

Strategic Distraction

The Consequence of Neglecting Organizational Design

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It seems that something happens to the concept of design during transition from the worlds of architecture, manufacturing, and engineering to the realm of organizational leadership. The clear principles of design that give it a revered position as foundational to success in the technical world are somehow lost when the focus shifts away from schematics and micrometer tolerances. Instead of embracing a discipline that brings precision and aligns organizational actions, one finds that its exacting standards often become blurred to the point that organizational design loses its significance. This devaluation results in leaders' failure to fully implement and execute organizational design, which leaves their institutions vulnerable to strategic distraction and misalignment. Even the Department of Defense (DOD), with its penchant for exactitude, has fallen prey to this neglect of organizational design and is suffering the consequences. A renewed understanding of such design is essential to ensuring that military and civilian leaders embrace and execute this critical process, thereby preventing strategic distraction.

What's Wrong?

In a scathing critique, Prof. Bernard Finel of the Naval War College argues that the "focus on the now" by former secretary of defense Robert Gates and his "failure to act strategically has left the Defense Department weakened and in disarray."¹ He attributes the secretary's shortfalls to the fact that his approach

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“was dominated by his inbox.”² Without the corrective emphasis on design within the organization, the DOD has begun what many individuals deem a decade-long “strategic honeymoon” in which political pressures and a myopic focus on current operations have led to the neglect of future plans. The gradual cessation of hostilities in the Middle East and severe budgetary pressures are now bringing this negligence to light. The absence of a clear strategy for approaching existing and emerging threats with available resources and the hollow nature of the Quadrennial Defense Review as an aligning mechanism have created a precarious situation. Although America’s wars may seem a worthy distraction, the country cannot afford to have its most senior leaders spending significant amounts of their time worried about the acquisition and movement of mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicles to Afghanistan or the number of water bottles on pallets heading to Haiti for earthquake relief. The essence of organizational design demands that leaders at each level of the organization understand and assume the responsibilities associated with that level.

Seeking Clarity

Sufficient comprehension of the role of organizational design and the hazards of its neglect calls for mastering several key concepts. Thanks to the complexity of the English language, much of the confusion with design comes from the term itself. In a bizarre arrangement, *design* addresses the intent of the process, the process itself, and its desired outcome. That is, the organizational leader has a design (intent) to design (plan, process) the design (product, structure). This confusion has created a situation in which no generally accepted definition of *design* exists, and the term has different connotations in different fields.³ Despite this lack of clarity, great leaders continue to describe design as an essential element of organizational success. The late Steve Jobs referred to design as “the fundamental soul of a man-made creation that ends up expressing itself in successive outer layers of the product or service.”⁴ To compound this emphasis, Tom Peters argues that “the dumbest mistake is viewing design as something you do at the end of the process to ‘tidy up’ the mess, as opposed to understanding that it’s a ‘day one’ issue and part of everything.”⁵

Design appears in a number of managerial texts but often with shockingly little depth. Take for example Richard Daft’s capstone text *Organization Theory and Design*. One might consider this study a treasure trove of design information, yet the author often seems deliberately to avoid addressing the topic directly. His rather expansive glossary includes no definition of design, and, despite hundreds of textual references to the term, only one minor sentence 60 pages into the text

provides any explanation of it: “Organization design is the administration and execution of the strategic plan.”⁶ This delayed and obscured explanation is unfortunate because a perfect presentation of the concept appears almost 50 pages earlier. Without clearly identifying it as his core concept, Daft explains design as the actions by which “managers deliberately structure and coordinate organizational resources to achieve the organization’s purpose.”⁷ This statement, which captures the enduring intentionality of design and its role in driving structure and resources toward the purpose, seems to embody the essence of organization design. Daft does supply a valuable depiction of what he terms “the structural and contextual dimensions of design” but fails to sustain the emphasis of those three pages in the following 500.⁸

Unfortunately, Daft is not alone in his mistreatment of the design concept. The otherwise marvelous text *Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience* by Richard Hughes, Robert Ginnett, and Gordon Curphy of the Center for Creative Leadership addresses design for the first time two-thirds of the way into the discussion—and then only as a synonym for *organizational structure*. The authors treat design not as an active process but as a collection of characteristics—complexity, formalization, and centralization.⁹ Even Bernard Bass’s tome on leadership deals with the concept directly only twice, briefly discussing its structural aspects.¹⁰

In Jay Galbraith’s *Designing Organizations*, yet again the reader is treated to a game of hide-and-seek with the concept. One finds his best attempt to address design in the blurb on the dust jacket. There he includes an indirect reference to the book as “a leader’s concise guide to the process of creating and managing an organization—no matter how complex—that will be positioned to respond effectively and rapidly to customer demands and have the ability to achieve unique competitive advantage.”¹¹ This definition captures the multidimensional nature of design and its importance to success, but one finds it nowhere in the actual text. Only late in the discussion of the concept does Galbraith note that “organization design is a process; it is a continuous process and not a single event. . . . Leaders must learn to think of organize as a verb, an action verb.”¹² Unfortunately, he immediately clouds the idea by replacing *design* in the next sentence with the term *organizing* and fails to distinguish between them.

Given the pervasive mistreatment of the term and the associated confusion it creates, the managerial tool kits of many senior leaders understandably fail to appropriately include organizational design. For the purposes of this discussion, it encompasses leadership actions to structure and coordinate personnel, processes, and resources that fulfill the organization’s purpose. Having clarified design, the article now looks at a consequence that leaders should try to avoid.

Path to Distraction

Organizational distraction entails the misallocation of leadership's focus from important strategic issues to those less significant but more pressing, thus resulting in degraded organizational performance. Although a simple route, the path to such distraction comes in several forms—each beginning with partial understanding of the concept of design. Leaders grasp the latter's structural aspects but fail to connect design concepts to other processes. Other leaders establish initial connections to implement design across the organization but fail to view it as a continuous process, resulting in the emergence of alignment problems over time. The final path to distraction is trod by leaders who grasp the concept and understand the enduring nature of their responsibilities but abdicate their role because of the complexity associated with managing organizational design. In each case, the lack of an understanding of design leads to decreased emphasis on the concept and partial implementation. Leaders can avoid this pitfall by renewing their comprehension of the purpose of design.

Such avoidance may seem simple, but distraction is an insidious threat not easy to safeguard against, especially in today's semichaotic operating environment. By way of analogy, most drivers are well aware of the myriad distractions that can quickly create hazards for themselves, passengers, and others on the road. This awareness allows responsible drivers to take actions to mitigate those distractions—at least the ones they can control. This leaves a significant number that they must still guard against. Senior leaders face this same challenge in terms of attending to the important aspects of organizational activity.

Part of the genius of organizational design resides in the creation of clear operating responsibilities for the senior leader. This role definition lays out a distinct path to ensure that executives focus on the strategic dimensions of the organization and are not distracted by those assigned to other levels. However, today's operating environment exerts strong "downward pressures" that can drive the unwitting leader's attention away from strategic responsibilities and into operational or even tactical issues—a situation especially true for senior military leaders. The enticement of reverting to lower levels of leadership based on their previous experience becomes potentially overwhelming. In these cases, one of the first steps toward avoiding distraction involves recognition and awareness of these pressures.

Downward Pressures

Four significant pressures warrant leaders' consideration, the first of which is the availability of real-time information on all aspects of organizational activities,

including those at the lowest levels. Unless treated appropriately, access to this information by senior leaders can quickly divert their attention from concerns more appropriate to their position. The natural human fascination with “frontline” operations and the familiarity often resident in senior leaders who have experienced those activities create a significant source of distraction if safeguards of organizational design are not in place and enforced.

The same information technology that generates real-time internal distractions fuels the 24/7 global-media enterprise that can comprise a second source of downward pressure on leaders. Most organizations do not serve as topics for cable news discussions or business-magazine articles, but the advent of social media forums has created the “every man a journalist” culture. Strategic aspects of organizational vision and objectives probably will not go viral in this environment; however, lower-level policies and practices will likely engender significant attention and draw leadership to those levels. Additionally, the ever-present eye of external media fosters an attitude of self-protection that can drive the leader away from long-term strategic concentration and communication into a reactive cycle attuned to the latest hot topic.

The third downward pressure comes from internal performance pressure that accompanies the high-stakes nature of many organizational leadership positions. The military’s evaluation and promotion cycle feeds this short-term emphasis. The desire for quick victories and expectations of improvements to fleeting metrics drive leaders to a fascination with tactical details to the neglect of their strategic roles. Ironically, in seeking short-term gains, distracted leaders undermine the likelihood of long-term organizational success.

Finally, leaders are distracted by their own penchant for the tangible results and clarity rarely found in the boardroom (Pentagon conference rooms) but readily available on the production floor (operational squadrons). This personal pressure is exacerbated by enticements of real-time information and continuous scrutiny from higher echelons. Although leaders naturally desire day-to-day relevance, they must learn how to satisfy this need without abandoning their responsibilities as strategic guides for the organization. This neglect of essential leadership roles, induced by undue attention on internal or external issues not related to the strategic direction of the organization, represents the essence of strategic distraction. Leaders must become aware of this hazard and take action to prevent it.

Strategic Inversion

When properly implemented, design plays several critical roles for the organization. First, it is the guiding intent that frames the basic path that the organi-

zation will follow. The design concept espoused by the founder or leading coalition provides the fundamental context for decision making and sets the benchmark for aligning the organization. Second, the design process, as a source of continuous refinement, coordinates or synchronizes the basic design elements of structure, process, incentives, and personnel. Galbraith calls the result of this coordination “strategic fit,” which occurs when all of the design elements “are aligned with the strategy and reinforce one another. A strategic fit means effectiveness because congruence among the policies sends a clear and consistent signal to organization members and guides their behavior.”¹³ Finally, design acts as the objective or end state for the organization to target. In this aspect, it becomes the strategic goal that helps keep the leader’s attention on long-term results and sustainability. Each of these aspects of design must be implemented and sustained to counteract downward pressures and their adverse effects on organizational alignment.

The consequences of abdicating responsibility for strategic design are rarely immediate due to the natural inertia of an organization, but the results soon manifest themselves in organizational performance as flaws in alignment become apparent. The DOD, an agency renowned for its disciplined strategic focus and processes, has become a case study for the consequences of neglecting or misapplying design. The personalities, politics, and operational pressures of two major conflicts have created the potential for a strategic inversion in the department. In a fascinating twist driven by technology and media, some of the most junior enlisted members execute tactical actions that produce strategic effects on the front lines. The resulting media attention pressures some of the most senior officers to delve into tactical minutiae through the portals of worldwide surveillance and global communications. Thus, the clear demarcations among tactical, operational, and strategic roles blur, and the organizational pyramid can become inverted. Without proper restraint, the continuous stream of information back to Washington can feed an infatuation with operational and tactical details that distract from strategic responsibilities.

Succeeding by Design

The success of either the DOD or a much smaller organization depends upon ensuring that leadership understands and implements the basic aspects of design. Any leader seeking to walk this path should start by clearly defining the concept. The following definition offers a useful starting point: design is “a strategic approach that defines the plans, parameters, processes and actions within a specific context and its constraints to realize a desired outcome.” Next, leaders need to think of design as a unique change lever available all of the time and at

multiple levels throughout the organization.¹⁴ As such, it should be an active part of all leadership conversations. Lastly, design should emerge as the direct product of a well-developed strategy, executed through the four primary design elements that protect against strategic distraction: structure, process, incentives, and personnel.¹⁵

Before properly executing the design elements, one must establish a relationship between organizational strategy and design. In a proper connection, these two form a symbiotic relationship wherein design both flows from and informs the organizational strategy. As the foundational concept, design shapes the range of possible strategy options. Once selected, the strategy guides the design process through adjustment of the key managerial levers. As the organization moves forward, a robust design process supplies feedback to strategic-planning efforts and shapes adjustments to the future strategy. Leaders must maintain clarity between these two important concepts in order to ensure fulfillment of each role and sustenance of their complementary nature.

After determining the strategic direction, one can fold design into each of the previously mentioned areas; collectively, they will form an institutional safeguard against strategic distraction. Although the efforts across the organization occur simultaneously, for clarity the article addresses them sequentially, starting with structure.

Organizational structure, the most visible manifestation of the design process, is often treated as synonymous with design. In fact, design is the metaconcept that applies to all organizational aspects whereas structure primarily involves the distribution of power within the organization as well as the size and nature of operations conducted by the organization. Creation of an appropriate structure acts as an important preventive against strategic distraction because it aligns individuals with lanes of authority and responsibilities and establishes habitual relationships between those persons at different levels. Although not sufficient alone, a well-designed structure is an important initial barrier for maintaining organizational alignment.

Despite all of the attention usually paid to structure, Galbraith claims that “most design efforts invest far too much time drawing the organization chart and far too little on processes and rewards.”¹⁶ This critique is important because structure provides only the starting point for organizational execution. The day-to-day processes and incentives drive performance and foster an organizational culture. Through incentives, design efforts can ensure the success of strategic processes and the elimination of a singular concern with short-term achievements. One can tailor incentives to guarantee that performance cultivates organizational alignment as well as “the bottom line.” Similarly, organizational processes must be

designed to support strategy, structure, and incentives. Process design also helps ensure the execution of recurring validations of strategic alignment. Establishment of processes that repeatedly cycle back to the foundational design and strategy will make the organization both synchronized and adaptive to a changing environment.

The final lever of design implementation involves the organization's most valuable resource—its people. The transitory nature of some employees forces leaders not to depend too much on them for guarding against strategic distraction, but leadership can do a great deal through job descriptions, role definitions, and reporting responsibilities that go well beyond any particular individual. Implementing design through employees calls for deliberate hiring processes, robust developmental programs, and focused evaluation systems. Design in personnel requires that those who directly affect operations clearly grasp the intent of the organization and their role in ensuring its success.

Conclusion

Not a difficult process, the proper implementation of design must nevertheless be deliberate and continuous to produce the desired result of driving the organization forward and helping it avoid the perils of strategic distraction and misalignment. Senior leaders execute design as one of their strategic functions, but often they apply it only at the surface. The lack of thorough integration causes an organization to constantly pull the leader's view downward. Without appropriate safeguards or leadership intervention, institutional pressures undermine effective organizational design and drive misalignment. In the absence of rigorous design efforts, senior leaders become distracted from their strategic roles and succumb to the pressures of the tactical level. They must remain aware of this downward pull and ensure that organizational design goes beyond structural considerations and into all aspects of daily execution.

Notes

1. Bernard I. Finel, "The Failed Secretary," *Armed Forces Journal* 149, no. 2 (September 2011): 25.
2. *Ibid.*, 26.
3. Paul Ralph and Yair Wand, "A Proposal for a Formal Definition of the Design Concept," in *Design Requirements Engineering: A Ten-Year Perspective*, LNBI 14, ed. Kalle Lyytinen et al. (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2009), 103–36.
4. Steve Jobs, "Apple's One-Dollar-a-Year Man," *Fortune*, 24 January 2000, http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2000/01/24/272277/index.htm.
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6. Richard L. Daft, *Organization Theory and Design*, 10th ed. (Mason, OH: South-Western Cengage Learning, 2010), 59.
7. Ibid., 11.
8. Ibid., 14–18.
9. Richard L. Hughes, Robert C. Ginnett, and Gordon J. Curphy, *Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience* (Homewood, IL: Irwin, 1993), 323.
10. Bernard M. Bass with Ruth Bass, *The Bass Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research, and Managerial Applications*, 4th ed. (New York: Free Press, 2008), 294–95, 738–39.
11. Jay R. Galbraith, *Designing Organizations: An Executive Guide to Strategy, Structure and Process*, new and rev. ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).
12. Ibid., 154.
13. Ibid., 171.
14. David A. Nadler and Michael L. Tushman with Mark B. Nadler, *Competing by Design: The Power of Organizational Architecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 11.
15. Galbraith, *Designing Organizations*, 10.
16. Ibid., 14.