

Forgotten Questions on Purpose and Method That Provide Leadership Insight into Any Organization

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Abstract

Much has been written about use of Purpose, Vision, Values, objectives, and key performance indicators to build strategy and inspire workers and stakeholders with the aspirations of an organization. This conceptual commentary revisits two questions emphasized by leading 20th century management thinker, W E Deming, which he devised to enable leaders to examine the actual focus and priorities found in their organization, which may be different to those leaders' intended or hoped-for ambitions. Deming's questions unearth true preferences, habits, norms, and competencies, thereby identifying the culture that influences technical aspects of work, its subsequent outputs, and ultimately the organization's results. The questions apply to industrial, commercial, educational, public service, or third sector organizations. Subsequent analysis will enable leaders to revisit what work is actually undertaken, whether it is appropriate, and what that means for the organization. Leaders may then pursue work-focused operational changes which will directly impact results to truly deliver organizational intentions.

Keywords

Purpose, Vision, Operations, Strategy, Culture, Change, Systems Theory

1. Introduction

This conceptual commentary explores how leaders can develop a purposeful organization by examining methods applied in work. Drawing on the authors' professional insights, including knowledge from literature and practice, the commentary considers how to unpick organizational culture through systems thinking.

Plenty has been written about how leaders define, organize and shape priorities in their organizations, with a repeating theme concerning alignment of organizational aims with actual activity, deliverables and results (Oakland, 2000: pp. 245-249; Coppin & Barratt, 2002: pp. 46-47; Kouzes & Posner, 2007: pp. 16-21; Bennis, 2009: p. 163). Contemporary literature often presents statements of Mission, Vision and Values as components of organizational design for aligning outcomes to leaders' aspirations, with vision-building and visionary leadership emphasized as key areas of competence (Senge, 1990: pp. 213-220; Kouzes & Posner, 2007: pp. 103-156; Bennis, 2009: pp. 192-194; Boyatzis, Rochford, & Taylor, 2014; Kouzes & Posner, 2009; Black, 2021). However, ostensibly common terms like Mission, Purpose and Vision are used differently even by commentators as well-known as Drucker (1994), Senge (1990: pp. 147-150) and Kouzes and Posner (2007: p. 5). Since several of these concepts are discussed hereafter, they are defined for consistency as follows: "Purpose" is considered an enduring reason for the organization's existence, essentially what it is here to do (Seddon, 2005: p. 49, 154), "Mission" is a similar notion but carries a shorter-term current focus (Drucker, 1994); "Vision" is the intended, inspiring future-state of the organization (Senge, 1990: p. 209); "Objectives" are specific, measurable, and time-bound milestones required to achieve a defined need or aspiration (Doran, 1981); "Method" is the approach taken (the process of work) which achieves outcomes (relating to purpose) and thereby how an instruction is carried out in practice (Deming, 1986: pp. 69-70; Seddon, 2005: p. 62).

Unsurprisingly, the context of any organization shapes its focus and characterizes how people are engaged, all of which are embodied in working practices. For example, a commercial organization which offers products or services to defined markets, should be customer-focused (Peters & Waterman, 1982: pp. 156-199). Public service institutions (including health, education and social services) will focus on the needs of various segments of user communities relative to societal challenges, such as employment, demographics, economics, and engagement of public policy (Seddon, 2005: p. 213). In contrast, wildlife conservation organizations often operate in ambiguous conditions (Faucheux & Froger, 1995; Black & Copsey, 2014) so must remain grounded in their priorities whilst taking adaptive action (e.g. accommodating unknown risks despite meagre evidence). Faith organizations have a quite different focus, as in Baptist churches (Black, 2023) where people's interests centre on living, demonstrating, and communicating the Christian gospel. Despite varied contexts of each organisation, its "reason for existence" (*raison d'être*) is a primary concern, and contemporary management literature labels this as organizational "Purpose".

Discussions and research on purpose remain less common than those concerning vision (Senge, 1990: pp. 205-232, 274-276; Coppin & Barratt, 2002: pp. 45-48, 71-72; Seddon, 2005: p. 49, 154; Black & Copsey, 2014; Hollensbe et al., 2014). The most high-profile advocate of purposeful organizations was W Edwards Deming who included "constancy of purpose" as the first of his 14 points for management

(Deming, 1986: pp. 24-26). This review briefly revisits Deming's value for organizational purpose, but more importantly reflects on a forgotten leadership question which tests whether purpose is accurately reflected in the realities of organizational practice.

2. How Leaders Define Organizational Focus and Priorities

Typically, leaders establish organizational focus through a combination of aims, objectives and strategies, often augmented by "critical success factors", "key performance indicators" and other measures and metrics (Oakland, 2000: pp. 245-249; Coppin & Barratt, 2002: p.47). Such hierarchical approaches echo the assumptions found in early 20th century "scientific management" formalized by Frederick Taylor (similar ideas were made famous by Henry Ford and Alfred Sloan), which still perpetuate modern organizations and ideas promoted by some management consultants and business schools (Seddon, 2005: p. 9, 66; Jacobs, 2009: pp. 70-73, 86-89). The same rationale suggests that organizational mechanisms (i.e. management actions) ensure smooth delivery of aims into operational work and therefore results, however research demonstrates that organizational culture also has an impact (Prajogo & McDermott, 2011). Furthermore, mechanistic thinking is flawed in assuming that intervening decisions about focus, time, priorities, effort and standards are linear and based on intention, when real organizations are complex (Churchman, 1968: pp. 17-18; Deming, 1994: pp. 30-31, 96; Seddon & O'Donovan, 2023) and their context is often messy, or complicated by "wicked" problems (Grewatsch, Kennedy & Bansal, 2023).

A further difficulty is the variability of intentions of everyone in an organization (which are usually unknown or unknowable; Deming, 1986: pp. 121-124). Psychological theory also indicates that people's individual intentions have marginal influence on actual behavior (e.g. theory of planned behavior; Ajzen, 1991). Overall, unpredictability in people's motivation relates to interactions with others, and these dynamics are one complicating element of organizational culture.

Systems Theory provides better explanations of how numerous interdependencies, interactions, consequences and dynamics arise within organizations, and how these factors influence people's interpretation of aims and outcomes, often in unintended or unexpected ways (Bertalanffy, 1969: pp. 31-34; Meadows, 2008: pp. 86-110; Deming, 1994: pp. 96-98; Grewatsch, Kennedy & Bansal, 2023).

Systems Theory also shows that there are no cultural (i.e. behavioral or motivational) or mechanistic (i.e. technical or organizational) ways to ensure that leaders' aspirations can be progressed through management communication into operational outcomes. Instead, in order to improve work outputs, leaders should (alongside people doing the work) explore improvement of the capability of the system to improve work outputs (Deming, 1986: pp. 321, 339-340; Seddon, 2005: pp. 70-74; Seddon & O'Donovan, 2023). This seems somewhat obvious but systemic improvement of work design often appears to be forgotten by modern leaders as a lever for change.

To better understand systemic issues, Deming offers two crucial questions, which establish the most important identifiers of any organization. The first question concerning purpose is familiar, although often hard to meaningfully answer. The second question is rarely asked, but operationally even more fundamental.

2.1. The First, Familiar Question: “What Is Our Purpose?”

An organization’s purpose statement communicates its reason for existence, its *raison d’être*. It is worth briefly mentioning that “Purpose” is often conflated with ideas of “Mission”. In simple terms, notions of “Mission” tend to have a shorter-term focus, such as NASA’s “to put a man on the moon...” (Senge, 1990: p. 149) which lasted less than a decade, while a “Purpose” is more enduring, for example the Durrell Wildlife Conservation charity is still, “saving species from extinction” (Young et al., 2014).

A number of authors emphasize the importance of clarifying purpose (Deming 1986: p. 156; Seddon, 2005: p. 109; Black, 2015a) ahead of vision, since purpose allows a clearer focus upon the work (i.e. operations of the organization). In essence the point is: “*to create constancy of purpose in order for the management system to help the organization succeed*” (Hunter, 2015). Deming himself placed this responsibility on leaders: “*Do all employees of your company know about this stated constancy of purpose (raison d’être), if you have formulated one?*” (Deming, 1986: p. 156). Deming’s request is not about communication, but rather about operationalizing a shared sense of purpose; making it happen. The best purpose statements allow anyone, whether executive or factory-floor worker, to test the rationale of decisions or tasks, namely: will this enable us to achieve our purpose? (Seddon, 2005: p. 154; Black, 2015a).

Nevertheless, a well-crafted purpose statement may be self-evident and unarguable, yet be undermined by working practices (Black & Copsey, 2014); noble words in a purpose statement may not transfer into reality at work. This is a potential headache for leaders: how do we get people to follow the organization’s purpose, to be purposeful in their work? However, this is an incorrect line of leadership enquiry, since this thinking fails to consider and explore the organization as a system.

Instead, the relevance of a purpose statement (and the reality of its implementation in the real world of work) can only be determined by asking the second key question set by Deming, which forces proper examination of the organization as a system to identify real, current purposes of people demonstrated in work (Deming, 1994: p. 41).

2.2. The Second, Forgotten Question “By What Method?”

The simplicity of Deming’s second question (Deming, 1986: pp. 19-20; Deming, 1994: p. 41, 43, 47) namely, “By what method?”, masks the fundamental power of its shift towards systems thinking. Guilfoyle (2014) is clear that: “*to see performance improvements you need to have an actual method for achieving them.*”

Yet Dr Deming's question "By what method?" is often ignored and certainly rarely mentioned in literature. In essence, the question cuts to the core of people's shared motivations, preferences, insecurities, prejudices, limits in thinking, competence, and focus (on self, or others), these in essence shaping the underlying culture that influences operations of the organization (Schein, 1984). In other words, do 'methods' reflect commitment to 'purpose', or do they simply reflect other things like established skills, expertise, preferences, or risk aversion? When an organization's leaders state its purpose, the question "by what method?" raises specific considerations for that organization's context. Different sectors encounter distinct lines of enquiry, such as:

- Do **manufacturing** processes reflect internal expertise or real market needs?
- Are **public service** channels actually helpful for its users in the community?
- Do **charitable activities** avoid difficult neighborhoods despite real needs?
- Does an **educational curriculum** reflect academics' interests or public need?
- Is a **business** pursuing a method because it has always done things that way?
- Do church **faith activities** fit tradition, or properly serve the wider community?

The above examples (from Womack & Jones, 2003: pp. 67-69; Seddon, 2005: p. 205; Seddon & O'Donovan, 2023; Black, 2015b; Drucker, 1994; Black, 2023) illustrate how methods reveal an organization's real purpose. Real purpose may actually reflect internal preference, comfort zones, competence, risk aversion, or tradition, and may be:

- i) a set of methods which are a good reflection of purpose.
- ii) obsolete or irrelevant methods incapable of delivering purpose.
- iii) methods that are a poor or contradictory reflection of the intended purpose.
- iv) misplaced intentions which "do wrong things right" (Seddon, 2005: p. 223).
- v) a reflection of external regulation, or other external stakeholder demands.
- vi) internal resource constraints, or difficult-to-replace legacy systems.

If leaders ask: "by what method?" with honesty and humility, they identify whether their organization is appropriately focused, or not, or whether its constraints are unavoidable (such as fixed legislative standards). As Hazy (2006) identifies, "*For a system of human interactions to be a complex adaptive system*" (i.e. an effective organizational culture) "*it must have two aspects. First, autonomous agents must interact in some form of coordinated action*" (which Deming calls "constancy of purpose") and "*Second, the agents and the socio-technical arrangements of agents, resources, tasks, and knowledge must change, and to the extent that they improve the system's ability to make use of the environment*" (consistent with Deming's question "by what method?").

In short, by exploring method (improvement by redesign) leaders identify changes to work which influence culture changes that are consistent with purpose. Where culture is contradictory to the stated purpose, addressing "method" seems counterintuitive (Meadows, 2008: pp. 145-147). Yet, as methods are changed by improved work design, and new measures of success, and different availability of resources or information (informed by feedback), those new psychological con-

trols influence the behavior of people within that system and thereby establish new norms (Ajzen, 1991).

The common alternative of setting arbitrary targets *without* considering method, such as “make 20% more”, “reduce errors”, “double sales this quarter” reflect a failure of leadership and may have opposite effects to what is intended (Deming, 1986: p. 69; Seddon, 2005: pp. 66-67). Attempts to improve results by simply raising expectations without addressing method reveals delusional or neglectful management. Instead, despite systemic change seeming complicated, it can be achieved by work re-design. Improved methods, focused on the desired purpose, will improve results.

3. Conclusion for Leaders

A fundamental skill-set for effective leaders is the ability to understand their organization as a system (Churchman, 1968: pp. 17-20; Bertalanffy, 1969: pp. 9-10; Deming, 1986: pp. 248-249; Deming, 1994: pp. 93-100; Meadows, 2008: pp. 4-6, 165-170; Seddon, 2005: p. 80). Purposeful leaders are less prone to ego-driven or other value-laden perspectives which subvert more helpful commitments (Black & Copsey, 2014; Wilson, 2017). Purposeful leaders also avoid expending effort and resources on activities misaligned with the principle focus of the organization. Leaders set the tone through their own behaviors and priorities (Kouzes & Posner, 2007: pp. 73-98). Deming’s questions offer clarity of examination, and simplicity in logic and explanation, to enable suitable leadership focus on systemic improvements to pursue desired results. If leaders align methods, with purpose, and enable people to do the right things more effectively, then the organization will benefit through improved performance, while a favourable culture change will also be enabled as a welcome bi-product.

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Author Contributions

Simon A. Black provided the conceptual review of literature and collaborated on practical framing of the definitions of Dr. Deming’s concepts, in particular with industrial, commercial, wildlife conservation, education and faith organizations.

Rachel J. Black reviewed literature relating to charitable (3rd sector), healthcare, education and public services, and provided illustrations and examples from those sectors, and practical framing of Dr. Deming’s concepts.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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