

An Opportunity For You To Be A More Effective Leader: The Challenge Of Walking AND Chewing Gum

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History reveals that many organisations become trapped in the status quo long after the quo has lost its status. This outcome represents the challenge of walking and chewing gum, the challenge of balancing the tensions that occur between managing today which preparing for and creating the future. Managing and enhancing the performance of your organisation's current business model usually relies on convergent thinking, sharp analysis and rational decision making. Evolving your organisation so that it remains relevant and effective in the future represents a qualitatively different contribution. It refers to the opportunity that you have to be a pathfinder in the sense of visualising or imagining what your organisation could or should be in the future, and being a catalyst to mobilise others to join you in this quest . This challenge often requires associative or divergent thinking, imagination and intuition. It's not enough to be able to do both yourself, or to bring together a team who can make these contributions. It's also necessary to determine the relative importance of these two qualitatively different contributions at this point in time. For it is critical that your organisation is neither **over** nor **under** led nor managed; achieving the correct balance determines sustained success.

Organisations of the future are here now. They offer more benefits for all of us, and its time to begin the transformation now or ultimately to become irrelevant and to disappear. However, the demands of the present are often urgent and more tangible. Managers become entrenched in the present by their prevailing habits and skills. This trap can be created by reward systems that generate problematic second order effects: managers can be lured by an annual bonus; analysts and shareholders can become overwhelmed by short term performance rather than longer term potential; and politicians can live for the next election. For many of us focusing on and managing the present seems to be easier or the default option.

Notwithstanding the importance of managing the present, there is increasing need to prepare for a future that is arriving faster than ever before. Therefore I want to challenge your thinking about your opportunities to lead beyond the present in ways that sustain the relevance and success of your organisation.

One intriguing thing about the future is that it is already here. Parts of our future are being spawned around us if only we can identify these developments for what they are. For example, several years ago Robert Miles and Charles Snow argued that organisations of the future will have to be cellular, to be more organic. For such organisational forms can be more agile, can allow increased emphasis on lateral information flows, can unleash innovation, can develop greater member engagement and can enhance collaboration and knowledge transfer. While many of us have some difficulty visualising these lattice like or networked organisations, they already exist. Gary Hamel has provided three case studies from diverse industries to illustrate both the viability of these forms and the generalisability of such an approach.

Gore is best known for the magical fabric Gortex. The founder, Bill Gore, fled Dupont because he reasoned that its bureaucracy stifled the very feature that initially brought it fame and success: innovation. In setting up Gore he used small flexible membership teams as the basic building block. Bill Gore did away with hierarchy, considered that innovation was everyone's opportunity, collocated members with diverse skills, encouraged everyone to take 10% of their time to dream and fiddle with new ideas, and used peer based processes to hire, make resource allocations, and initiate new projects.

Google has demonstrated that the power of these ideas is not restricted to manufacturing organisations. Amongst many initiatives they have made the strategy process open, encouraged experimentation and tolerated many that failed to realise their early promise, devolved power and given everyone 20% of their time to generate options and ideas.

The third case study comes from a very mature and staid industry, supermarkets. Whole Foods relies on principles more than policies, uses teams as families to build clans and communities, gives them access to all performance data that enables local decision making, and espouses higher order objectives to entice people beyond financial considerations to quality of life outcomes.

These developments are neither fad nor fashion. Rather, they represent changes in the fundamentals of our understanding of organisations, management and leadership. Their success goes beyond just financial performance to member and community well-being. As such they represent an opportunity to transcend our historical over reliance on economic indicators of organisational and societal success. Furthermore, there is strong convergence in the evidence to support these organisational forms and the leadership and managerial practices that ensure their effectiveness. While Miles and Snow saw the first evidence of the success of these forms, Jeffrey Pfeffer has documented the empirical evidence of some of the high performance work practices that characterise these forms. In turn Gary Hamel has raised wider awareness of their significance.

If these new forms of organisation and new management and leadership practices are showing so much promise, how can you evaluate their potential for your own situation? What can you do to avoid being trapped in the present that is soon becoming the past?

The first suggestion is to recognise that this is not solely your responsibility. It can be a challenge for leaders at all levels of your organisation and the opportunity for your CEO to create leadership forums that increase awareness, offer opportunities to contribute and build commitment to remaining relevant and successful.

A second suggestion is to challenge the language that we use to describe what we do. Terms such as differentiation, hierarchy, span of control, top-down and the ubiquitous human resources all describe the ways in which we learnt about organisations in the industrial revolution and the armed services. Linguists would remind us that the words that we use influence how we ultimately think and behave. And if we want breakthroughs in organisational performance and sustainability and in member well-being, we need new ways of conversing and thinking that enable these outcomes.

A third suggestion is to draw on outsiders to create sufficient diversity to enable us to understand the gaps between the present and the future. Too often members develop shared but implicit ways of thinking about things based on unchallenged assumptions or assumptions that are now no longer valid. So who could be “outsiders”? Well your customers or clients, your suppliers, the alumni made up of former members and prospective members: young undergrads who you are seeking to attract can all offer an external perspective. Using “outsiders” can expose unspoken and unchallenged assumptions. They are often the source of innovation. It is a salutary lesson that most of the initiatives that comprised the Industrial Revolution came from “fringe dwellers” in that society. For example, both the steel and confectionary industries were spawned by Quakers. These communities were hardly mainstream at a time when the Anglican and Roman Catholic Church members were dominant as thought leaders and incumbents of the major positions of power. So draw in outsiders to create the diversity that can enable you to deal with the ambiguities and uncertainties of dealing with the future.

Finally, move beyond issues to questions. The issues of “the war for talent”, the ageing workforce, attraction and retention have been pored over endlessly to the point of mental fatigue. Each presentation on these topics seems to be about moving bones from one grave to the next. It’s time to move to some powerful questions, questions that generate conversations, challenges and insights that lead to action. After all, the answers can often lie in a powerful question.

Here are a series of questions that you might pose to your leaders, your people and those “outsiders”.

1. Who are the thought leaders who might provoke our thinking about the future? And who should we invite who might become early adopters and champions of these ideas?
2. Where can we go to see the future right now? (Many people are best persuaded by the proof of success offered by qualitatively different ideas; herein lie some of the benefits of study tours.)
3. What are the assumptions that we have long held about our industry, our organisation, our people and our clients? And which of these assumptions still hold true?
4. If our CEO and executive are unwilling to be involved in these conversations, who is ready and able (try the next generation, they have more to gain from these considerations!) ?
5. If we had a greenfield site, how would we create our organisation? So how can we now move in that direction? And when barriers are thrown up how could we address and overcome them?
6. Where could we set up pilot sites to test some new ideas and establish their worth? (Remember Charles Darwin’s finding that evolution emerges from diversity and selection; so you need to encourage enough flowers to bloom!), and

7. Finally, shaping the future can never be an issue that we solve; it is an issue that we work on. Therefore considering the future shouldn't become an event. It must be an ongoing process. So how can we prime and sustain the process to keep it fresh, vital and productive? By succeeding you will be developing your organisation's adaptive capability.

In sum, it is becoming increasingly important to invest time and effort into sustaining the relevance of our organisations, into championing innovation in how our people think about management and leadership, into offering pathfinding leadership to our colleagues, and into acting as a catalyst for adaption and renewal. The forces of darkness can be hidden in the urgency and tangibility of the present. To enhance your effectiveness as a thought and practice leader, ensure that you make time to consider and shape the future of your organisation. So in meeting the challenge of walking **and** chewing gum, may the force be with you!

Further reading

Gardner H. (2006) Five Minds For The Future. Boston: HBS.

Hamel G. (2007) The Future of Management. Boston: HBS.

Pfeffer J. and Sutton R.I (2006) Hard facts, Dangerous Half-truths, and Total Nonsense. Boston: HBS.