



Management and Performance Associates – April 2009 White Space

Picture it! A typical organizational chart: John is in charge of European Sales, while Mary is in charge of Latin American Sales. Both employees are very competent, have exceeded *their* goals, and as a consequence received their fat performance bonus checks. From an organization chart point of view, both of these boxes (Europe and LATAM) are shown in parallel, and report to another box (Peter, in charge of International Sales). The space between Europe and Latin America is not called the Atlantic Ocean in an organizational chart, but “White Space,” the focus of our newsletter this month.

The White Space gets even more complicated when it is not only geographic, but functional. It’s easy to visualize the implications when one box in the chart is in charge of research and development, another one of sales and marketing, and another one in charge of production. Every person responsible for each box can be doing his/her job very well, but chances are there are many issues that fall in this “no-man’s-land,” between the boxes in an organization chart or the area between the different functions. Very often no one is in charge or responsible for the White Space. The important handoffs between functions are happening here, and this is very often the area where an organization has the greatest potential for improvements. How many issues fall in-between those boxes, without anyone being responsible for them, and with no awareness of them because they are not part of the traditional “functional responsibilities?”

Who is impacted by this dysfunction? Clients are not getting the service and products they want, shareholders’ returns are not being maximized because of lost opportunities, employee talent is not being used at its best, and so on. In the White Space things often “fall between the cracks” or “disappear into black holes” resulting in delays, misunderstandings and things simply not getting done. To manage the White Spaces is a way to improve process performance of an organization.

There is more bad news: there is no budget for the white space, no goals, no strategy, and the vision is totally foggy.

The managers who operate in these uncharted seas are often the ones most successful at driving innovation, nurturing new business, and approaching new markets. The million dollar question then becomes: should companies leave these huge and valuable territories in the hands and talents of individual managers, in the hopes that they will find their way, or should they incorporate them in their strategic plan in order to leverage the exploration of these frontiers? The white space encompasses all the opportunities that fall outside the reach of management, planning and budgeting. Now it’s the time to introduce a new concept: Entrepreneurship; Going into uncharted waters, looking for the unknown, looking for new territories, being a new Columbus.

Now, before you launch into this new territory, remember that Columbus had Spanish Queen Isabella as his major sponsor, providing legitimacy and resources to the adventure (two of the major problems when you are navigating the white space). Also, remember that Columbus had no maps for his first voyage. It is up to you to find your way across the vast Atlantic Ocean, or the white space.

So, what is the modern Columbus to do?

1) **Think outside the box**

The phrase has been consistently associated with creativity, but we have to extend the usage of the expression here to mean think outside of your organization chart box. Don’t be limited by your job description, or your goals. It is not about “that’s the way we do things here” but “where are the opportunities?” and “what do the customers want?”



2) Remember that the old org chart is still there

Chances are, you'll step on someone else's turf. People will be territorial if they notice you are invading their business. You will need to influence them, win them over, and make them your partners, not your enemies. There is a story going around the blogosphere detailing why Google has lost many of its top visual designers. In one case the visual designer decided to quit after a team of engineers using technical programs could not make a decision among 41 shades of blue. Creativity limited by software!!! If this can happen at Google, imagine in more traditional companies.

3) Develop a business plan

Before you go to Isabella and ask for funds you will have to develop a business plan. The more detailed, thought-out and innovative it is, the higher the chances of approval.

4) Manage up and find a sponsor

Who will be your Isabella? Who is willing to fight the traditional organization and support your efforts? Remember that managing up relies totally on influencing your superiors.....and having a well thought out plan.

5) Select the best crew for your voyage

You need competent and engaged people to support you through this journey. Inspire them. Share your vision and get their commitment. Lead and involve them. You may be good, but you can't do it alone. Being an entrepreneur does not mean flying solo. We know some adventurers have crossed the Atlantic by themselves, but . . . well, that's another enterprise . . .

We wish you well in your adventurous journeys and hope you think of MAPA to help you reach your destination.

See you next month. Suggestions are welcome.

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