

Old myths, new myths

Successful organisational change management is currently a difficult achievement due to the complexities within organisations and external social factors. Seemingly unsolvable societal phenomena (such as hunger, poverty, diseases and violence), breakdown of institutions and stagnating governance models are the contexts within which organisations find themselves. What were once valid business solutions and approaches are now ineffective, established models seem to be incapable of enabling businesses and even extensive experience comes short of providing solutions or answers to deal with these modern challenges. In addition, aside from the business complexity facing them, organisations are also expected to take on their social responsibilities towards the challenges our world is facing.

In order for organisations to co-create new business and governance models, new practises have to be put in place, leaders of organisations must be challenged to suspend counterproductive habits and refresh their perspectives (lenses) and shed old system characteristics, so that performance can be enhanced and sustained whilst taking on corporate social responsibility. Our works consistently confirms that the fundamental key success factor in transitioning organisations is to first align core personal and corporate values and behaviours against business objects and organisational processes.

In our experience as business consultants, on organisational transformation, we find that many organisations act from implicit set of beliefs systems regarding how organisations should work and transform. These beliefs are the summation of formal education, accumulated experience and hypes in management theories. The downside to knowledge and experience that were once successful is that one tends to perceive new problems and complexities through these same frameworks, which overtime may have become obsolete. Moreover, individuals often seek solutions within their personal frameworks and belief systems that have been accumulated through past successes, which are not often refreshed or appropriate for the challenges facing an organisation. This may be the reason why so many reorganisations and change programs fail¹. Most remarkable are the beliefs that organisations act upon that seem to have transcended into myths.

According to Wikipedia, a myth is a sacred narrative in the sense that it contributes to systems of thought and values. Some examples of these "sacred" (and thus unquestioned) stories in organisations are:

- *Sense of urgency*, expressing to employees that change only happens if there's a -mostly exterior- pressure on or in the system;
- *The first 100 days*, meaning that leaders have to take the tough decisions within this time slot to have real impact (I often wonder why organisations would pay 'leaders' after this period...);
- *Gap analysis*, implicating that problem solving is a straight and logical line between base and desired outcome;

¹ Research by prof. W. Mastebroek, University Amsterdam, showed that 75% of all reorganisations in the Netherlands doesn't meet their objectives (2004)

- *Benchmark*, although the other organisation's solution or performance might not be the one that is effective in your context;
- *Exemplary leadership*, where top management, as told by 'Communications', delivers a speech about the urgency of an upcoming change process and the importance of everyone's commitment and then abandons the process to middle management.

These myths share common characteristics that could negatively impact an organisation's transformation. For instance, most of the approaches are *linear*, meaning that problem solving basically is seen as nothing more than bridging the gap between cause and effect. Secondly, the approaches are rather *rational* 'we think our way to the new future by analyzing, comparing and fixing'. The rational approach also is related to the third characteristic, which is the observation of organisations as *technical systems*; managed by a clear command and control structure and where change basically is conducted by *separating* and *fixing parts* after having been measured, benchmarked etc. And lastly, all of these approaches reflect a high degree of 'pace setting' (pressure to provide results that usually are counter productive, also known as 'running to stand still')

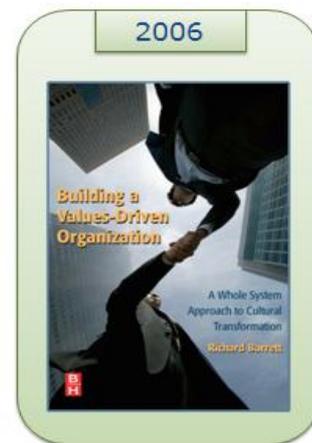
As mentioned in the introduction, the current complexities in the world and in organisations require different styles and new ways of interacting (a paradigm shift in approaching transformation). To quote Albert Einstein, "*problems can not be resolved by the same level of consciousness that created them*". This is underlined again in Marcel Proust's, a French poet, statement that "*the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands, but in seeing with new eyes*". Both Einstein's and Proust's statements support the notion that solutions are available by looking through a different point of view and that doing so increases one's wisdom in finding solutions. This position is in line with the new approach to organisational development, which is characterised by the following design principles:

- **Organisations are organisms, living entities, implicating that managers are dealing with dynamics, energy, flow instead of (or besides) strategy, structure and system.** The term "transformation process" is used, referring to the fact that "change" implies changing or improving structures or systems, whereas "transformation" transforms the underlying belief and values systems on which the leadership builds the new vision and organisation;
- **non-linear**, transformational and co-creative process, where every new step (if any) is a decision of the management team, who take real responsibility for the process, without being attached to a set outcome and in the mean time refraining from the obvious action lists, which would prevent us from looking deeper into the undercurrents. Although cause and effect analysis may be helpful, meaning and significance of phenomena are emphasised;
- **address and relate all human and organisational needs**, not only rational/mental needs, but also physical (healthy and productive), emotional (the quality of relationships) and spiritual needs (significance, collective wisdom, long term vision, corporate social responsibility);
- **a whole system or systemic approach**, continuously aligning beliefs, values and behaviour to create a resilient vision-guided, values driven culture and business performance;

- **time**, trusting the process that the future will emerge and creating the space for meaningful dialogue;
- **co-creation**, co-envisioning and co-shaping the new organisation with buy-in of all concerned.

In this new approach, values are a powerful anchor because they reflect the energy of people.

That is why, prior to the start of an organisational change or transformation processes, we conduct a survey with the Cultural Transformation Tools of Richard Barrett, which allows us to show the degree of alignment between personal values, current and desired organisational culture. This powerful tool is not only a descriptive diagnose, but also creates a transformational agenda



During sessions with the leadership -and later with the teams- the management team reflect on the findings ("seeing the system"²), become deeply aware of the system they work in, the values they exhibit and their habits and patterns. We also address implicit viewpoints (lenses) and beliefs ("seeing our seeing"), to create awareness about 'sacred stories' (myths).

The next step of this process is "sensing": viewed from another perspectives, from the whole, where participants realise the impact of their patterns and their personal responsibility in re-enacting to and reinforcing current systems (patterns). In-depth conversations about beliefs, values, personal stories and ones purpose in life and work all take place. It is our experience that these dialogues enable a higher shift in consciousness, which creates new mental space; thus, allowing the leadership to envision and co-create a new future by collaborating with teams and middle management.



² steps based on Theory U, Otto Scharmer, 2007

Lastly, composing a shared vision and a set of espoused values and guiding principles are important next steps. From an integrated point of view, we've learned the necessity of aligning these values with behaviour in order to ensure personal and organisational integrity. Furthermore, business performance can't be secured under all circumstances without aligning values to the mission of the organisation.

In conclusion, the process of changing old system thinking by using this process can be very difficult. Sometimes participants find comfort in 'doing' rather than in 'becoming'. However, the most important aspect to this approach is the emphasis on collective wisdom, beliefs and values, which provides organisations and leaders a solid foundation..

And yes, it is true that by creating new design principles, we are creating new "sacred stories". As long as we're aware of these new myths and we're able to transcend them, we might build organisations that are able to cope with organisational and social complexities.

Sander Mahieu
Founding Partner Synnova
The Hague, Netherlands

Estelle-Marie Heussen
Network partner Synnova