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Organizational hindrance: The overlooked factor

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IN THE LAST ISSUE (Volume 7, Number 2, Summer 2008) I discussed the enormous degree of change that the profession and practices of architecture will face in the next 10 years. Most firms will survive, and some will elevate themselves to phenomenally high success. Some of those successes will be random, consequences of the right people and processes coming together at the right time in light of external occurrences. Other firms will be highly successful due to deliberate action, and those who choose deliberateness are the intended audience of this article.

Most practitioners, after some degree of thought on the matter, will conclude that they define success as some combination of such things as quality of the work, reputation in the marketplace, professional satisfaction, size of the revenue, and positioning of future leadership, profitability. The list can be longer or shorter, and the emphasis will vary from firm to firm. Once defined for a particular firm, an algorithm for success might include something about the clients served, the talent doing the serving, the intellectual capital (which this article refers to as "knowledge") and the

application of that knowledge. A resulting algorithm might look like this ...

$$S = (C + T) \times (K + A)$$

... in which S = the firm's definition of success, C = clients, T = talent, K = knowledge, and A = application of knowledge. Looking at those factors individually, it will become clear that improving any one increases success incrementally, and increasing them all increases success considerably. This is true to the extent that the firm's leaders, managers, talent in general and resources don't get in the way. Unfortunately, they always do, and in doing so, they form "organizational hindrances." Hochberg's *Law of Organizational Dynamics* says that there is *always* some degree of hindrance in any organization, which is another way of saying that there is no way to achieve a *perfect* organization for anything – a business, a sports team, a family – in which perfection means there is nothing that could be better. However, the algorithm above doesn't recognize that law. A more accurate algorithm resolves that by including the "hindrance factor" (H):

$$S = \frac{(C + T) \times (K + A)}{H}$$

Hindrances are things that impede other components of success from achieving

optimal levels. If one were to apply a scale of 1 to 5, with five being strongest (which means "5" is best in the nominator and worst in the denominator of the algorithm), the maximum score would be 100...

$$S = \frac{(5 + 5) \times (5 + 5)}{1} = 100$$

... and the lowest would be 0.8:

$$S = \frac{(1 + 1) \times (1 + 1)}{5} = 0.8$$

More relevant than the extremes is what happens when for any set of numbers in the nominator, the denominator (that is, H) increases:

$$S = \frac{(5 + 5) \times (5 + 5)}{2} = 50$$

$$S = \frac{(5 + 5) \times (5 + 5)}{3} = 33.3$$

$$S = \frac{(5 + 5) \times (5 + 5)}{4} = 25$$

An incremental change in the hindrance factor has much greater effect than a similar increase in any single factor in the nominator. The very clear message

of this algorithm: Give priority to reducing hindrances; that is, *get out of our own way*.

While the title of this article refers to hindrance as "the overlooked factor," it is clearly *not* overlooked by those affected by inattention of leadership and management. It makes sense for leaders and managers to assess their practice candidly to identify hindrances that can positively or negatively leverage the firm's ability to succeed. Some things to consider include:

- ◆ Do leaders give conflicting messages about the firm's values, vision, goals, standards and behaviors?
- ◆ Do we allow behaviors that contradict our values and goals?
- ◆ Do we work with clients who don't share our values and who don't value our work?
- ◆ Do we have people in the firm whose performance and potential are inconsistent with our goals?
- ◆ Do we lack technologies that we know are necessary to accomplish our project work efficiently?
- ◆ Do we talk about elevating our intellectual capital and then inhibit input from people whose opinions conflict with ours?
- ◆ Do we talk about performance but reward tenure?
- ◆ Do we talk about our future but deal only with the present?
- ◆ Do we resist change in a changing world?
- ◆ Do we talk about investing in our future but put the profits in our pockets?

Fortunately, many of these hindrances can be minimized. Unfortunately, many leaders and managers don't seize the opportunity to deal with them.

You may want to apply this algorithm to your practice and, irrespective of your rating, identify what moves will increase the factors in the nominator and decrease the hindrance factor. Tip: If you have all fives in the nominator and a one in the denominator you are assessing too softly. ■

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