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Business Leader Magazine - August 2007

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Anticipating Change In Your Business

Business Leader Magazine (August 2007)

What's next? Just when it seems that you have recovered from the last tsunami that rocked your world, here comes the next. We all are accustomed to the mantra of the 21st century by now: Change is the only constant we can expect.

Winning organizations and leaders, however, already have translated this reality into fundamental changes in how they do business and/or lead their organizations. While we Americans still hold on to the eternal optimism that things can get better through hard work and resourcefulness, competing in today's turbo turbulent world requires new paradigms for guiding the people, process, and technology direction of your organization or business.

Ours is the era of the agile imperative, where best practices must yield to next practices as we strive to discover how to effectively adapt and thrive in this real-time, fast-paced and ever-changing world.

This is the second in a series of articles focused on strategies and actions that can help you navigate your journey through turbulent waters as an individual contributor, group leader, business owner or enterprise executive. This series is built around the five core drivers of organizational agility embodied in the AGILE Model™ from Agility Consulting and Training LLC (ACT) and endorsed by the American Management Association (AMA).

In late 2006, the AMA and ACT collaborated to introduce a new seminar designed for business owners and senior executives and built around the AGILE Model™ called Strategic Agility and Resilience: Embracing Change to Drive Growth. The five drivers of an adaptive, agile organization include the ability and processes to anticipate change, generate confidence, initiate action, liberate thinking and evaluate results.

Our discussion in this article will center on the need and value becoming deliberate and intentional as you strengthen your capability to anticipate change.

Understand The Forces At Work

As the pace of change accelerates around us and becomes increasingly unpredictable, the need for improving our visibility on the forces of change is an important place to start.

Understanding your forces of change along with the trends and dynamics driving their behavior — or forces of change — helps in your effort to anticipate change. As one who enjoys sailing in the islands, a seasoned captain always must be alert for the potential forces of change that could affect smooth sailing and the safety of the crew.

If you know where to look, there are many signs to monitor, such as changing color of water ahead, behavior of other boats around you, wind and depth gauges, cloud formations, and even the behavior of birds.

A good captain also monitors the conditions on the boat: Crew readiness, sail trim, engine performance. Not all forces of change are external to our organizations, and the key is monitoring the right things.

Keep Your Eyes Open

Each and every organization has a collection of critical forces of change. The list generally includes customers, the consumers of your products or services, suppliers of your raw materials, government regulators, competition, and current and potential workforce. You will improve your capability for anticipating the change that rocks your world by taking inventory of the trends occurring with each, and understanding how those trends affect you and your business.

What monitoring system can you put in place to give you earlier visibility on trends or actions that will affect your success model? At its most basic level, anticipating change is much like we teach our children as they learn to drive: Don't just watch the car in front of you; watch the car that's in front of the car in front of you.

Adapt To The Situation

A good example of adapting your focus and strategy can be seen at Greensboro's VF Corp., the world's largest apparel company. The apparel industry, similar to many other industries, has historically been retailer focused.

This is not a bad thing, except that as the tastes and trends of the end consumers began changing with more emphasis on lifestyle — and companies that kept their focus primarily on selling in product to retail customers — began to lose out to those organizations who shifted and strengthened their abilities, resources, and business processes to better understand consumer forces of change and enhance their skill at anticipating evolving direction.

Mackey McDonald and his team at VF made a definitive and strategic shift towards consumerism several years ago, which has been one of many reasons for the continued profitable growth of the organization.

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There are so many new developments occurring in the technology world that are simultaneously giving us the ability to recognize and monitor change while contributing to the rapid revolution around us.

Technology availability, portability and access have collapsed our world into an interconnected community where new trends and solutions occur at the speed of Skype or the next blog. New and old businesses skyrocket or crash as a result of the rapid networking and mass communication connections embedded in MySpace.com or FaceBook.com, with more to come.

New technology begets new technology, and the speed of change increases. We could go through a long list of the new technologies that change the rules of old concept (such as a Sling box for your TV), but the list would be too long and almost obsolete before we finished.

Our first challenge is getting ourselves to accept that change is inevitable, so we must get comfortable with that reality and set our sails on becoming a master of change, rather than a casualty. There is more to come next month, as we look at the next driver of organization and leadership agility: Generating confidence within your enterprise.

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