

Vision

Friend or Foe During Change?

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Vision has been traditionally regarded as an asset to the success of organizational change. However, based on the results of a case study, Landau, Drori, and Porras propose that vision may also be a hindrance to the change process. The authors disagree. The authors contend that Landau et al. has collapsed the effects of psychological ownership and attachment to organizational identity with vision and as a result has misattributed the source of hindrance. Furthermore, the authors disagree with Landau et al.'s assertion that conflict during change is necessarily dysfunctional and thus a hindrance to change. In fact, the authors contend that such conflict may be functional.

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In “Vision Change in a Governmental R&D Organization: The Pioneering Legacy as an Enduring Element (2006 [this issue]),” Landau, Drori, and Porras propose that vision can both facilitate and hinder the process of change. The basis for this hindrance is found in their assertion that changing a vision is tantamount to changing

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an organization's identity and that the extent to which members are committed to or psychologically own the current identity, they will resist such a change. Challenges to an existing vision, particularly one traced to the founder, are therefore seen as "equivalent to attacking core aspects of identity" and can be expected to trigger strong opposition. As Landau et al. point out, "Once a vision becomes clear, coherent, and acceptable to organization members, they develop a strong sense of commitment to this vision and tend to resent any attempt to change it" (p. 148). The existence of one vision therefore can be a hindrance to the creation of another vision.

The authors' contention that vision can serve as a liability to change is an interesting one and although likely to be dismissed at first blush is worthy of further investigation. However, in spite of its potential merits, we do not believe that Landau et al.'s current study demonstrates the limiting effects of vision on change in general or on changes in vision (and thus organization identity) in particular. In fact, we contend that (a) they have confused the inhibiting effects of member commitment and attachment to identity with those of vision, (b) their results support the value of existing visions in the creation of new visions, and (c) they mistakenly generalize their findings. We consider each of these points in the following.

ATTACHMENT TO IDENTITY VERSUS VISION

Landau et al. (2006) define vision as "a statement of purpose determined by management based on the organization's core values and beliefs that defines the organization's identity and combines an ideal manifestation of its direction together with a tangible prescription for realizing its goals" (p. 147). According to this definition, changing a vision changes an organization's purpose and its identity. This is an interesting assertion for which the authors offer no empirical evidence. Although they do cite conceptual and theoretical arguments for such a relationship, at no point do they demonstrate or report an empirical relationship between vision and identity or that changes in one result in corresponding changes in the other.

Because the relationship between vision and identity is at the core of their proposition regarding vision as a hindrance, firmly establishing its existence is critical. But the vision-identity relationship is never directly established, and the problem is avoided by making the relationship definitionally true. This is unfortunate because it defines away the very thing that needs to be shown; namely, that vision defines identity. If vision does not define identity, then the cause and effect assumptions in Landau et al.'s argument have questionable validity, and their case regarding the mechanism through which vision becomes a hindrance—its relationship to identity—breaks down.

Rather than assume vision and identity are related, we think the existence of such a relationship needs to be established. We would expect for example that people who work for religious, professional service, or volunteer organizations are much more likely to see their identities connected to the vision of their organization than are people working in profit-driven organizations. For this reason, we do not believe vision will define identity in all organizations, even with strong founders, just in

those where vision is tightly connected to members' identities. The relationship between vision and identity therefore is an empirical issue, not a definitional one.

But, even if we accept Landau et al.'s definition of vision (which we must as it is the one used), we contend that their own arguments indicate it is the commitment and attachment organizational members have to identity that is the source of hindrance to change, not vision. As the authors state, people can develop strong commitments to, emotional bonds with, and psychological ownership of an organization's identity. Ownership however is not just about the thing owned (e.g., the organization's identity) but about the owner as well. Ownership helps people define, express, and maintain their personal and social identities (Dirks, Cummings, & Pierce, 1996).

Where ownership is high, a change in vision implies a redefinition of what "I own" and "who I am." Under these conditions, we would expect people with high ownership to negotiate rather than passively accept any changes they consider to have significant implications for their identity. And indeed one can interpret Landau et al.'s findings as consistent with such negotiations. But, and this is our point, it is not the vision itself that is the source of hindrance to change. Rather, it is member commitment and attachment to what they own and their identities that becomes the hindrance. Unfortunately, because the authors definitionally equate vision and identity, they treat the negotiation of ownership and identity as if it is the negotiation of vision and the negotiation of vision as if it is the negotiation of identity. The result is a confounding of two distinct constructs and a misattribution of the source of hindrance.

CONFLICT AS AN ASSET

Landau et al.'s contention that vision is a hindrance to change stems from the observation that some members of Gamma did not accept the changes in vision but actively challenged, argued with, and negotiated them. Are they proposing that the Gamma members should have done otherwise? At the heart of their assertion that vision is a hindrance to change is the question, "A hindrance to what and to whom?" By contending that vision constitutes a hindrance to change implies either (a) people should willingly comply to change or (b) there is no functional value to the organization in conflict over and negotiation of its vision qua identity.

Conflict and negotiation have been found to be highly functional in the decision-making literature (Schweiger, Sandberg, & Rechner, 1989). In fact, decision theorists recommend increasing functional conflict through the use of devil's advocacy or dialectical inquiry to improve the quality of decisions. Why then when it comes to a decision about the purpose and direction of an organization as expressed in its vision is conflict considered a hindrance? To whom is it a hindrance? Clearly, not all conflict is functional. But neither is all conflict dysfunctional, and treating the negotiation over vision as "hindrance" treats it as dysfunctional.

Debate can not only strengthen the quality of the vision but the commitment of those who participate in the debate. An existing vision serves as a counterpoint (e.g., thesis) to any new vision (e.g., antithesis), thereby creating the possibility of an altogether

new vision (e.g., synthesis) arising. In this sense, an existing vision is not a hindrance but an asset in the dialectical creation of a new organizational identity. Why then must we consider the conflict over a change in vision a hindrance? We contend that one can only argue Gamma's existing vision was a hindrance if it is assumed there should be compliance to a new vision advocated by change agents, that change agents were somehow hindered in getting what they wanted by those unwilling to comply, and that they should not have been hindered.

Green (2004) points out that legitimizing discursive justifications must be provided for changes to be adopted and that if these are not provided, change agents should not expect adoption. But legitimacy does not simply come from "I say so" or "Trust me on this." Rather, it is established in conversation through argumentation and narrative. Accordingly, the hindrance and opposition to which Landau et al. point would be part of the legitimizing process and critical to the adoption of any new vision.

There is no doubt that an existing vision can be used as a justification for not changing, just as a new vision can be used as a justification for changing. But it is not the vision that is at issue but how people are related to it. Vision is a possible future to which people are attracted. And because it is always a possible future, people can be attracted to it even when there is evidence that it is or cannot be fulfilled in the existing reality. To suggest that one vision is a hindrance to the creation of another vision is to assert that one vision is somehow preferable to another in some sense other than its attractiveness and utility.

GENERALIZED FINDINGS

Even if we concede all of Landau et al.'s points, we question the conclusions they draw regarding the relationship between vision and change for two reasons. First, we question the validity of drawing conclusions about the hindering effects of vision in the change process when what the authors studied was a change in vision itself. It is highly questionable that the arguments regarding vision and identity apply when vision itself is not the focus of the change. Why for example should vision be a hindrance in reorganizations, restructuring, or process changes?

Second, we question the validity of drawing general conclusions from a single case study. At best we can only speculate about relationships and propose testable hypotheses.

CONCLUSIONS

The hindrance Landau et al. attribute to vision could also be attributed to any number of other factors that contribute to people resisting change. In fact, an examination of this case study reveals that such factors as fear, loss of prestige, confusion, and so on could all account for the opposition people have to changes in Gamma's direction and purpose. Moreover, Landau et al. contend that the founders' legacy vision persists in an organization through a variety of mechanisms such as stories, myths, artifacts, and so on. Because each of these mechanisms, as well core values and beliefs, are also

considered part of an organization's culture, it is not clear if it is the organization's culture or vision that is the source of hindrance. Unfortunately, the authors never address these possibilities, contending it is vision and its relationship to identity that is the hindrance.

It is true that organizational members can be stubborn and immature and not accept that the world has changed. A lot of businesses and organizations have ceased to exist because people were not willing to shift to a new line of work that would cause them to abandon their current identities or their current standing in a social network. We think the field would benefit greatly from understanding the underlying dynamics at play here and developing interventions/methodologies to help people make a successful transition when alterations in identity and ownership are required. Appreciative inquiry, future search techniques, and many other approaches could be employed in these situations, but there would be more to be gained by studying what is required to help people shift from their attachment to "who they know themselves as" to new identities.

People should be entitled to their identities, but at the same time, organizations do need people who are committed to a viable, sustainable vision to survive. If there are extreme shifts that require extreme changes in vision and therefore identity, it is possible that an organization cannot and perhaps should not survive. When organizations need to change so fundamentally that people's identities are called into question, we should expect the organization to lose members at a minimum and perhaps even cease to exist. Perhaps in a systems sense, that is what needs to happen; if the environment is that hostile, there may be no way to fight against it.

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