

Organizational Strategy & Harmony: Lessons From The Choir

I am a member of a community choir that performs three concerts a year. There are approximately one hundred members in the choir with four sections: Soprano, Alto, Tenor (my group) and Bass. We have a rigorous process that we work through to achieve a successful concert performance. We all learn our music in each section; we all have to listen to the other sections to achieve harmony; we learn the dynamics that the Director wants in each song; we support each other to achieve a quality of singing that the choir is known for; we are all clear on what the expectations are for concert performance. We also have resources available on the choir website so we can practice learning our part at home. That is a considerable investment in time. Now you may wonder what this has to do with strategic alignment in organizations. So let me use a well-worn phrase- that process is how the choir gets to sing in harmony from the same song sheet. The same approach applies to organizations.

Strategy is everything to do with organizational success. That is why the process for arriving at strategy and gaining alignment throughout the organization is critical. Early alignment builds early success. Alignment means that employees at all levels of the organization have line of sight to strategy and goals. When people act in concert with strategic goals, they make choices on what actions positively impact results; they know what to do and what not to do. Alignment means that each employee has goals/actions in their performance plan that link to strategy. This is where organizations succeed or fail in delivery of strategy.

When I was the CEO for the National Quality Institute (now Excellence Canada) I had the opportunity to work with a team to assess organizations as they worked to integrate the Excellence criteria in their organization. What I found was that many organizations received a low score on Planning processes, not that there was a lack of strategy and goals, but there was very little alignment in the organization. Most of the senior team could speak to the strategic plan, however once we drilled deeper in the organization there was much less clarity, at some levels there was little to no knowledge by employees of how their actions were linked to strategy. You can imagine the comments when we provided feedback to the senior team. Many found it hard to take when we provided feedback that they lacked an organizational architecture for effective delivery and line of sight for strategy. Developing a plan is the easy part; gaining alignment for delivery is the hard part.

So back to my community choir, by investing time in the choir process we perform as a harmonic group. We not only know our own part, we also know how the four-part harmony sounds. Our director is right there with us, in front of the choir for practices, working with us on what we need to improve, providing feedback, keeping us motivated to spend time in practice and at home so that we become comfortable with the music and with the lyrics. The day of our concert performance is an emotional high for we know that feedback from the audience will be instantaneous.

Each concert performance runs about ninety minutes of singing. To get to concert performance level, each choir member has invested, on average three hours a week during the twelve-week concert cycle for about thirty-six hours to perform a ninety-minute concert. What happens through the twelve-week cycle is nothing short of a miracle where one hundred amateur voices that started the practice cycle in disharmony find their way to harmonic alignment. When those first sounds of harmony happen after all our practice time, it is a thing of beauty. We all want to

succeed, so choir members put in the time because we know that the end result will be worth the investment. The same for organizations, employees want to succeed but often the processes in place for aligning their work and contribution is not in harmony with strategy and goals.

In my strengths based practice I work with leaders and Board members so that they understand that the process for arriving at strategic delivery is not top down or bottom up, but circular. Leaders need to set out the broad framework for strategy. Employees need to be consulted. Feedback is on going- up, down and across the organization. There are a number of easy to implement actions that organizations can do to gain alignment on strategy. For instance, at the Board level and senior leadership team, the agenda for all meetings should be set to align with strategic goals. The same goes for meetings elsewhere in the organization. If there is no linkage, then the question should be asked why is that item on the agenda. Employee performance plans at all levels should link personal goals to strategic goals. There should be on going conversations about what is happening with strategy and action on goals rather than just a quarterly review, a monthly meeting or a leadership tweet.

Success comes from having the organization architecture designed so that people know their part; know when & how to collaborate in teams; know what the short terms actions are to achieve longer terms goals. That is the value that comes from using criteria in the Excellence Frameworks and using strengths based approach to setting strategy and delivery. People work to their strength if they are appreciated knowing that their work contributes to moving the organization forward. People know what good performance looks like which ends up having employees at all levels singing from the same song sheet just like our choir at a concert performance.

Excellence Frameworks provide the basic organizational architecture for leaders to build a high performance organization. Just like in the choir when the organization is in harmony, it is a thing of beauty.

About the author: Dan Corbett is recognized for facilitating strategic organizational change that taps into the positive strengths & energy of people who share a desired future for excellence in their organization. He has served as President & CEO in the public and not-for-profit sectors and senior executive roles in the private sector. He has lead executive team workshops, facilitated strategic governance sessions, participated as a speaker and panelist at conferences and seminars and believes in making a difference as a community volunteer.

As President of the National Quality Institute (now Excellence Canada), Dan promoted NQI as the Canadian voice for Excellence and Healthy Workplace. He positioned the Canada Awards for Excellence as the national recognition program for organizations and championed the innovative Healthy Workplace program as a key employee engagement program.

Linkage to the OES Framework-

This article on Strategy and Harmony “Lessons From The Choir” uses the analogy of how a choir group achieves harmony through the use of a rigorous process. The same focus applies to

organizations, in that to achieve alignment on strategy through all levels of the organization, leaders need to define a clear delivery process that is integrated into the leadership and planning cycle. The OES Framework recognizes that just as the choir learned to sing in harmony, organizations need clearly defined processes and criteria as the way to make strategy and goals relevant to all levels of the organization

The OES Framework provides a roadmap for organizations to navigate to a level of excellence that recognizes the hallmarks of world-class performance..

For instance two of the principles for the OES Framework are:

- Alignment – understanding the organization is a system of interrelated and interconnected work processes and all activities need to be aligned with the established direction.

- People involvement – nurturing and reinforcing cooperation and teamwork and giving employees the opportunity to develop their full potential.

Specific criteria in the OES Framework identify how leaders go about getting everyone “singing from the same song sheet” to achieve alignment of strategy and goals to actions at every level of the organization.

2.0 Leadership Develop a strategic plan with goals and objectives that will guide the organization toward its vision & Communicate openly to employees about organizational performance

*3. 0 Planning: Communicate and integrate the business plan internally and externally & Monitor and review the business plan on a regular basis **

5.) People: Ensure people understand and commit to the strategic direction and improvement goals & Get people involved with improvement initiatives