

Visions to Guide Performance: A Typology of Multiple Future Organizational Images

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ABSTRACT

Organizational performance is highly influenced by how employees envision the future. To date, many scholars have emphasized the importance of an overarching future vision that unites all stakeholders, while acknowledging the presence of divergent perspectives among members. This variety in perspectives may be further complicated in organizations undergoing great stress and where the leadership has not defined and promoted a future vision to guide the content of the images of its members. Little study has explored the various types

of future organizational images that exist or the nature of those images. We explore these concerns via a case study of an airline in the midst of a dramatic fight for survival. The findings both confirm the existence of multiple views for the company's future and delineate their general characteristics through a typology of imagery. We conclude with a language to use to differentiate those images for future research and offer practical implications for managing multiple future organizational images to mobilize energy and enhance performance in a more unified direction.

Introduction

The interpretation of strategic issues is affected by how employees envision the future (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). Visions can symbolically act as a powerful catalyst to guide organizational performance and influence individual action. Much has been written about the need to have a shared vision among members of an organization to achieve unity in spirit and a cohesive effort toward a common goal (Lippitt, 1998; Nanus, 1992). Yet, scholars suggest the presence of multiple organizational views due to the unrealistic expectation of achieving an integrated organization-wide

consensus (Martin, 1992). In addition, volatile conditions may create a climate of ambiguity that produces a divergence of perspectives that can diffuse synergetic performance. It is incumbent on leadership to understand the presence of multiple future organizational images but to do that requires an understanding of the potential for variation. The literature has presented the concept of future organizational images as desired or ideal images of the future (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Reger, Gustafson, DeMarie, & Mullane, 1994). But what if the presence of multiple future organizational images in-

cludes a variety of images held by members that are both positive and negative? And what if these images are influenced by personal translations of others' perspectives?

Previous research indicates that individuals typically possess multiple images of an organization (Gioia et al., 2000). Our research seeks to expand this premise by focusing on images associated with the future. In particular, we explore the types of future organizational images that members hold in an environment that lacks a clearly defined vision as expressed by leadership. Our study was guided by this overarching question: What are the types of future organizational images that members possess? We investigated this question in the context of a case study of a small, low-cost airline in the midst of dramatic change. As the company restructured and merged with another carrier, we sought to understand how employees viewed the future of their organization. The data permitted us to create a typology of those images and offer a language to be used when studying future organizational images. In addition, as we analyzed the findings, possible implications for managing those images also emerged that may guide management in their efforts to enhance productivity and performance.

Theoretical Framework

This section is designed to give the reader an overview of the literature in this area. In particular, we have focused on the following three areas that have greatly shaped the research in this article: (1) the importance of a shared vision, (2) the presence of multiple perspectives, and (3) future image terminology.

Importance of a Shared Vision

The concept of future images or visioning is treated frequently from a descriptive and practitioner perspective (Allen, 1995; Nanus, 1992; Wilson, 1992), yet has received less attention as the focus in systematic research. There is research that targets visionary leadership (Awamleh & Gardner, 1997), the importance of vision salience (Oswald, Mossholder, & Harris, 1994), antecedents of visioning skill and effects of visioning training (Thoms & Greenberger, 1995), the visioning process (Thoms & Govekar, 1997), and the content and context of visions (Larwood, Falbe, Kriger, & Miesing, 1995). According to Thoms and Govekar (1997), empirical evidence has yet to show benefits of positive future images to organizational performance. However, in spite of the lack of data confirming benefits, many organizations seek to create a shared vision in their efforts to build community or enhance competitiveness. Some of these visioning activities include future search (Weisbord & Janoff, 1995; Weisbord & 35 co-authors, 1992), search conferences (Emery & Purser, 1996), other large group interventions (Axelrod, 1992; Danne-miller & Jacobs, 1992), and learning organization practices (Senge, 1990), just to name a few.

The importance of a shared vision has been expressed in the merger literature (Isabella, 1993; Marks & Mirvis, 1997; McEntire & Bentley, 1996; Salk, 1995) as well as in the demands for strategic unity as organizations move forward in turbulent times (Ulrich & Wiersema, 1989). Gioia and Thomas (1996) conducted research that revealed the power of a desired future image as a means

for change. They studied strategic change in higher education and how members made sense of important issues related to change. The researchers found that a compelling future image was a catalyst for change, and "a plausible, attractive, even idealistic future image would seem to help organization members envision and prepare for the dynamic environment implied by strategic change" (Gioia & Thomas, 1996, p. 398). Beer (1987) described the need to transform internal perspectives and processes in order to meet the demands imposed by the external environment. He identified the importance of a comprehensive model of a future vision as a necessary condition to guide organizational transformations.

Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) portrayed the power of an overarching, symbolic vision. The vision of change offered by the university CEO served as the guide from which to gauge all actions. The CEO's effective use of this symbol was described this way: "a captivating vision is perhaps a key feature in the initiation of strategic change because it provides a symbolic foundation for stakeholders to develop an alternative interpretive scheme" (p. 446).

Collins and Porras (1997) described a visionary company as one that creates an environment that consistently supports and nourishes the company's core ideology and stimulates performance toward an envisioned future. With this internal compass, organizational members are guided in a unified direction, bound by common values and purpose and a shared future image. When all elements work together within this framework, Collins and Porras labeled such a visionary organization as being built to last.

The Presence of Multiple Perspectives

The concept of multiple future images for an organization is analogous to the concept of possible selves for the individual (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The possible selves of an individual include not only one's past self and present self but also perceptions of one's potential and future. This includes a variety of other possible selves: the ideal of what one would like to become, what one ever considered, what one will probably be, and what one is afraid of becoming. Individuals, through the construction of these possible selves, are able to affect their own development. These possible selves have power because they are both an incentive for future behavior and a tool for evaluating the current view of oneself. This research by Markus and Nurius sheds light on the complexity of individuals, but does not apply this complexity to the organizational unit.

Some identity scholars propose the presence of multiple organizational identities (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Pratt and Foreman suggest the importance of understanding the complexity of multiple identities as well as the potential avenues, costs, and benefits of this variety. While acknowledging these multiple conceptualizations of the identity of the organization, these researchers make no reference to multiple conceptualizations about the future of the organization by its members. We suggest the need for research with this future organizational image focus. Pratt and Foreman also propose that organizational leaders manage the multiple organizational identities. Similarly, we propose the need to understand the management

of future conceptualizations of an organization. This task may be quite complex if the range in future images is varied as is the range of perspectives on the organization's identity, as suggested by Pratt and Foreman.

Culture research supports a multiplicity of perspectives due to the existence of multiple subcultures. Sackmann (1992) presents a complex view of organizational culture by revealing the simultaneous existence of both subculture differences as well as organization-wide views. The array of subcultures can be based on cognitive traits, visible differences, geography, as well as other factors (Phillips & Sackmann, 2002). Subcultures may be internally strong and unified but differ significantly with other parts of the organization yielding a sense of fragmentation and lack of alignment. Creating synergies requires a multiple cultures view with the skills to manage this mosaic of diversity in a way that builds on similarities and manages differences. Meyerson and Martin (1987) present three cultural paradigms in organizations: integration and homogeneity, differentiation and diversity, and ambiguity. Using the lens of the multiple perspectives ranging from organization-wide consensus, to subcultural consensus, to no consensus, as discussed by Joanne Martin (1992), a broader insight can be gained to enrich understanding. In environments of inconsistency and complexity, diverse perspectives can contribute to the presence of multiple organizational perspectives. Although organizational culture research acknowledges this variety, this research has not been applied to future organizational images.

Future Image Terminology

A language for organizational images is initiated in the organizational identity and image research. Organizational identity refers to insiders' perspectives of the essential character of the organization (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). In contrast, organizational images are pictures "about an object in the absence of frequent interaction with, a deep relation with, good knowledge and overview of, or close contact with the object" (Alverson, 1990, p. 377). Although the concept of organizational image has been used to refer to insiders' beliefs about outsiders' impressions (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991), the image concept has also been applied to the desired or ideal view of the future of the organization from an internal perspective (Gioia et al., 2000; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Reger et al., 1994). Presented as a positive image, the label "desired future image" (Gioia & Thomas, 1996) describes a "visionary perception the organization would like external other and internal members to have of the organization sometime in the future" (Gioia et al., 2000, p. 67). This desired future image has a strategic interpretation. Other researchers have labeled this positive future image as an ideal picture of a desirable future state (Reger et al., 1994).

Many scholars use the term "vision" to describe an energizing image of a more desirable future (Nanus, 1992), a positive, motivating cognitive image of the future (Thoms & Greenberger, 1995), and a picture of the future that defines what will be created (Senge, 1990). Visions are organizational anchors (Ancona, Goodman, Lawrence, & Tushman, 2001) that provide direction, captured in a variety of forms ranging from slogans

(Ulrich & Wiersema, 1989), to stories (Levin, 2000), to simple and practical single-sentence statements that are neither risky nor conservative descriptions of the future (Larwood et al., 1995). There is little agreement on definition or content (Larwood et al., 1995; Nathan, 1996).

According to Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail (1994, p. 258), "Future research should consider the array of organizational images that may affect members' attachments to an organization." They suggest that future-based images shape members' behaviors and therefore warrant future investigation. According to Morgan (1997, p. 149), "The beliefs and ideas that organizations hold about...what they are trying to do...have a much greater tendency to realize themselves than is usually believed." Therefore, it behooves an organization to understand the future organizational images that members possess.

Given these theoretical frames, we felt that there was a gap in understanding the variety of future organizational images that might exist within an organization as well as a need to better label and define those images to enhance future research, discussion, and the management of those images. This study targets the perspectives of individual members about the future of their organization, but does not attempt to study the similarities or differences that exist relative to the variety of subcultures within that organization. A merger offered a useful setting for this investigation.

Methods

The Setting

Using an inductive and emergent process, this qualitative case study

provided an opportunity to uncover insiders' perceptions of future organizational images within the context of an organization experiencing a merger. The setting for this research was a young company, that we labeled Company A, that had been in existence for fewer than five years. Company A was a public company in the business of commercial air transportation, which offered low-fare, passenger air service. Company A was extremely profitable and growing until its accident. The crash not only resulted in the loss of all lives on board, but also led to extensive negative media coverage. The company's efforts to survive prompted a massive reduction in service and then a 15-week shutdown and furlough of employees. After scheduled service resumed, losses continued to accumulate in spite of efforts to attract customers back to the company. Just 14 months after the accident and with a continuing decline in profits, the company announced a merger. This holding company merger with the parent of another small airline was specifically targeted as the best vehicle for keeping the company alive and improving the company's reputation that had been damaged because of the intense and unrelenting negative media exposure since the accident. It was an opportunity to bring life back into the company and allow it to have a future.

Sampling and Data Analysis

A semi-structured interview process (Spradley, 1979) was employed to conduct 52 interviews with company employees. The study's focus on how members saw the future of their organization framed the interview guide. Examples of questions asked

include the following: (1) What do you picture as the future for Company A two years from now? (2) Is this what you expect for Company A's future? If not, how do you expect to see this organization two years from now? (3) Is this the ideal future for Company A? If not, if you were describing the ideal Company A, two years in the future, what would it look like? (4) Do you think others in the organization see the future of the organization as you see it? (5) Do you think others outside the organization see the future of the organization as you see it?

In the tradition of purposive sampling (Bernard, 1995), various functional groups in the organization—pilots, in-flight, maintenance, and reservations—were fairly equally represented. The largest group sampled was customer service because that category consisted of several subgroups: ticketing, gate, baggage, ramp, transfer, and operations employees. Managers in in-flight, reservations, customer service, as well as at the hub were included in the sample.

Data were transcribed and verified for accuracy with the person interviewed. With this confirmation, we then began to code and link the data to our research question. This permitted us to develop a classification system for the analysis and examination of emergent themes (Spradley, 1979). Member checks confirmed categorical development, and the data were continually compared and analyzed in accordance with grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The technique of constant comparison upon which grounded theory is founded permitted us to refine and confirm the stability of our patterns.

Clusters of data emerged during the coding process. Future image data initially grouped into five subcategories: members' expected future organizational images, members' ideal future organizational images, members' feared future organizational images, future organizational images of others inside the organization, and future organizational images of others outside the organization. The five subcategories were clustered under two main categories: (1) members' future organizational images and (2) what members believed were others' future organizational images. The main category of members' future organizational images included three subcategories: members' expected future organizational images, members' ideal future organizational images, and members' feared future organizational images. The second main category—what members believed were others' future organizational images—included two subcategories: others inside the organization and others outside the organization.

Findings

Our data analysis first confirmed that individual members did possess multiple future organizational images. These data emerged into two core categories: (a) the types of images that members perceived about the future of their organization, and (b) the types of images that members held about the future of the organization that they construed others thought. The labels of these categories—"perceived" and "construed"—reflect earlier language presented by Dutton et al. (1994), grounded in the prior work by Dutton and Dukerich (1991), using the concepts of *perceived orga-*