Exercise: Questioning Your Assumptions & Identifying Your Adaptive Challenges

ARTSFWD

Why do organizations develop assumptions?

When you're clear about what success looks like for your organization, achieving your goals overtime means creating predictions about what strategies and approaches are likely to bring you that success.

You then move forward on the basis of those predictions, and reflect on which strategies turned out to be effective, and which did not. The latter are discarded, but the former become our guidelines for repeated success.

As strategies like this continue to lead to successful results, they are assumed to be reliable predictors of success. Over time, these become implicit and, ultimately, taken for granted; they become the bedrock on which we build our organizations' activities.

For example: It is a common assumption amongst arts and culture organizations—based on success in the past—that selling whole-season subscriptions is the best way to optimize ticket revenue and build audience loyalty.

Why is it important to question assumptions?

Disturbing times and times of great and rapid change—such as we're experiencing in the arts today—demand that we re-examine the foundational assumptions that have led us to success in the past. We must rethink our assumptions in order to see if we need to change them, because they may no longer reliably predict success.

For example: In organizations across the country, subscriptions are persistently down, single tickets are rising, and feedback indicates that patrons now want to decide on attendance closer to an event. At the same time, some organizations are finding that people are strongly attracted by the ability to customize their relationship with the organization.

So organizations are beginning to ask themselves: Does our assumption about subscriptions still hold? Will that strategy continue to bring us success?

What will drive success in these changing times?

Leaders in our fields are developing new predictors of success—strategies that are unlike those of the past, respond to current evidence, and that can be tested in practice. It is these explorations that will dislodge outmoded approaches and open up new pathways for organizations to achieve their goals.

As Edgar Schein, Professor Emertius at the Sloan School of Management at MIT, and the leading writer on organizational culture, puts it: "*In order to innovate, organizations have to resurrect, examine, and then break the frame created by old assumptions.*"

For example: A new predictor for success that might replace subscriptions would be: a wholly new pricing structure focusing on individualized selling will optimize revenue, and people will become loyal if we offer them the ability to customize their experience.

Try It: Questioning Your Assumptions & Identifying Your Adaptive Challenges

Gather a small group from your organization to the five guiding questions on the following worksheets to help you surface and question underlying assumptions.

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Identifying Your Adaptive Challenges
WORKSHEET #1

Identifying Your Vision of Success

Write a paragraph articulating the community impacts and benefits that you are looking to achieve.

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WORKSHEET #2

Questioning Your Organizational Assumptions

What foundational assumptions that have reliably predicted success in the past are you now questioning?	What contradictory evidence is causing you to question each assumption?

Identifying Your Adaptive Challenges
WORKSHEET #3

Developing Bold New Directions

What new strategies for success in the field or other sectors are contributing to your questioning?	In response to all this evidence, what bold new directions can you imagine your organization taking? (What new predictors of future success might you test in practice?)

Describing Your Adaptive Challenges

Try this format for your statements: Because [1] (the most important evidence driving the challenge), we will [2] (the success you want in the future), by [3] (bold new direction(s)).

Example: Because subscriptions are persistently down, single tickets sales are rising, and people are attracted to customized experiences, we will optimize revenue and build audience loyalty in the future by introducing a wholly new pricing structure and engaging patrons in a customized manner.

1. _____

_____

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2. _____

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3. _____

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