

Empower Only Around Purpose

Dr. Manuel Angel Coco Morales

Human rationality and capacity are limited. Organizations, as institutional forms, are designed to cope with inherent human limitations through the division of labor and structured relationships. As we all know, hierarchy and bureaucracy can constraint quick response and achievement. However, the work of organizations, tend to get done even if not optimally.

In the 21st century, knowledge intensive organizations, networks of relatively informal relationships seem to drive creativity, innovation, performance and production, often in spite of formal arrangements or structures. Since we still have to tolerate bureau-pathologies, imprinting the DESIGN PRINCIPLE EMPOWER ONLY AROUND MEANINGFUL PURPOSE-TASK into the organization's pattern of working relationships will mitigate the restraining effects of excessive bureaucracy.

Hierarchy in organizations is natural and useful to the extent that it doesn't displace purpose, goals and objectives. (It is like the person that wanted to keep his shop so clean that he never open the doors!). The point is that intelligent empowerment can be the complement, drive and substance of hierarchical bureaucracy. A hierarchical structure is not the essential matter. The core issue is wise empowerment, which is the foundation for sharing decision-making power and entrusting others to engage and to complete meaningful tasks.

In our experience and heavy research a hierarchical design tends to be driven by patterns of delegation based on tasks or functions as oppose to responsible for results related to purpose. The same should be the case for the recent fashion stressing accountability. The advice of organization theory is to make people accountable on the basis of their expertise as it is aligned with meaningful organizational purpose.

A fundamental statement is that A STRONG SENSE OF PURPOSE LIES AT THE HEART OF ALL GREAT ACCOMPLISHMENTS. Purpose is an important objective to be attained; something that has to be done right and with quality; the reason behind any vital task. Purpose is built around alignment, commitment and achievement for creating a culture of high execution and performance.

Going deeper, to meet the requirements of this design principle, purpose must relate to the whole organization, being comprehended and framed as the basis for action by all levels of the organization. Thus, everybody inside and outside the organization should be clear about what the organization aims to accomplish. Purpose relates to the organizational objectives or ends expressed in actionable and comprehensible terms that both reflect the aspirations of all segments of the organization and can be translated up and down and across the organization. Expressions of visions appropriately should be inspirational and should provide a solid foundation upon which purpose can be wisely deploy with relevance and consistency across the organization.

The achievement of organizational goals must be understood in measurable or any other observable terms. Purpose has to reflect choices having been made among a larger set of alternative outcomes based on the principle of potential leverage.

What employees can grasp and operationalize are translations of purpose all across the organization and guide them in doing their jobs. Ideally, if left leaderless for a while (as Warren Bennis has shown singular leadership is always necessary), people could continue to do their jobs by staying focus on purpose! There are four tests for assuring a soundable organizational purpose.

1. Is purpose consistent with other higher motives of the organization (vision, mission and strategy)?
2. Does purpose has a pragmatic-workable orientation (it is an expression of external consequences of effort)?
3. Given that resources are limited, does purpose enable trade-off decisions to be made among competing alternatives?
4. Is the achievement of purpose generally recognizable, measurable or at least fairly clear in terms of observable effects?

The two fundamental aspects of empowering and working around profound purpose are the following:

1. The orientation to the whole organization. This is an inclusive rule. It was John Dewey in Democracy and Education who stated that where there is real inclusion you can require responsibility.
2. The focus should be on goals, objectives and results that relate to the whole organization.

The concept of purpose as the foundation of empowerment is concerned with the consequences of the work of organizational units. So, as Robert J. Grossman has I indicated (11 Initiatives for 2011) the strategies to induce better performance around purpose are: (1) Look at succession planning and talent acquisition. (2) Lift pay freezes (if you can). (3) Invest in top managers and critical jobs. (4) Prevent legal controversies. (5) Be an effective adviser. (6) Stress principles and values. (7) Rebuild trust and morale. (8) Look for innovative approaches. (9) Use a mix of nonmonetary rewards. (10) Focus on core business. (11) Learn from the past, question assumption.

Our twelve recommendations is to approach the future with hope and optimism, emphasizing purpose as embodying factors as product and service innovation with attendant market consequences, earnings, balance sheets and customer delight.