

Opportunity 'isnowhere'

Different types of organisations shape the way their employees think about opportunities. What kind of organisation do you work in? asks Dr Leandro Herrero

Yes, the title of this article is a test, not a typographical error. You could have read it in three possible ways, each of them meaning something. If you read it as, 'opportunity is nowhere' it means that your hope reserve is very low. Does it also mean that you are a pessimist? Not necessarily. But let's see things from the organisation's perspective. There are people who spend their time working in organisations and feeling this way. They don't see any light of opportunity at the end of the tunnel, whether in terms of personal career development or overall collective business performance. You probably know people or organisations like these.

Opportunity is nowhere

To read the letters as 'opportunity is nowhere' may be the individual's own situation (ie reality) or perception of reality. The former is bad enough but the latter is more worrying. Entire workforces can perceive the workplace as lacking in opportunities. Even in cases where opportunities do exist, the negative perception is so strong that real opportunities can't surface even if they are actually waiting to be uncovered.

In the life of organisations, there are points of 'consolidation of perception' where strong beliefs cascade down and inundate the workplace. In declining organisations or those that have reached a plateau in their evolution, or indeed those in transition without a clear vision of their destiny, it is common to 'see and feel' a broad sociological 'group-think' phenomenon taking over. People feel there is little they can do. They spend their time waiting for a takeover, figuring out what kind of exit package they might receive, polishing their CVs or 'counting the beans' for early retirement. Loyalty is low. The place could be labelled 'in transit'.

Monster, the online job search and recruitment service, has data on the time of the day when pages are searched and used. It's not in the late hours of the day or the weekend that people search for ads

on their home computer. The busiest log-on time is, surprise, surprise, nine to five, weekdays!

Organisations that have reached this level of introversion and have a collective reading of 'opportunity is nowhere' are like cadavers waiting for somebody to sign the death certificate. Life has been written off. Managers bring their bodies from nine to five, but their souls and hearts are busy looking for new homes. You can smell these feelings by simply walking in or talking to the receptionist. When an organisation has reached this milestone, it may be difficult to change it via rational means. Something drastic may need to happen, and it has to be very convincing for people to actually embark on a mental turnaround.

Opportunity is now here

Another possibility is that you have read, 'opportunity is now here'. This is obviously the opposite to that described above. From an organisational perspective this kind of environment is the one that wins minds, hearts and bodies. As in the previous case, it may be the reality or a perception of the actual situation. A strong perception by everybody that the organisation thrives on opportunities, whether small or big, is an asset that chief executives should nurture. This positive environment is a winner and a good cushion for not-so-good days. As Sir Winston Churchill said, "We shape our houses and later they shape us." He was referring to the building for the UK parliament but people in organisational development could well adopt his approach.

What we make of the place in which we work has a strong influence on the people who inhabit the building. It is as simple as that. If we build a house of opportunities, people see them. If we build a house where opportunity is obscure, then people can't even spot the real chances of a potential success.

When one is hired by an organisation, one is given not only a PC and a credit card but also a pair of glasses through which to see the world. The kind of glasses that a particular organisation uses are a test that can be used as part of an organisational assessment.

Signal spotters

People who read and see 'opportunity is now here' are of several types. First there are the 'signal spotters', who are able to distinguish between signal (a piece of information or knowledge that is going to make a difference) and 'noise' (a piece of information or knowledge that leads nowhere and

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Illustration by Rob Wilcockson

is a distraction). I am talking here about business signals. You need people with these abilities – and you need to create an environment where these people are welcome and nurtured. In this era of knowledge management solutions the risk of overflowing information has increased. It is even more dangerous than before because noise can now come to you packaged as a signal – something that you need to know, that you have to read, must get.

We are in the era of ‘e-enlightenment fallacy’ when it is assumed that because we can now have access to almost everything and everybody, that because information is now clear and transparent, knowledge will follow. Signal spotters are key people who consistently exercise the most powerful brain tool: filtering.

Trend spotters

There is another group of ‘opportunity is now’ people. These are the trend spotters, the ones who are able to project the future and see where things are going. They include the true visionaries but not all visionaries are of the flamboyant, grandiose type. Trend spotters are able to anticipate changes in the environment and visualise how they or the organisation will cope (or not cope) with those trends a few years down the road. Some data suggest that the ability to see that future correlates with levels of executive responsibility.

Elliott Jacques has based an entire approach to leadership on the idea that some people in day-to-day managerial or operational positions have a short future span. In other words, they are able to see a future not more than weeks and at most a month down the road, while chief executives and top leaders have spans measured in years. I have always been fascinated by Jacques’ largely unknown approach but have never figured out how solid it is. The reality is that – although there may be some general rule in what he describes – business life is filled with anecdotes describing where

the ‘great idea’ came from, be it the shop floor or an anticipation of a business trend from one of the operational parts of the organisation running everyday business.

Very often, true contact with the day-to-day reality, such as that of the sales forces, for example, can trigger more long-term vision than sitting in a strategic function in headquarters. The times of large strategic planning departments populated by strategic people – the only ones allowed to think long term – have had their day. In parallel, the short-term focus of many western enterprises has created a management mutation, which is genetically unable to see beyond ‘the next quarter’ – a new unit of time that has substituted the Gregorian calendar.

Bridge spotters

Finally, in my short classification of ‘opportunists’, there are the ‘bridge spotters’. These are the people who are able to see the synergy between A and B, even if they belong to different fields, different businesses or different scientific disciplines. Bridge spotters are unlike the signal and trend spotters because their minds are not necessarily focused on either the future or a relevant piece of information. They usually work on a today basis and don’t know *a priori* whether the information is going to be signal or noise, but are able to link ideas and people.

They tell A that the answers are to be found in how B is doing things. They spot and demonstrate that even between different fields the commonalities are huge and that, for example, mutual learning is key. These people are brokers of ideas, ventures, people, entire organisations and knowledge.

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The 1970s and 1980s have seen the decline of cybernetics and the 'general system theory' which had their origins in the works of von Bertalanffy in the 1940s. In his work he tried to bridge mathematics, engineering, biology and computing, but this has now been substituted by the progressively sexy 'systems thinking'.

A whole industry of consultants has grown around the idea of systems thinking, most notably represented by the work of Peter Senge, at the US Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Business is still trying to come to terms with the concepts behind the rhetoric, trying to understand the value of a conceptual framework built on the idea of interdependency of factors – the sum is bigger than the parts – and what feedback mechanisms can do for planning, operations, marketing, etc.

There is a growing tendency in business to embrace complexity theory concepts and to focus on the whole (of the business for example) as opposed to the traditional very analytical approach. Surely, bridge spotters are behind these projects!

Combine these three kinds of opportunity seekers – the signal, trend and bridge spotters – and you have all you need for a strategic group without perhaps calling it this. But even if some people are better than others at the 'opportunity is now here' approach, what really matters is

whether you have a Churchillian 'house of opportunity' that is going to shape everybody on the payroll.

I snow here

There is a third interpretation of the 'opportunity is nowhere' test. If you read it as 'I snow here', then you may be exhibiting some early symptoms of business fatigue and may benefit better from a shrink than from a strategy consultant. You know, at first, one starts snowing, then raining and finally one is all the seasons in one afternoon. M

Further reading

Elliott Jaques. *Requisite Organisation: A total system for effective managerial organisation and managerial leadership for the 21st Century*. Cason Hall & Co Pub, 1998.

Peter Checkland. *Systems Thinking, Systems Practice*. John Wiley & Sons, 1999.

Peter Senge. *The Fifth Discipline: The art and practice of the learning organisation*. Currency/Doubleday, 1994.

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