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Priorities for building organizational infrastructure

Do your eyes glaze over when people talk about organizational infrastructure? You're not alone. For many of us, the thrill of leadership comes from inventing products, seizing opportunities and anticipating consumer needs. Yet, building infrastructure

GUEST COLUMN

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is like going to the doctor: You can survive without it, but you'll be better for it.

Infrastructure is especially important for young organizations looking to move to the next level. Young organizations typically overflow with passion and innovation. The organization probably started with a passionate vision, like the idea of a simple navigation tool for an increasingly complex Internet that catapulted Yahoo to success. Early innovators may have developed products in a garage, as did Apple Computer Inc. founders Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak with the first Apple computer. These patterns were necessary for growing the organization.

But now, as the company matures, are youthful patterns encouraging inconsistent customer service? Maybe tasks are falling through the cracks because it's not clear who is responsible for what. Or perhaps people waste time reinventing the product development process for each customer.

Organization infrastructure links goals, activities and people through planned processes and systems. Most likely, you have infrastructure to support your finances because the IRS insists upon it. What many young companies lack is infrastructure to support process and performance.

To build process infrastructure, start with the obvious: What product or service do you provide to the customer. Then back up to the very beginning: what materials, data, ideas, or supplies do you use to create that product or service?

The next step is where it can get complicated, but is also where organizations find value. Bring together representatives from each stage of the development process to map the steps that take the product from raw material to customer. If they resist (as they might, since young organizations enjoy their flexibility and often reject attempts to standardize), take the steps up one level.

Defining high-level activities provides people with a common understanding of how work gets done. Better yet, the organization gains efficiency and consistency that customers appreciate.

After identifying and validating internal processes, you can build performance infrastructure to support employee achievement. You probably have high-level annual goals for your organization. But how well do those high-level goals connect to your processes and people?

Seagate Technology, a pioneer in hard drive development, built a best-in-class system that links the entire organization around a common set of goals. Seagate's senior executives come together to review goals and make sure that initiatives are aligned. Then, the executives cascade the goals through the organization to individual levels.

Your organization doesn't need to have sales of $7 billion like Seagate to benefit from this kind of system. Begin by bringing together your top leadership to set high-level goals. Then connect those goals to your process.

Finally, cascade the goals to every employee so that everyone understands how they help contribute to the big picture. By doing so, you'll trace a clear line from each individual to corporate goals and assure that you're well positioned to achieve every strategy.

The last step is to monitor and manage goals throughout the year. Some companies set goals in January and then forget about them until December. Don't let this happen in your company.

Every large company begins small, and every one needs infrastructure. If you want your company to shift out of survival mode and take the next step toward becoming a Yahoo, Apple, or Seagate, build the organizational infrastructure to support your growth.

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