

Settling-in to the future

An organizational identity perspective

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To realise and settle-in to plausible and desirable futures in the context of turbulence and unpredictable uncertainty, we propose that executives need to pay as much attention to explicit questions about their organisation's identity as they do to questions about strategic choices. Invariably in futures and strategy engagements such as scenario planning, forecasting, search conferences, etc., there comes a point where the consideration of new strategic options emanating from this work about 'what we should do' comes up against current understandings of an organisation's identity - 'who we are'. Unless the question of the organisation's future identity is handled well, executives can experience inertia - "this option may make sense given the changes we are seeing in the world, but it is not aligned with who we are". As a result, they scale back ambitions to not imperil the current identity but in so doing compromise the achievement of the strategic objectives they hold dear.

Organisational identity reflects executives' deep sense of a "collective self" (Ashforth, Schinoff and Brickson, 2020:30) which guides their judgement and action as to what is relevant, inspiring and the right thing for their organisation to do and not do (March and Olsen, 2011). It can be formally defined as how "senior executives define the central and temporally coherent attributes of their organization that make it distinct from others (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Whetten, 2006)" (Lang, forthcoming:3). Identity is defined through cycles of "sensemaking and sensegiving" where executives "periodically reconstruct shared understandings and revise formal claims of what their organization is and stands for" (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006:436).

Organisational identity is core to questions of strategy ('what we as an organisation choose to do') forming an inter-dependent relationship: "identity frames and shapes strategy while strategy enacts and informs identity (Ashforth and Mael, 1996; Schultz and Hernes, 2020; Sheard, 2009)" (Lang, forthcoming:1). This inter-dependency means that when considering different futures, organisational identity is inevitably a key consideration for executives.

Identity not only lends significant power of justification and meaning to what executives choose to do on behalf of their organisations (Normann, 2001) it also acts as a "perceptual screen" for what is observed in the external environment, how it is interpreted, and acted on

(Gioia and Thomas, 1996: 372; Tripsas, 2009). Consider the experience of UK-based firm Rolls Royce who produces power systems for civil and defence aerospace, marine and nuclear applications (as discussed in Lang, forthcoming). Lang describes how in 2014 and 2015 the firm issued five profit warnings indicating the futures they were expecting had not arrived. The firm subsequently introduced a leadership programme including scenario planning with the explicit intention of “creating a new set of filters” by which 150 executives could “think and talk differently” about their future context. Three scenarios were developed that enabled executives to take a fresh look at their changing environment and to explore questions of strategy and identity. A core outcome of this process was to contribute to a shift in the organisation’s identity from an engineering to an industrial technology company with subsequent implications for the strategic options the firm chose to pursue.

Turbulence brings organisational identity front and centre

In stable conditions, identity very often remains implicit because taken-for-granted assumptions about the context means ‘what we choose to do’ remains aligned with settled understandings of ‘who we are’. However, in turbulent and unpredictably uncertain times’ identity comes explicitly to the fore (Whetton, 2006), as Rolls Royce experienced. This is because turbulence for executives is not just about objective changes in the external environment but is subjectively experienced as a sense “the ‘ground’ is in motion” (Emery and Trist, 1965:26) caused by the interplay of those external changes and the organisation’s sense of who it is and subsequently what it does (McCann and Selsky, 1984). It is this interplay that raises questions for executives about whether their organisation’s identity and unique set of activities will remain relevant and successful. The consequence is that when executives are considering very different future contexts for their organisations, discussions about identity will be evoked.

However, engaging explicitly with questions of identity is not always easy. Such conversations can be uncomfortable as they are less familiar for executives oriented more to ‘doing’ than ‘being’ and can feel threatening, even existential, for their organisation, as well as having potential implications for their own professional and personal identities and roles. These conversations are even more complex when organisations work together, which many now increasingly do to have more influence over their context, to capture big opportunities, and address complex, systemic problems (Ramirez et al., 2023). To enable their effective collaboration, executives from a diverse set of organisations must develop a joint identity that co-exists in relation to their own organisations’ individual identities (Berkowitz et al., 2022).

Providing a safe and creative space for executives to imagine possible identity options and strategy implications ahead of time is key to settling-in to different futures effectively. Using scenarios of the organisation's future context can be of help here (Lang, forthcoming). Acting as transitional objects (Winnicott, 1971) scenarios enable leaders to explore changes that will be needed between the present and the future without any immediate need for action (Burt, 2003; Ramirez and Drevon, 2005). Scenario-based strategic conversations can thus provide a learning experience for executives to explore questions of both identity and strategy evolution (Brown and Starkey, 2000).

To understand how this can work, we present the recent strategy development work of the Global Outbreak and Alert Response Network (GOARN) that was undertaken in the context of the turbulence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

GOARN engages with its identity as it sets its strategy

GOARN is a network of technical experts and institutions that prepare for and respond to disease outbreaks around the world. The network was created in 2000 to ensure more coordination of partners (members) during responses at the country level, and to facilitate working together outside emergencies. Over the subsequent decades it has grown to over 300 institutional partners and is hosted by the World Health Organization (WHO).

In 2021, GOARN decided to revise its strategy to ensure it remained strategically focused during the upcoming four-year period 2022-2026, given the turbulence caused by the pandemic. Health outbreaks tend to show up weaknesses in systems and this is exactly what happened with COVID-19 as it disrupted economies, supply chains, health services, and laid bare social and income inequalities. The magnitude of the pandemic represented a significant change in GOARN's context with ramifications for the group's strategy as one of the world's major preparedness and response organisations.

To ensure a sufficiently rich strategic conversation (van der Heijden, 2005) given the complexity of the changing context and the network itself, GOARN not only surveyed member-partners and interviewed key stakeholder, but partnered with the Saïd Business School, University of Oxford to run a strategy lab. The lab involved four phases; surveying the strategic environment (contextual factors, key actors, and the way GOARN is currently organised to create value); developing a set of scenarios about how the network's future context might evolve; mapping future actors and their roles and relationships – “value-

creating systems” (Ramirez and Mannervik, 2016:31) - in each scenario; and generating strategic options. In all, around 100 people were involved¹.

The scenarios and their related value-creating systems provided GOARN member-partners with the space to explore identity and strategy implications related to potential changes in their future context. One scenario for example explored the negative impact on global collaboration due to rising geo-political tensions. In this world, GOARN's identity as a neutral network of technical experts comes to the fore, providing one way for countries to access needed assistance. During the scenario exercise the strength and value of GOARN's neutrality surprised some within the network but has led to a sense of confidence and clarity.

Another scenario explored the consequence of a demand for more national capacity building to address disease outbreaks, building off the experience of nations dealing with COVID-19. Taking a more in-country approach to preparedness and response contrasts with the historical deployment of global experts to help with a health emergency. For GOARN, it brought to the fore that they are a network of regional and national partners as much as a global grouping and can catalyse important in-country conversations. This puts more emphasis on GOARN's strategy being shaped and implemented by the member-partners in their specific parts of the world rather than only by the global steering committee or Geneva-based staff.

Yet another scenario explored the increasing involvement of the private sector in disease outbreak preparedness and response. The private sector played a significant role in the pandemic, and it was assumed in one scenario that this would continue. For GOARN, it led to an invaluable conversation about who the network was and may need to become vis a viz the private and public sectors. Language is important and 'private sector' meant different things to different people. In particular, the scenario prompted a detailed consideration of governance models for GOARN as well funding mechanisms. The outcome was clarity among the member-partners that GOARN was a public community group whose hosting by the WHO was a big part of who it was and that this should continue. To do well in this scenario would require strategies that complement (rather than compete) with the private sector.

¹ For a more detailed description of the scenarios and the strategy development process including the lab, see the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network 2022-2026 strategy document: <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/366066/9789240067028-eng.pdf?sequence=1>

A final scenario explored a world in which the number and nature of health emergencies including from climate change overwhelms the effectiveness of the multi-lateral system. In its place bilateral government relations emerge along with collaborations with the private sector and professional health associations. For GOARN, this scenario was perhaps the most challenging as it would suggest it could become more a grouping of individual health professionals supporting each other in their work, rather than being a network of institutions co-ordinating their activities globally. The outcome of this conversation at the time was a clarity that this is not who member-partners think GOARN is or would want it to become. To do well in this scenario the emphasis would be on the value of GOARN as a network rather than an organisation and thus able to morph to meet the needs of the people, institutions, and governments it is supporting. One senior GOARN member for example could provide sufficient support in an outbreak as opposed to a large team or teams.

These insights from the scenarios were combined with the survey outputs, stakeholder interviews, regional consultations, and the work of three groups who investigated certain strategic options in more detail, to draft the strategy. Reflecting the understanding that organisational identity frames and shapes strategy and strategy in turn enacts and informs identity, the strategy document (GOARN, 2023) outlined a set of identity claims that were then followed by related strategic actions.

These claims were represented by statements of “is”: GOARN is community centred; is committed to the global public health emergency; is about creating solutions for a better disease outbreak response; and is a collaborative network of institutions. Strategic actions were then listed below each of these claims as statements of “will”. For example, under the heading “GOARN is community centred”, is listed the action that the network will help build the capacity of local communities to support public health and outbreak responses.

The explicit engagement with questions of identity, and the rendering of identity claims had three key benefits for GOARN as it settled-in to its future.

The first benefit came from directly engaging with the question that repeatedly came up through the process that “as part of the WHO family, who is GOARN, what makes us distinctive?” If this question had not been acknowledged and taken seriously it would have limited the quality of the strategic conversation and the resulting strategic actions, while also missing the opportunity to communicate to all stakeholders who the network understood itself to be (and not to be) as it positioned for the future.

A second benefit was providing essential clarity about something that in effect limited the range of acceptable strategic choices – what GOARN would do and not do. For example, it was decided that the network was an implementation not a standards-setting organisation and therefore setting standards was a not an option for the strategy, leaving that role to others to take on such as the WHO.

The third related benefit was that clarity about identity helped the network define what made it distinctive vis a viz others and what it could uniquely contribute that others couldn't, as well as what collaborations to pursue. A clear sense of identity has lent a sense of confidence and meaning to what GOARN does, and with whom.

Helpful principles to engage your organisation's identity to settle-in to the future

Based on our experience working with GOARN and many other public, private and non-government organisations, we have found that the following suggestions are of help for executives wanting to engage with their organisation's identity to settle-in to new plausible and desirable futures.

Don't take identity for granted or, as a static, implicitly unchallenged assumption.

Keep in mind that the sense of turbulence is not only located in external changes in the environment, but also plays within, affecting subjective views of the identity and strategy of the organisation. Acknowledging and engaging with the question of an organisation's identity can create strategic value by providing insight and clarity for executives and other stakeholders, not least, making changes easier and cheaper to implement.

Use scenarios to create alternative frames of reference. Perceptions and claims on a given view of an organisation's identity is at the heart of way executives frame their strategy and its future context. When changes start to emerge in the context, existing frames can limit what executives notice or how they interpret and act on those changes. Scenarios provide alternative frames of reference enabling executives to see differently and explore more possible implications than would be the case if only one frame was used (Ramirez and Wilkinson, 2016).

Invest sufficient time and resources. Perhaps strategy development processes in the context of relatively stable conditions can be undertaken quickly with less resources and consultation. But to engage with the implications of potentially very different futures,

especially when the organisation itself is complex, means involving all relevant stakeholders and giving them time to converse, challenge pre-conceived understandings, and create new strategic options. It takes time for questions of identity to move from the implicit to the explicit and to be productively engaged with. Designing processes that enable this to happen will counter-intuitively save subsequent time and resources.

In our experience, the question of organisational identity is under-estimated and under-attended to when executives develop strategy in turbulent conditions. As identity is usually implicit and executives are more comfortable with doing rather than being, the explicit question of 'who the organisation may need to become' is far less familiar. Developing the capacity to expertly engage with questions of identity will help executives and their organisations to more effectively (and with less cost) create and settle-in to truly new and desirable future courses of action.

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