Develop trusted transparency*

- Tell it like it is.
- Ask questions instead of telling.
- Pay attention to what is not being said.
- Let people know where leadership missed the mark; demonstrate the same level of accountability and integrity you expect from your employees.
- Make it safe for people to talk and give feedback.

### *Get clear about your personal brand*

- Hold yourself and your team to uncompromising levels of respect, courage and humility.

Healthy, vibrant companies are hard to mistake. They apply the same level of focus and discipline to their internal brand (the organization) as is applied to the external brand (the market place). These organizations operate on a fundamental discipline knowing that when the organization is clear and aligned internally it can leverage change, navigate complexity, balance uncertainty and manage conflict. These organizations make clarity and alignment a strategic priority.

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