

The StraightTalk Coach

Insights for Leading From Strength

Pathways and Pitfalls on the Road to Relevance – Part 1

By Cathy A. Higgins & David J. Kreischer

Today's tumultuous global marketplace creates an incessantly accelerating pace of change and unusually complex opportunities and challenges. Controlling these forces is impossible. Navigating them successfully is not.

Once you recognize and accept relevance as the critical measure of value between organizations, customers, stakeholders and employees, you can actively pursue pathways that help your organization manage the faster pace of change and complexity to achieve greater relevance. And you can avoid pitfalls that impede your organization's ability to improve relevance.

Relevance for individuals and organizations alike is judged by the market – and what is relevant is changing rapidly. Faced with tougher challenges and greater uncertainty, consumers and businesses are seeking new solutions tailored to advancing their most critical missions. Incremental improvement is not enough.

This issue of *The StraightTalk Coach* will discuss pathways and pitfalls for leading customer-relevant organizational change. The next issue will address the impact of pathways and pitfalls on individuals, for whom becoming and staying relevant is essential to a sustainable career.

Pathway 1: Accelerate Relevant Learning and Relevant Change

Accelerating your organization's pace of change is important – but insufficient. Today, the path to success is applying new learning in real time to quickly provide customer-relevant solutions.

“The essential elements of the American character: Our faith in ourselves, our spirit of experimentation and our hope for the future.”

~ Jonathan Alter,
The Defining Moment

The time lag between recognizing customers' challenges and creating better solutions must become shorter. Tightening this gap requires constantly enhancing an organization's understanding of new opportunities created by the global market and improving the organization's ability to use that knowledge to help its customers succeed.

Reducing the cycle time between acquiring new knowledge and delivering customer-relevant innovations will require fundamental organizational changes. For example, organizations will

need to place the highest priority on hiring, developing, deploying and retaining people who can generate relevant solutions. The functions required to support these individuals will typically be outsourced to expert resources. However, expectations of outside resources will also be measured by higher standards of relevance, feeding demand for greater relevance throughout the marketplace.

With a similarly constant emphasis on relevance, organizations will also seek greater agility in recognizing and using new sources of learning to respond to emerging customer challenges.

Pitfall 1: Relying on Past Successes

The market is changing so quickly that the product or service your organization sold in the recent past – and how you developed and delivered it – is no longer adequate.

Many organizations are optimistically preparing for an economic recovery, but with a customer-relevant view of the future. If your organization is offering the same products or services it did two years ago, chances are good that you will not meet customers' new challenges or aspirations.

Traditionally, past performance has been a reliable indicator of future success. In today's market, an organization's capacity to learn and

quickly develop future-focused customer-relevant solutions is a better measure. Shifting from past-success mode to quickly-learning-relevance mode will entail difficult choices about the roles, structures and standards needed to accelerate your organization's ability to develop higher-value, higher-relevance solutions.

Pathway 2: Become Portable

Today's challenges and opportunities are not only complex, they are also often so novel that responding effectively requires unique expertise. Leaders need to constantly form and re-form teams staffed with the right combination of expertise – with members who may not even be part of the organization.

In other words, an organization needs to become almost portable: so flexible and agile that it can recognize and quickly take advantage of opportunities, and readily move resources to clarify and overcome challenges.

Increasing portability will stress organizations in many ways. Infrastructure may become particularly difficult in a “less is more” world. Organizations will need to reduce administrative drag, streamline processes and relax structures so key resources are free to focus on customer-relevant innovation.

Pitfall 2: Working Harder and Faster

Many people act as though working harder and faster at business-as-usual will carry them through today's complexities. Unfortunately, relying on what worked in the past – be it key customers, existing teams or earlier strategies – will not foster success, no matter how much more time, energy or focus you invest. Faster is important today, but only when accompanied by relevance.

A similar pitfall is failing to recognize that the qualities that previously differentiated your organization may no longer do so. Organizations will need to constantly reassess and realign people and processes to generate more

customer-relevant products on a more timely basis.

Pathway 3: Move Forward with Integrity and Purpose

Today's rapidly changing dynamics create nearly endless possibilities. Without a clear vision that thoughtfully aligns an organization's core abilities with customers' changing needs, organizations may begin to drift unproductively.

Leaders need to develop and share an exciting vision that aligns their organizations with their customers' needs, that is based on integrity and clear purpose, and that includes a commitment to Straight-Talk and straight listening. This will help accelerate the pace of change and innovation in substantive, relevant ways.

A vision that moves an organization forward with integrity and purpose is especially important in light of the need for portability. The more fluid the organization, the more definitive the organization must be about what it is trying to accomplish and how.

Pitfall 3: Getting Trapped in Sideshows

A lack of clear vision and purpose makes organizations dangerously susceptible to sideshows, from the “flavor of the month” to super-heated politics. No matter how much sound and fury sideshows generate, they are not focused on customers' needs. Nor do sideshows effectively apply an organization's core talents.

Sideshows can lead to poor resource allocation decisions. With so much at stake today, wasting resources on sideshows is irresponsible. Instead, make sure you invest in activities that help your organization move forward with integrity, purpose and relevance.

Pathways and Pitfalls for Leaders

Leading your organization down pathways to success while avoiding pitfalls is easier said than done. Courage is especially important. Leaders who try to move their organizations along the right pathways will encounter resistance from

everyone across the ICE equation who is invested in the status quo. Being accountable for taking risks is not easy – but it is necessary to improve an organization's relevance

Shared leadership is one response worth considering. Making fundamental changes so your organization can effectively accelerate the pace and customer-relevance of learning and change, become more portable and move forward with integrity and purpose may best be accomplished by a team of leaders. For example, one leader might be a missionary who excels at creating and selling the vision; another leader might excel at orchestrating change. (See “Building the Future: The New Office of the Chairman,” *The StraightTalk Coach*, Volume 3, Issue 6.)

Leaders may also need to enhance their skills. A recent issue of *The StraightTalk Coach* (see “Are You Ready for Today's Leadership Challenges?”, Volume 6, Issue 4) described four critical skill sets leaders need for today's market. These are:

1. Creating a dynamic, customer-relevant strategic perspective.
2. Orchestrating and building high-quality, high-value partnerships.
3. Transforming diverse learning into highly relevant innovation.
4. Mobilizing key stakeholders with a clear, honest, inspiring vision and a sharp, engaging customer-relevant focus.

As outlined on the enclosed insert, strengthening these skills can give leaders better tools to move their organizations onto desirable pathways and avoid dangerous pitfalls.

The speed of change in today's global marketplace will continue to accelerate. The complexity of opportunities and challenges will continue to increase. Organizations whose leaders embrace relevance by pursuing pathways to stronger, more productive and innovative relationships with customers will grow. Organizations whose leaders fail to grasp the importance of relevance and fall prey to pitfalls will lose ground – and eventually disappear. [HK](#)

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Pathways and Leadership Skills

Success Pathway	Leadership Skill Group
<p>Pathway 1: Accelerate learning and improve the value of change.</p>	<p>Creating a dynamic, customer-relevant strategic perspective:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Taking a world view. - Thinking and deciding strategically - Planning dynamically - Constantly updating
<p>Pathway 1: Accelerate learning and improve the value of change.</p>	<p>Transforming diverse learning into highly relevant innovation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promoting constant sharing of learning from diverse sources - Innovating across people, process and product - Focusing learning on customer-relevant innovation - Constantly increasing the pace, quality and applicability of learning to implement innovative solutions
<p>Pathway 2: Become portable.</p>	<p>Orchestrating and building high-quality, high-value partnerships:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Constantly recruiting strategically relevant partners - Building relationships that foster integrity and optimize strengths - Capitalizing on horizontal collaboration - Sustaining high-quality partnerships
<p>Pathway 3: Move ahead with integrity and purpose.</p>	<p>Mobilizing key stakeholders with a clear, honest, inspiring vision and a sharp, engaging customer-relevant focus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Setting and communicating a clear, inspiring vision - Demonstrating a consistent commitment to the mission and a sharp customer-relevant focus - Avoiding distracting sideshows - Creating balance and agility to advance the mission

