

Is the Spark Still There: or did Your Organization's Star Die Years Ago?

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"We measure ourselves around revenue, profit and financial metrics that perform long after the spark has gone." Carl Bass, President-CEO, Autodesk, Inc: Corner Office article, NY Times Business News, May 2012.

CEO Bass was expressing an opinion after sharing his fascination with, "keeping companies entrepreneurial, innovative and cutting-edge." He used a metaphor of observing light from a star that collapsed a long time ago: "It's 100 light years away, and three years ago that star died."

We have seen household name companies come and go...Polaroid cameras, Compaq computers, Eastern Airlines, Pan Am, and so forth. We see media related companies that are in decline...Yahoo, MySpace. Could Google and Facebook be next?

Truth is that organization success, stock markets and business press are all focused on historical results: the measure of what was decided many months or years ago. Business journalists are historians. Market analysts are historians. Most of us within organizations become historians, too. As Bass further commented, "I think it's real easy as a leader to confuse what the results are today with actions that happened a while ago, because then you start coasting."

Bass is right. We're generally more interested in yesterday and today's outcomes rather than the signals that predict what lies ahead. Most of today's outcomes result from activities that started 6, 12 or more months ago. Instead, we should be fascinated with barometers (forecasters) of future outcomes. Dashboards, which many businesses are preoccupied with, indicate current performance – which is often too late –, whereas barometers are bell-weatherers of future results.

Barometers worth considering include:

- **Sales Pipelines** – Done right, sales pipelines give a good picture of what's falling into a company's net 6, 12 or 18 months in advance. Some opportunities, usually the larger ones, take much longer to gestate, while other smaller ones can race through. Any mix is important to observe; although progress from prospect interest, to proposal, to negotiation and finally "close" is even more important. You can literally observe momentum from many months out.
- **Staff Surveys** – Again, done right, can gauge staff mood and confidence in their organization's future and provide valuable signals. Testing an organization's "collective wisdom"- its combined intuitive pulse-, can be a great way to sense momentum and feelings about an organization's destiny. Such barometers can often sense demise well before executives can. However,

such surveys need to be simple and short, focusing on the right indicators, to get the best responses.

- **Transforming vs. Running** – Enterprises that devote regular time to transforming or repositioning themselves are more likely to spot fresh opportunities, than those preoccupied with "running" today's business. As Bass pointed out, those caught up in today's monetary success are less likely to be around tomorrow. On the other hand, those focusing on tomorrow's exceptional stakeholder experiences (including shareholders), are actively strengthening their futures.
- **Leading vs. Managing** – Gauging how much time executives are leading rather than managing is another important barometer. If senior executives are spending 60% or more of their time managing: that is, planning, organizing, directing or controlling: then their actions are likely to be regressive and based upon history. On the other hand, if 60% or more of their time is spent leading: that is, visioning, positioning, engaging and collaborating: then their actions are more likely to be progressive and based upon future intentions.

There are other useful barometers, too. Like trade fairs, where you can often spot the "next wave." Following industry thought-leaders at universities can be valuable. Another is workforce spread: that is, is your workforce aging or is there plenty of fresh blood to drive the future? Younger folks are more open to new trends and opportunities.

None of these suggestions require major organization surgery. Put in place and sponsored by the right teams, they will begin to show encouraging results within 6-9 months. Your venture will shift some of its *today focus* into a *tomorrow view*. Your organization will rarely be caught out and you will be regarded as a leading-edge enterprise.

Leading-edge enterprises attract and retain their industry's best and brightest. They are more focused on the future than historical results, consequently their growth and prosperity is assured: "The spark or sense of urgency is still there."

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