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THE DOWNSIDE OF ORGANIZATIONAL MATURITY



BIG IDEA In A Few Words

From the standpoint of organizational development, maturity makes an organization vulnerable to insularity. Insularity reduces corporate empathy. The reduction in empathy limits creativity. Insular organizations that increasingly limit meaningful engagement with “outsiders” diminish empathy by stifling their corporate limbic system, making it harder to understand key layers of their constituency and more difficult to relate to them effectively. Diminished empathy doesn’t completely eliminate creativity. It makes us much more vulnerable to wasting precious resources solving problems none of our constituents care about or providing overcomplicated solutions that only make the problem worse.

If you’ve read anything about organizational development you have no doubt encountered the classic bell curve diagram that reflects corporate life cycles from birth through adolescence toward maturity. In almost every other context, the stability that comes with maturity is a good thing. But the crest of the bell curve representing an organizational life cycle is not where you want to be. As the saying goes, it’s all downhill from there, but in the worst possible way, toward increased bureaucracy and organizational irrelevance if not death.



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The agility of prime, not the stability of maturity, is the ideal goal for healthy organizations. Maturity in this sense is the first step in a downward spiral. Here's how I characterize it: maturity makes an organization vulnerable to insularity. Insularity reduces corporate empathy. The reduction in empathy limits creativity. I know this seems counterintuitive and represents only one of many expressions of the downward spiral on the back side of the bell curve. But I'm convinced maturity, as it relates to organizational life cycles, leads to insularity, which leads to a lack of empathy, which limits creativity.

Let's take a closer look at each step in this downward spiral, starting with insularity. Mature organizations have by definition experienced some level of success. The problem comes when increased success produces diminished urgency to keep learning and turns the focus inward. It's nearly impossible to defend insular thinking. So insularity is often rebranded as loyalty so it can be vigorously defended by the old guard.

Insularity Rebranded as Loyalty

Take Ford Motor Company for example. In 2006 Ford announced that the parking lot at its Dearborn Truck Plant would be open only to employees who drove vehicles built by Ford or one of its subsidiaries. This seems like a logical and sensible act of solidarity for a company under attack by foreign competition. But it was really a symbol of the American auto industry's insular thinking that had permeated Detroit and created an environment where few people designing or building American made cars ever had direct interaction with their competition.

I have encountered this same insular thinking repeatedly in mission circles. In one case I was assembling a team to give input on a future project and had several people in mind who are passionate about the Great Commission but operate in circles outside our core constituency. To my surprise, there was resistance from another member of the team to the idea of including anyone that did not serve with an affiliated organization. My instinct is to embrace like-minded outsiders so we can learn from them; others felt strongly we would be rewarding outsiders for not being closely affiliated by engaging them at such a high level.

On another occasion I was the guest of a mission organization for a key gathering of staff and leaders. The members of the board were present and introduced by the leader to the rest of the group. In the introduction it was carefully explained that only churches who had bought in to the mission with a high-level of financial commitment were permitted to have a representative on the board. The audience applauded this policy and demonstration of organizational loyalty.

I fully understand the thought process behind wanting members to drive planning and supporters to drive governing but I see in both of these cases tell tale signs of insularity being rebranded as loyalty and a slippery slope toward lack of empathy.

Old school leaders are more comfortable talking about strategy than empathy when it comes to organizational development. The objective realities of leadership can seem incompatible with soft and subjective words like empathy. Daniel Pink has described empathy as one of the most underappreciated abilities in business. Dev Patnaik, in his book, *Wired to Care*, makes a powerful case for why empathy is an essential quality for effective organizations. The limbic system draws together many different parts of the brain to form an overall mechanism for handling emotional information. When you discern a colleague is discouraged or depressed or upset it is your limbic system that is enabling you to combine the various data points such as body language, tone of voice and facial expression to identify a specific emotional state. Your limbic system enables you to not only understand other people but to care about them.

Insular organizations that increasingly limit meaningful engagement with “outsiders” stifle their corporate limbic system, making it harder to understand key layers of their constituency and more difficult to relate to them effectively. I believe this is one of the reasons I so often hear church leaders lament that mission organizations “just don’t get it.” And it’s why so many people who live within a proverbial stone’s throw of a church never even think about attending based on the assumption “they don’t understand people like me.”

When maturity triggers a downward spiral toward insularity resulting in a lack of empathy, the end result is diminished creativity. It is extremely difficult to cultivate highly engaged constituents if your organizational limbic system is underachieving. And you are much more likely to overlook possible solutions to their problems if you don't understand the problems in the first place. Diminished empathy doesn't completely eliminate creativity; it makes us much more vulnerable to wasting precious resources solving problems none of our constituents care about or providing overcomplicated solutions that only make the problem worse.

Empathy Fueled Creativity

In 1908 the London underground was a hodgepodge of ten different rail lines that had been strapped together like random pieces of wire. While you could get from one place to another on the tube the chances were high it would take a long time because there was a high probability you'd get lost.

Operators of the Underground decided to solve this problem by producing a map showing how all the lines were interconnected. It was released with great fanfare and a high energy, high profile city-wide ad campaign. The problem was the map did almost nothing to mitigate the problems travelers faced in attempting to figure out how to get from one place to another. Looking at the map was like staring at a pile of Technicolor spaghetti. The lines followed complicated and circuitous routes and the addition of above ground landmarks made it even harder to decipher. They had developed an accurate, comprehensive and nearly useless tool.

Confusion reigned until 29 year old Harry Beck, a laid-off employee of the Underground, had an empathy driven epiphany. "He realized that people who used the Underground didn't need to know each bend in the track or even the precise distance between stops; they just needed to know how to get from one station to the next. Tube travelers didn't need a map of London. They needed a diagram of the Underground."³⁰

Using a small notebook Beck sketched out a ridiculously simplified image of the entire Underground train system. Every rail line was drawn as either a horizontal, vertical or 45-degree diagonal line. The

only landmark on the map was the River Thames, which was also reduced to geometric segments. The distance between stops was equal, regardless of whether it was 200 feet or two miles. In a few minutes Harry Beck had morphed a pile of Technicolor spaghetti representing the most complex transit system on earth at the time into something even a child could understand. And almost every other metro transit system in the world has adopted his empathetic genius.

When Harry Beck drew his map on a notepad he was empathizing with a traveler not thinking like an Underground worker. Perhaps being unemployed from the Underground made it even easier for him to think “outside the tube.”

High Creativity and Low Empathy Stifle Opportunities

Let me tie this together with one more illustration. Mamitu Gashe is one of the top surgeons at the Fistula Hospital in Addis Abba. What is remarkable about her story is she never went to elementary school, let alone medical school. She arrived at the hospital as a patient for fistula surgery after her first pregnancy. She remained at the hospital making beds and later helping the doctor during surgery. She stood next to him observing carefully, learning the names of the equipment until she could assist with fistula surgeries. After a few years the doctor allowed her to assist with suturing and over time took on more of the procedure until she was able to do it by herself. This hospital does more fistula surgeries than any institution in the world. Mamitu eventually took charge of the training program so when elite doctors visited the hospital to learn fistula surgery their teacher was at times an illiterate woman who had never received a day of schooling in her life.

Other examples of training non-medical professionals to address life threatening women’s reproductive health challenges have shown promise in other parts of Africa. And there is wide consensus it would save many lives. Yet in spite of their promise, none of these programs have been scaled up to meet the need. Why? Because medicine as an industry is at a place of maturity, vulnerable to insularity, and the lack of empathy, not so much with individual doctors but as an industry overall. That stifles creativity, especially when it involves non-expert outsiders.

We are at a similar crossroads as a Great Commission community in North America. It’s time to jump

the S-Curve, to move off the top of the bell curve and begin the steep climb of adapting to new realities. That doesn't mean we have to abandon everything about our history or current practices. But it does mean we have to rail against insular thinking and cultivate corporate empathy at every turn. So let me close with a few questions. Where are you most vulnerable to tolerating insularity by rebranding it as loyalty? How well developed is your organizational limbic system and finally what evidence would you cite of empathy fueled creativity?

NOTES

³⁰ Dev Patnaik, *Wired to Care: How Companies Prosper When They Create Widespread Empathy* (FT Press, 2009) Kindle location 338-345

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