



# THE UTOPIA OF THE EMPATHIC ORGANIZATION

THE INNOVATION IMPERATIVE:  
REIMAGINING ORGANIZATIONS FOR A NEW ERA

**Climate change, the pandemic, Great Power Conflicts, and other upheavals have shown us in a short period of time that we have reached the end of our conventional structures and orientations. But what is the way forward? How do we need to think about our organizations if we still want to avert the exodus of our high culture? Nothing less than a 360-degree transformation is likely to be the answer.**

According to former mezzo-soprano Priscilla Dunsten, during the first three months of a newborn's life, there are five sound reflexes that express needs such as hunger, tiredness, or discomfort. Although this theory has not yet been scientifically confirmed, it nevertheless makes one thing clear: after our first breath on this planet, we unmistakably communicate our needs to the environment in which we exist.

In this article, I will attempt to describe an organization that at first glance seems utopian. From my point of view, however, it indicates a direction in which we must go in the future in order to take the overwhelmingness out of the complexity around us and to make it possible for sustainable structures and an alignment to be established in systems that will last, but which will align their action according to existing situations.

## **The revolution in the foundation**

The zeitgeist is characterized by discussions about whether an organization can be changed by movements from within. Many initiatives are geared toward this and certainly give the credible impression that it works. But can methods, the mere will of individuals to change, and also the energy expended in doing so — which is required over an indefinite period of time — really transform structures and systems that are shaped by conditioning, patterns, opinions, assumptions, and beliefs, and are also deeply rooted?

Does a revolution from within have any value at all, or does it not rather need to shake the foundations? With increasing climate change and events like the latest pandemic, it should

slowly sink in that holistic perception and holistic action are what will take us forward in the long run and give us an opportunity to escape the exodus of high culture.

This means; organizations need to tear down their old foundations and make a 360-degree change. If we don't have the courage to bring real innovation, real awareness, and a holistic aspiration into our systems to make a difference, we will remain trapped in the endless loop of a crisis spiral until we are no more.

## **The utopia of the empathic organization**

But what does the organization of the future look like? To answer this question, we need to start on a drawing board of possibilities, looking less for causes and problems, and more for solutions and scenarios that don't fit at all into the conventional growth-for-profit strategy.

## **Values**

Values are something fundamental — partly anchored in people's innermost being for generations and not reversible. If we take this as our starting point, it is therefore imperative that an

organization's values resonate with the values of its employees and vice versa.

After all, where there is no resonance, there is no progress, and where there is no progress, at a certain point it becomes destructive or any change efforts become Sisyphean work.

So it makes sense to hire people who are willing to enter into a value agreement that is shaped, respected, and accepted by both sides. The more convergent this agreement is, the less tension there is in the collaborative work, and the less energy are expended. But not only that. Values need to be monitored by an organization, especially while growing and transforming into new structures. As this can quickly lead to an abuse of power in enforcing values through leadership.

## **The energy management**

This primarily refers to the internal and external streams as well as the effort of an organization. The more precisely these are brought into dialogue, free of judgment and assumptions, the less irritation and resistance there will be. Streams can be directed in such a way that the effort is perceived as a flow and flexibility is created that makes it possible to integrate emerging impulses immediately.

If there are innovative streams in an organization, for example, they should be allowed to make change possible, even if they may seem incomprehensible at first. Blocking these streams means that they will either dry up or the organization will no longer be competitive after some time.

## **The vision**

A vision is often the heart and direction of an organization. In utopia, however, it has less to do with self-preservation or consumer satisfaction. It must be focused first and foremost on sustainability. A holistic pursuit that presupposes long-term action and allows the organization to grow in a needs-oriented manner through internal impulses. The organization is thus capable of adapting to external situations and deciding for itself how much effort must be expended at what point in time. Profit is thus only used to ensure its own stability.

## **The human component**

Whether positive or negative, people are the driving force of any organization. Ideas, as well as solutions for change, are created in people's minds.

One of the biggest roadblocks to the flow of an organization is that people are judged by assumptions — mainly in the form of subjective performance evaluations. We don't activate their strengths, we usually only focus on their weaknesses or judge them by short-term successes or goals — as our conditioning dictates. People are judged according to their own perceptions or their shortcomings. However, if we intensively allow human striving to be guided by potential and strengths, we get a dynamic that is self-sustaining because it is fed by what exists.

## **The guardians**

Today we talk about leadership roles or fixed forms and positions in a system. What happens when we soften these? In an empathic organization, each person is a custodian.

This means that people, as small units, are self-responsible and empowered to make their own decisions. They have the ability to draw from the organization and are able to receive help at any time, but in return must also advance their skills and strengths. Of course, this requires a corresponding mindset and ability to act.

In the end, every founder and every manager should honestly ask themselves what difference he or she is making. Miracles don't have to happen overnight, but the first step is certainly to ask:

- *Do I treat the people who work for me with respect and give them the freedom to innovate, or do I just see them as pawns on a board and innovation an empty phrase?*
- *Do I have an impact on the sustainability of my business and can I make up for the damage caused by my value creation?*
- *And: Can a large part of my organization's life cycle ensure sustainability and ensure that it can exist in the long term by creating value?*

If only one of these questions can be answered negatively, it is time to develop and implement a strategy for change.





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