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## Align Structure to Strategy for Growth

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AS YOU DEVELOP A STRATEGY FOR GROWTH, one of the obstacles you may face is the current structure of your congregation. Unfortunately, structures perfectly suited for other times and other places, often persist beyond their usefulness. For structures to become catalysts for growth--rather than obstructions--they must flow from and serve the strategy. Organizational theorists call this "strategic alignment."<sup>1</sup>

While not the only contributing factor, strategic alignment may increase the potential of your church to grow and to reach its goals. On the other hand, a structure that works at cross-purposes to the strategy is a sure way to halt any progress toward the goal.

### The Strategy-Structure Link

STRUCTURE IS THE CONNECTING LINK between the idea and its implementation. Structure is the form; strategy is the substance. Structure is the body; strategy the soul. Just as the human body was designed to communicate the soul to its environment, structure should be designed to express the church's purpose.

We first look at our purpose. Why are we here? What is our business? We then look at our vision. What do we want to accomplish? What will it look like when we realize our dream? Next, we develop a plan. How do we get there? What are the landmarks along the way toward our ultimate objective? These elements coalesce to form the strategic vision of the church. The church develops a shared understanding of its future size, shape, strengths, particular contribution, and unique personality.<sup>2</sup> This vision is far more than a slogan on the wall; it is the heart and soul of a particular community of believers united to serve Christ in their time and in their place. It is the expression of a God-inspired vision of the church's future.

Having chosen a strategy, the church must then embody that strategy in a structure. Some experts define structure in a political sense as "the placement of power and authority in the organization."<sup>3</sup> However, this description seems to coincide more with Jesus' description of the antithetical forces and power struggles that characterize the organizations of the unregenerate (Matthew 20:25). Others describe structure as a question of "control and coordination."<sup>4</sup> Control is associated with efficiency and stability; coordination with learning, innovation, and flexibility.<sup>5</sup> This definition of structure brings to mind images of an Olympic gymnast who has complete command of his form, yet exudes creative movement.

Another way to understand structure is to see it as a series of channels through which information flows.<sup>6</sup> Like the life blood that carries the vital oxygen and other nutrients throughout the body, structure should get the information to where it is needed, when it is needed.

Strategic alignment occurs when all the parts fit, when the body is aligned with the soul and when agreement between strategy and structure sends a clear and consistent signal to church members and guides their behavior.<sup>7</sup> Things begin to happen when people share a common vision, especially when that vision is empowered by Jesus Christ, the Head, and embodied in a structure that expresses the vision. Yet, in spite of the powerful benefits of alignment, we have all seen how tenacious old and misaligned forms can be.

## Why Do We Resist Structural Change?

ORGANIZATIONAL THEORISTS HAVE LONG RECOGNIZED that performance is enhanced when structure fits the strategy.<sup>8</sup> So, why do Christians sometimes resist this idea? Why do we cling to forms that no longer fit today's environment?

Organizational inertia is behind the reticence of many organizations to recognize the need for structural changes.<sup>9</sup> People refuse to acknowledge the problem and rely on solutions that worked in the past. Yet, congregational resistance to structural

change seems to possess a particular strength not seen in other organizations. This may be related to our tendency to sanctify forms. We cling to forms because we imagine them to be more holy than others.

We forget that structures are just forms; they are not the soul of the Church. The soul is the immaterial part of a person; in the same way, the unseen assumptions, values, and vision that drive behavior and attitudes form the soul of the church. It is the actuating cause of the church's life. Just as Christ retained the essence of deity while taking on the form of humanity, we need churches today willing to take on the forms appropriate to today's environment, while retaining their core values.

### Develop a Culture of Flexibility

WE NEED TO DEVELOP A CONGREGATIONAL IDENTITY that understands structure to be the servant of strategy. In the Scriptures we find a foundational structure; Paul appointed elders in every church (Acts 14:23). Here is the principle of a plurality of spiritual leaders who could provide guidance to the newer Christians. The leadership of a church, however, cannot occupy headship in an absolute sense for Christ alone is the head of the body (Ephesians 4:14).

Just as the human body must make adjustments to interact with its environment and survive, the church must build upon that foundational structure, adapting it to a particular time, place and strategic focus. The Eskimos wear polar bear skins, the hairs of which conduct warm solar rays to the body. The pigmies of the Kalahari dessert wear almost nothing. In the same way the church must supplement its essential core frame to fit the particular environment in which it moves.

God gave the Church a flexible form. For example, helpers were added to aid the apostles in the distribution to the widows (Acts 6:1-6). The church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20), but it is built and the word "built" implies flexibility and growth. The same apostle who warned us to hold fast the word which was preached (1 Corinthians 15:2), also

became all things to all men, that he might save some (1 Corinthians 9:23). The external packaging should adapt to the audience we are trying to target.

## Fit Structure to Strategy

"ALL THINGS MUST BE DONE PROPERLY AND IN AN ORDERLY MANNER" (I Corinthians 14:40, NASB). So how do we order the church? How does one choose her form? The answer is to look at your strategy and extrapolate from that strategy the form she should take. That is a process that must be worked out by the top leadership team in conjunction with the entire congregation as it looks at the options, weighs potential benefits and weaknesses of each option, and chooses the form that will best serve the purpose within its context.

One way to conceptualize strategic options is to ask yourself the question: "What will be the primary dimension of your strategic focus; will it involve geographical locations, services offered, or demographic groups that you want to reach? Does your strategy champion a particular process, such as discipleship, worship or evangelism?"<sup>10</sup>

Once you have defined the soul of the church, you are in a position to look at the form. What form will best serve the strategy? According to experts, strategy has to do with explicit choices we make about whom we are targeting, what services we offer, the kinds of technology we plan to use, and what will be our distinctive competence.<sup>11</sup> If your church wants to target an inner city, low-income, neighborhood, you will probably have to choose a structure that is highly command-and-control oriented; but if your strategy is to target the highly educated who thrive on autonomy, you may have to design a structure that disperses the decision-making function as widely as possible. This in turn may require that information be distributed liberally providing the data necessary for making decisions at the furthest extremes of the structure.<sup>12</sup>

Another way to think about the strategy-structure link is to see strategy as a narrative;<sup>13</sup> it is the story about how you plan to make it happen, "it" being your mission statement. Lofty objectives are not sufficient; you need to be able to visualize the connecting chain of events that will take you to those objectives. Suppose the strategy is to become a church-multiplying church that, instead of seeking to build a mega-church, purposes to spin off a fellowship of daughter churches. What does the chain of activities look like leading up to that eventual outcome?

Does the church plan to invest heavily in the latest technologies, using technology to draw visitors from a high-tech environment; or will you focus on personal discipleship? The high-tech congregation may require the addition of a staff person whose job description is to maintain the church at the cutting edge of technology. The distinctive competence of the low-tech church is the quality of its interpersonal relationships; this church may have to institute an interpersonal skills training program for small group leaders and ministry positions for those who have completed the training.

Will your church be seeker- or believer-oriented? If you choose to be believer-oriented what exactly will you do for the believer? Is your strategy to train the believer to develop effective outreach ministries that target unbelievers? If so, then how will the top leadership team control the quality of service taking place in those ministries? What kind of structure will it take to provide the freedom and support necessary for these lay ministers to be effective, while at the same time maintaining a cohesiveness of purpose and values?

## Conclusion

THE GYMNAST GRACEFULLY SWINGS AND PIVOTS before a public that is mesmerized by the harmony of form and substance. Like a living, breathing, body, the structure of the church allows its soul to interface with its environment. Unfortunately, for many churches, what was once a living body has become a corpse, impeding movement and clotting the flow of innovation and creativity. This is not a call for change for the sake of change, but rather for the intentional alignment of structure and strategic purpose. When alignment is achieved, control and coordination work together and we grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love (Ephesians 4:15-16, NASB).

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> François Bergeron, Louis Raymond and Suzanne Rivard, "Ideal Patterns of Strategic Alignment and Business Performance," *Information and Management* 41 (2004): 1003-20; available from [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com).

<sup>2</sup> David A. Nadler and Michael L. Tushman, *Competing By Design: The Power of Organizational Architecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 30.

<sup>3</sup> Jay R. Galbraith, *Designing Organizations: An Executive Guide to Strategy, Structure and Process*, Revised ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Richard L. Daft, *Organization Theory and Design*, 8th ed. (Mason, OH: South-Western, 2004), 119.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>6</sup> Nadler and Tushman, 63-64.

<sup>7</sup> Galbraith, 171.

<sup>8</sup> Bergeron, Raymond and Rivard.

<sup>9</sup> William M. Lindsay and Joseph A. Petrick, *Total Quality and Organization Development* (Boca Raton, FL: St. Lucie Press, 1997), 103.

<sup>10</sup> These categories have been loosely borrowed from Galbraith, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Nadler and Tushman, 30.

<sup>12</sup> Galbraith, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Brian E. Becker, Mark A Huselid and Dave Ulrich, *The HR Scorecard: Linking People, Strategy, and Performance* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2001), 28.