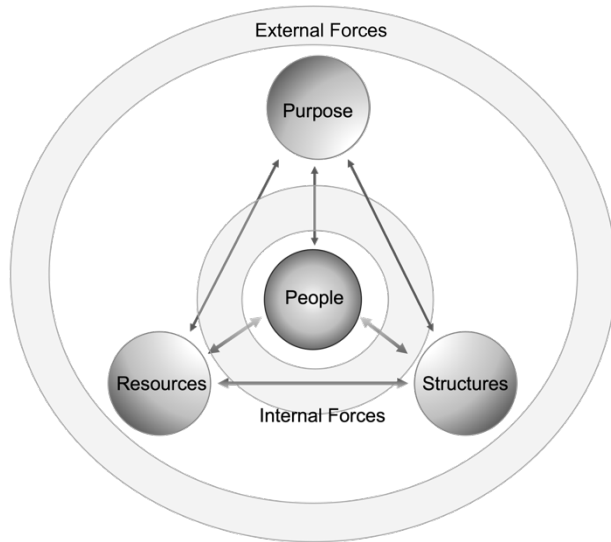


The Six Dimensions of Organizations



The Six Dimensions of Organizations is a conceptual framework for understanding how to improve organizational outcomes by focusing on organizational alignment. Like any conceptual framework, it is a simplistic representation of a complex phenomenon.

All organizations share four basic components: people, purpose, structures, and resources. In addition to the four basic components, external and internal forces make up the final two organizational dimensions.

Each of these dimensions can work with or against the others. When any component is out of alignment with the other components, friction is created. Friction inhibits organizational functioning and success. In a perfect organization, all elements are perfectly aligned. In the real world, every organization is misaligned in some way. In high performing organizations, the degree of misalignment is small. In struggling organizations, the degree of misalignment is high.

People

People are the individuals who work and live within the school. These are the actual people, regardless of their roles, who carry out the work of the school. People's uniqueness can enrich organizations, but they can also contribute to misalignment. People have agency and they have lives outside the organization. This combination of factors usually means people have their own purposes (yes, multiple) which may or may not align to those of the organization.

People's attributes:

- Knowledge
- Skills
- Dispositions
- Health

People have unique attributes which include knowledge, skills, dispositions, and health.

Knowledge is what people know. What they know about teaching, about students, about themselves, about leadership... about everything. We can also consider here what teachers don't know, as that can be as impactful as what they do know.

Skill is the ability of teachers to apply what they know. Skills do not reflect an exact correspondence with knowledge. A teacher may not be able to manage a classroom even though they know the components of good classroom procedures. Teachers may create safe and supportive classrooms which meet the needs of diverse learners even if they don't have training in diversity, equity, or inclusion.

Dispositions are attitudes and beliefs. They constitute how a person views their world, how they interpret the actions of others and the conditions of their environment. Dispositions have a strong influence on how knowledge and skills are used. A teacher who had been treated poorly by a previous administrator may have a negative disposition towards all administrators. A teacher caring for a terminally ill parent may prioritize supporting their parent over preparing for lessons. A teacher who believes they can make a difference with each student is likely to work to expand their knowledge and convert knowledge into skills.

Most importantly, people have health. This includes physical as well as social and emotional health. Health, in all its forms, influences the work people can do and, of course, the quality of their lives. As people become healthier, their capacity to grow and to act on their knowledge and skills expands. In my experience it also seems to be true that when we grow in knowledge and skill, our health is positively impacted.

“You win with people”
-Woody Hayes, football coach

People Before Purpose

My original model of the Six Dimensions prioritized purpose, with people, structures, and resources supporting the purpose. Emphasizing a “purpose-driven” organization is consistent with most of the literature on organizational improvement. Open any leadership text and you will be inundated with words like vision, mission, goals, and objectives. These are technical words, not human words. So, what made me move from a purpose to a people driven view?

Leaders have power over others, and therefore have an ethical obligation to care for the people they wield power over. This is certainly true for hierarchical leaders wielding legitimate power, but it is also true for non-hierarchical leaders wielding “softer” forms of power. In short, if I am willing to lead you, I must put your health and well-being at the forefront of my concerns.

On Halloween eve in 2020, my wife Pam lost her mother Margaret. Six weeks later her oldest brother Scott passed away at the age of 57. The previous two years had been a grueling heart-rending march to the end for both Margaret and Scott. Pam was exhausted, emotionally, and physically spent, and trying to cope with a huge hole in her life. And yet, she went to work every day and taught her students, graded assignments, and served on her committees. She showed up -but only partially. Only the part she could still bring forward. The rest of her was occupied, trying to make sense of and adapt to a world without her mother and brother.

During this time, I stood inside my wife’s personal life, and I watched her muddle through her outside work life. It was obvious that she wasn’t as good a teacher that semester. She wasn’t as good a colleague. She wasn’t as good at fulfilling the school’s mission. But none of that mattered. What mattered was her, and the road to healing. A purpose-driven leader would view poor performance as a problem. A people-driven leader would see that same performance

as part of the human journey and would focus on helping her make that journey in the best way possible.

During this period of mourning, Pam's student evaluations were lower, and had she been teaching a tested area in k-12 her students would surely have scored lower on the state assessment. This leads me to the final reason for putting people before purpose.

From my perspective we have convoluted the purpose of education. In our obsession to quantify student progress we have elevated things that can be easily measured, like facts and formulas, above things which are harder to measure such as agency, resiliency, and collaboration. We now make decisions based on numerical calculation instead of human ones. For example: with one reading intervention teacher who can take on 20 students, but having 50 students reading below grade level, who should receive the services? I have heard many school leaders say they focus on "bubble kids" – the students whose test scores are just below passing. The rationale is that improving those students' reading will increase test scores. This is a mathematical approach to addressing an ethical dilemma. Maybe you have made a similar choice? You can say that I don't understand the pressure or the expectations but that is exactly my point! The purpose has become distorted.

It seems to me that a more just way to structure our organizations is around the health and capacity of the people within the school. It is a way to escape the tyranny of numbers and it is a way to increase the meaning and power of our work as leaders.

People are at the heart of every organization and caring for people comes before everything else. This reinforces the understanding that the primary job of school leaders is to support and grow teachers, because when people have support and are growing, they become knowledgeable, skillful, efficacious, and healthy people. Those people drive a school's success. So, let's put people before purpose.

Purpose

Every school has a formal purpose, often found in the form of a mission statement. Typically, school mission statements include something about preparing global citizens who, as adults, have agency over their lives. In addition, many organizations have both stated and unstated purposes. Purposes may be visible, in which case everyone is aware of them—or hidden, in which case only some people are aware of them.

Further, different people may bring different purposes which will impact the other dimensions of the organization. Finally, organizations may have different purposes for internal and external audiences. Lack of clarity on purpose is a primary cause of misalignment. After all, if there are multiple purposes, which one are people supposed to focus on?

These multiple purposes influence what we do. I have already shared the example of how we allocate reading intervention support. Consider this scenario:

Imagine I'm the new principal of an elementary school. I work in a rural environment where it's typical for elementary principals get promoted to middle school, and middle school principals get promoted to high school. I really want to be the high school principal.

My purpose is to get myself promoted to the middle school as fast as I can. It may be not drive everything I do, but it will influence some of my decisions. I might be oversensitive to how my actions are viewed by the superintendent or district office expectations. Not necessarily a bad thing, but if there's a decision to make and maybe decision A is better for my elementary school, but Decision B looks better at District office, I may choose B because I have an alternative purpose.

This brings us back to people. At all levels of the school and district, people have their own purposes; those can either augment or stifle the school's official purpose.

Structures

Structures exist in three different forms:

- Physical structures include buildings, as well as the shape and arrangement of the rooms and furniture in those buildings. Physical structures play a critical role in shaping how people work, especially regarding community and hierarchy. Physical structures can promote or inhibit collaboration, increase, or decrease isolation, and flatten or exaggerate hierarchy.
- Legible or codified structures are the written policies, procedures, and legal requirements which influence and shape our work. I refer to them as legible because they are written and visible.
- Intangible structures are the expectations, rituals, and routines which are not formally codified but nonetheless exist. They exist in verbal form. They exist in the stories we tell, the praise we give, the expectations we hold, and the rituals we observe.

All these structures shape and give form to how we do our work. When these structures are closely aligned to the purpose of the school, they make it easier for the people to work towards achieving the purpose of the school. If the structures are misaligned to the purpose, then the structures make it harder for people to do the work to fulfill the school's purpose.

Structures have a heavy influence on people, in both subtle and obvious ways. Structures can make it easier for people to use their knowledge and skills, or structures can impose barriers.

A tangible example of how structures influence school environments can be seen in how the remnants of industrial schooling practices create barriers to our modern

expectations for teaching and learning. Expectations for students to be college ready and to be independent and creative thinkers requires different ways of teaching, but the physical structures and to a large extent the codified structures haven't substantively changed over the past 100 years. In many places, the purpose of school is fundamentally at odds with the structures and the policies in place.

Resources

Resources come in two different forms. Dynamic and static.

Dynamic resources can change over time. Dynamic resources include knowledge and skills, money, and stuff. Each person in the organization brings with them a unique combination of knowledge and skills. Money is the amount of purchasing power an organization has. Stuff is all the tangible assets such as furniture, buses, books, and computers.

People can learn and grow, thereby increasing their knowledge and skills available to the organization. The amount of money a school has access to changes over time. For example, by passing a local sales tax or having the state cut educational spending. The amount and type of stuff we have also changes over time based on what we purchase and what breaks, gets used, or becomes obsolete. For example, most schools have many more computers and technological tools now than they did pre-pandemic.

In contrast, the static resources do not change. The two critical static resources are time and attention.

Time

Time refers to each individual's time, collective time, and organizational time. Individual time is the amount of available time for work any individual has, for example 40 hours per week. Collective time refers to the total amount of time available for a given group of people. For example, a team of five people may have a collective amount of 200 hours. Organizational time is measured by days, weeks, months, and years. Organizational time refers to the length of time defined by deadlines or other landmarks. For example, the launch date for a new initiative may be three months away, so the organization has three months of temporal resources to prepare for the launch.

Every individual only has 24 hours in a day. No matter how well we organize it, no matter how productive we are, no matter what kinds of time saving tips we can put into effect, the actual amount of time available to us and to every person working in the school is static. There is little we can do to increase the amount of time available to us as individuals or to the school as a whole.

Attention

The second static resource is attention. As human beings, we can only attend to a limited amount during each moment. We can bring our entire attention to one task, or we can multitask by splitting our attention between more than one thing. However, we

have not increased the amount of attention, we have simply reallocated it. A big challenge is that quadrant two work is generally complex and requires a higher degree of attention, making multitasking difficult, ineffective, and even counterproductive.

How much can we attend to at one time?

Imagine you are a classroom teacher and after an observation the instructional coach leaves you with an “I wonder...” statement. *“I wonder if you had a problem on the board for the students when they entered the classroom if you could get class started faster.”*

A day later the assistant principal does a walk-through of your classroom and leaves another “I wonder...” statement. *“I wonder if you did more group work if kids would be a more engaged in class.”*

Another day passes and the principal observes and offers feedback. *“I wonder if you asked higher order thinking questions if your students would learn more.”*

Three people have come into your classroom and made three suggestions.

- Which one are you supposed attend to?
- How do you initiate changes to classroom procedures, higher order thinking, and grouping students at the same time?
- And if you are a first-year teacher, all your attention may be consumed just to figuring out what you are supposed to be teaching the next day!

Attention is a finite and critical resource we often overlook.

Attending to one thing means we can't attend to something else

Anytime we make a demand, put out a new initiative, or ask people to engage in a specific practice, we are consuming people's time and attention. Whether it's a teaching practice, something regarding policy, or anything else, every ask comes with a cost of time and a cost of attention.

Because we have limited time and attention, everything we do in a school, every demand we place on a teacher, or an administrator comes with an opportunity cost. The opportunity cost is the time and the attention we could have spent or invested on something else.

The key question when we are rolling out initiatives and changing things is not “Can we do this?”

The key question is “Is there something else we could do for a more beneficial outcome?”

External forces

External forces are largely beyond the control of the organization, but they impact the organization in substantive ways. External forces come in three forms:

- Legislation and governance create rules, laws, and policies which impact the organization. For example, federal and state governments have created laws and policies which require schools to give normed tests and, in many cases, include sanctions and rewards based on test performance. The largescale implementation of testing regimes impacts every element of the school.
- Social and political forces largely involve discourse around and at schools and impact how people outside and inside the school view the organization. These forces often influence governance as seen in the current efforts to censor books and curriculum based on specific political agendas and ideologies.
- Naturally occurring events include extreme weather and, of course, pandemics. Less dramatic examples include the changing of seasons.

Internal Forces

We can think of internal forces as being culture. This is simplistic but useful. Internal forces are shaped by how the purpose, structures, and resources impact the people within the school.

When purpose, structures, and resources are aligned to people's knowledge, skills, dispositions and health, internal forces will be smooth and positive. In an aligned school, people have the resources they need, and the structures make it easier for them to work towards a powerful purpose. People find their work rewarding and less stressful and they will be able to have the maximum positive impact.

In contrast, misalignment creates stress and inhibits performance. In misaligned schools, rules and expectations (structures) run counter to the purpose, people are under-resourced or experience too many demands on their time and attention, and they become stressed and frustrated, resulting in a negative culture.

The Problem of Alignment

Misalignment is unavoidable in all but the simplest organizations, and schools are very complex places. The value of viewing organizations through an alignment lens is that there really is only ever one problem: Something is not aligned.

The misalignment will always revolve around people and there are only four basic permutations:

1. The purpose is unclear or there are multiple conflicting purposes which distract and confuse people
2. People do not have the resources they need to do the work they aspire to
3. The structures present barriers to people's work and health
4. People lack the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and or health to do the work

When we look at organizations through an alignment lens, the work of leadership becomes clear.

The responsibility of leaders is to use change processes to create strong organizational alignment.

In this stage we have identified the two key responsibilities of school leaders. We have reframed the challenge of our work being priority management, not time management. We have determined the role of leadership is to align the four dimensions for the school to create a positive culture that facilitates people's growth, life, and work. I hope at this point you are beginning to view your work differently.

There is one more piece of the puzzle needed to complete the U-turn: choice.