

NEW WAYS OF WORKING SHAKING UP CORPORATE CULTURE AND MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

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Against a background of complexity, uncertainty, and the accelerated transformation of business models, today, putting in place “New Ways of Working” appears to be a highly attractive option for many companies. The purpose of these NWoW is to achieve sustainable performance, i.e. performance based on ongoing innovation which creates value and strong employee commitment.

There is no single formula for taking action in this area. Here we set out the building blocks of a dynamic aimed at “shaking up corporate culture and management practices”. In addition, we set out two other types of dynamic: “Putting in place corporate hacking” and “activating the NWoW-ready environment”.

Shaking up culture and management practices consists of an approach that combines a theoretical framework based on conceptual alternatives, with its operational outworking in both individual and collective practices. We believe that transformation is so important that a theoretical starting point is required in order to step back and better understand the changes that will need to be implemented. Overall, this means gaining an awareness of the fundamental principles of NWoW by using a set of conceptual alternatives, and then designing your own practices starting by reformulating these concepts to suit the particular business environment you're operating in.

TO ILLUSTRATE THIS, WE HIGHLIGHT SIX CONCEPTUAL ALTERNATIVES

Let's start with the vertical/horizontal alternative: the one most frequently cited when discussing NWoW.



VERTICAL MEANS :

- Following management's instructions
- Seeking to answer their questions
- Doing work that meets the needs of the management hierarchy
- Focusing on your business unit or silo



HORIZONTAL MEANS :

- Demonstrating added value for others
- Seeking to answer others' questions
 - Being prepared to be judged by others
 - Breaking down silos decompartmentalizing
 - Letting go and trust

It's not so much about dismantling the vertical as about finding the right balance between the vertical and horizontal, something that presupposes the existence of a strong horizontal dimension, "independent" of hierarchical control. The development of communities of practices, for example, maps perfectly onto such a balance. When managers engaged in NWoW say, "don't expect me to arbitrate; figure out the solutions among yourselves," they mean it in a way that is both provocative and exemplary..

The horizontal naturally leads on to the whole area of relations with others and the confidential/transparent alternative.



CONFIDENTIAL IS :

- Staying in the private space of an individual office
- Disseminating information on a need-to-know basis
- Limiting responsibility to individual territories
- Focusing on the internal



TRANSPARENT IS :

- Sharing physical and virtual spaces
- Sharing information openly
- Focusing on common objectives
- Being open to the outside world

This is a highly complex area because it can lead to excessive transparency, and the opposite results to those intended. Openness and transparency presuppose mutual trust, which is gradually strengthened as everyone sees that their contributions are valued and used. Creating the right conditions for such trust — and developing it — are clearly among the first steps that NWoW managers need to take.

Like the vertical/horizontal alternative, the planning/acting alternative is frequently cited too, especially by those seeking to develop the activities of start-ups.



PLANNING IS :

- Preparing, preparing, preparing... before acting
- Defining a target and a detailed action plan
- Centering on risks
- Filtering by ROI
- Focusing on "what's required"
- Defining and controlling responsibilities



ACTING IS :

- Trying things out and learning lessons (Test & Learn)
- Centering on opportunities
- Welcoming the unforeseen, the serendipity
- Filtering by "acceptable losses"
- Focusing on facts and their potential
- Mobilizing and providing momentum

While the days of detailed, five-year strategic plans are long gone, many companies continue to put more effort, and brain power, into planning than action. NWoW takes the opposite stance, starting with action, and then learning from what this produces. Such a focus doesn't rule out identifying and managing risks, or developing action plans, but, instead, uses them in a decidedly pragmatic manner.

The digital era is ushering in an explosion in data. Using this data well is essential, if companies are to derive value from it. This requirement leads us on to the certainty/movement alternative.



CERTAINTY IS :

- Being exhaustive
- Investing in up-to-date “inventories”
- Seeking to reach the “best”
- Focusing on the foreseeable
- Using the past to predict the future



MOVEMENT IS :

- Being agile
- Concentrating on the latest information
- Targeting what’s useful, what’s “good”
- Focusing on both the present and the future

All of us can think of very significant investments made in updating “inventories” (for example databases) or to the generation of detailed forecasts... And, the fact that, once the update or forecast had been completed, the realization that the work was of little use because the environment had changed. Of course, this certainty/movement alternative goes beyond the issue of deriving value from data; it’s about a wider mindset whose focus is on the future and moving things forward.

The formal/informal alternative is also frequently talked about by those who seek to build on the activities of start-ups, something we think should be considered in terms of ways of thinking and production.



FORMAL IS :

- Focusing on rigor, scientific thinking, and rationalism
- Writing and producing documented “deliverables”
- Working at a desk



INFORMAL IS :

- Integrating and displaying diversity, the discrepancy
- Allowing the space to be playful
- Illustrating, using images and videos
- Mobile working

The idea of “Cartesian certainty” has long been questioned, but we often find it difficult to move beyond it, which is just what NWoW invites us to do.

Infographics and videos are seeing massive development as standard communications tools, and there is much to be gained from more and better use of them. We’ve known for a long time that people only retain about 10% of what they hear, so the key to communication is clearly not quantity, but quality... in both form and substance.

A final alternative provides the opportunity to explore an even more personal dimension: the mask/wholeness alternative, which stresses a very ambitious vision of NWoW.



THE MASK IS :

- Creating a “facade” within the expected norms and playing the expected “role”
- Strictly compartmentalizing your worlds (especially personal/work life)
- Relying on “administered” management
- Being on your guard



WHOLENESS IS :

- Sharing your emotions and feelings
- Being authentic and fully yourself
- Integrating your worlds (especially work/personal life)
- Managing your “personal brand”
- Having confidence; inspiring confidence

Researchers who have plumbed the depths of the factors that affect team commitment stress the importance of “happiness at work”. We all know people who are totally different at work and at home (perhaps even ourselves). Where this is purely mechanical, such distancing doesn’t pose a problem, yet it limits the degree of commitment, something that would be strengthened if “being” and “doing” were harmonized.

For such people, NWoW can be perceived as deeply invasive and disturbing. As with the confidential/transparent alternative, there’s a need to be tactful to avoid negative effects, especially in terms of new interactions between personal and work life.



The approach we propose to shake up culture and management practices is to encourage groups to step back from their beliefs and to imagine new approaches inspired by these NWoW conceptual alternatives

While drawing on concepts represents a use of theory, in the round, the approach is highly pragmatic. Its focus is on the concrete situations faced by the people involved.

Let's consider three examples.

THE MANAGEMENT PROJECT

We are in the operational function within a large organization; it's facing uncertainty from the complex business environment it operates in and internal pressure as a result of business performance. The management decides to pursue a "management project": but what will it look like? Defining a target and trajectory, detailing them in specific action plans with indicators for steering, and then monitoring their progress?... Or, sharing the issues as widely as possible, building a compelling vision, launching initiatives to move people towards the vision, then steering things — step-by-step — building on the successes experienced? There are a number of key success factors in this second option:

- / Taking the time to share the challenges, and finding out, especially by way of first-hand accounts, the experiences of other organizations.
- / Investing in people's understanding of, and commitment to, the vision — by bringing it alive to make it as compelling as possible.
- / Facilitating individuals' (or groups') taking of the initiative to drive change — by drastically lowering the degree of approval needed. The stronger the level of buy into the vision achieved, the greater the likelihood that those in the field will act autonomously to bring about changes, in coordination with all the relevant stakeholders.
- / Pinpointing and highlighting successes.

ONGOING OPERATIONS IN A FUNCTION

We're working in an operational function, and the following question arises: how can we innovate in order to continuously optimize the performance of the services delivered? The manager of the service, who's interested in the NWoW, decides to "hand the keys" to their employees. Two seminars are used to generate thinking on the opportunities and risks of typical NWoW approaches, and then to define the broad lines of new ways of implementing them.

In concrete terms, the company adopts two main approaches:

- / First, the creation of three task forces responsible for day-to-day decision-making with respect to the key management levers: budget management, HR management, and team building. Each task force comprises a team which designates its own leader. The framework is set by the manager at the beginning of each six-monthly period; and then the task force is free to make its own decisions without management approval.
- / Second, a process for steering actions, inspired by Agile approaches, is put in place. Investments are made in energizing those working on the initiatives and the creation of a first backlog of actions, followed by eight-week sprints. At the beginning of each sprint, a kick-off with initiative champions takes place in order to support the production commitments at the end of the sprint, and to engage all those involved. Note that the first sprint does not cover all the actions in the backlog. At the end of the sprint, there is a review of what's been produced and ways of working, the backlog of actions is updated, and a commitment to a new sprint is made.

THE ROLE OF THE NWO MANAGER

We're working within a cross-functional management framework, and the important question is: how can we reinforce commitment and cooperation between teams? Management has a high degree of expectation, but is not really directly involved. A project manager is appointed to hold this tension. Initially, they increase the scope for inspiration using internal and external feedback, and then set up (using a training budget) NWoW co-construction workshops that are tailored to the particular needs of the organization. These workshops bring together managers from the company's various activities and focus on manager-employee relationships. They take place in three stages: role plays to test what the conceptual NWoW alternatives can offer; brainstorming to imagine new practices that can address typical scenarios in manager-employee relationships (the brief for a new project, objective setting, team meetings, etc.); and, more detailed work and preparation to implement 30 new practices that the group will select.

One year after the initiative, the feedback is positive, but the management remains a spectator, which limits the extent to which the new practices can be adopted. The project manager commits to preparing a seminar involving the executive committee, in order to share the initiative's results, and invests time in interacting with other leaders in the business to encourage executive committee members to engage personally. Watch this space!

Over to you to shake up your own culture and management practices!

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