

Brave New Work: Are You Ready to Reinvent Your Organization

BY AARON DIGNAN

The year 2020 has been one for the books. As organizations across the world have responded to the changes due to the coronavirus pandemic, and as we navigate the intense process of selecting a new set of leaders in the United States, many organizations, including the military health system (MHS), have had opportunities to explore new ways of reaching their goals. Ideally, we can take this chaotic (or unique) time to create some opportunities to reinvent many parts of our organizations. Within the Leader and Faculty Development Fellowship at Madigan Army Medical Center we discussed this book to get ideas on how to accomplish this type of change in our fellowship, Madigan, and the MHS at large. Admittedly, I realize that our ability to reinvent parts of military organizations is limited in a lot of very substantial ways. Even though we might not be able to accomplish all of the radical changes suggested in this book, we can advocate for changes in our sphere of influence, and we should take this time to do this “brave new work.”

This book opens with the following suggestions for how to be successful as a company.

1. Insist on doing everything through “channels.” Never permit shortcuts to be taken in order to expedite decisions.
2. Make “speeches.” Talk as frequently as possible and at great length. Illustrate your “points” by long

- anecdotes and accounts of personal experiences.
3. When possible, refer all matters to committees for “further study and consideration.” Attempt to make the committees as large as possible—never less than five.
 4. Bring up irrelevant issues as frequently as possible.
 5. Haggle over the precise wordings of communications, minutes, resolutions.
 6. Refer back to matters decided upon at the last meeting and attempt to reopen the question of the advisability of that decision.
 7. Advocate “caution.” Be “reasonable” and avoid haste which might result in embarrassments or difficulties later on.

8. Be worried about the propriety of any decision—raise the question of whether such action as is contemplated lies within the jurisdiction of the group or whether it might conflict with the policy of some higher echelon.
9. When training new workers, give incomplete or misleading instructions.
10. Hold conferences when there is more critical work to be done.
11. Multiply the procedures and clearances involved in issuing instructions, paychecks, and so on. See that three people have to approve everything where one would do.
12. Apply all regulations to the last letter.

continued on page 36

FIGURE 1: CI FIELD MANUAL



Accessed at <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/2012-featured-story-archive/simple-sabotage.htm>

At this point, you are either laughing or crying, depending on how much this resonates with you and your organization. This list of suggestions is part of the “Simple Sabotage Field Manual,” a larger pamphlet that the CIA developed during World War II to give to citizen members of the resistance in enemy-controlled countries to sabotage Axis Power economies. Pause. Think. The fact that many of our organizations are burdened with the bureaucratic shackles described in this pamphlet should raise concern for all of us. Are we sabotaging ourselves? These concepts are also things that should empower us to think differently about how we do things. Bureaucracy costs the United States in excess of three trillion dollars in lost annual productivity¹. More importantly, the costs to employee satisfaction, innovation, and mental health of the humans we work with are extremely high. As leaders, we must realize that higher-order capabilities like initiative, creativity, and passion are gifts that people choose to bring to work². It is our duty as leaders to create an environment where employees want to share these gifts.

This book addresses this critical issue and gives some very innovative ideas on how we, as leaders, can begin to think differently about work. By juxtaposing some essential ideas; the need for more time and the time we fill with meetings; the need for more information and the clogged lanes of communication; the need for innovation and the aversion to risk, the author highlights again that “work” is simply not working. The framework of this book is built on the idea that every organization operates under a set of assumptions that are communicated by the design of the organization’s operating system. These assumptions, portrayed by the operating system, often do not align with the organization’s established vision and goals. Dignan highlights that

if your operating system communicates assumptions that are not true, no amount of commitment, restructuring, or wellness retreats will accomplish the change you desire. He asserts that viewing your organization through wrong assumptions pushes the team to retreat to “how things used to be done.” After establishing the importance of the operating system, the book identifies some ideas of how we got to this point. He discusses interesting historical perspectives and the concept of organizational debt, which is any structure or policy that no longer serves the organization. The author suggests, “This debt needs to be removed through vigilant simplification to create roles, rules, and processes that are inherently agile. Unfortunately, organizational debt creates bureaucracy, and bureaucracy protects organizational debt.” The book then discusses the antidote, which it describes as “Evolutionary Organizations” who are “people positive” by trusting employees and “complexity conscious” by keeping things as simple as possible.

The second portion of this book dives into the idea of evaluating your organization’s operating system by looking at twelve domains of what he describes as the operating system canvas (Figure 2). For each of the domains the book offers “thought starters,” which are examples from evolutionary organizations to help you start to challenge the assumptions of your operating system in that domain. Each domain section also discusses ways to take action, insights to consider, and questions to ask. This discussion is the essence of the book and the most significant opportunity to learn for leaders. One example of a thought starter was the idea that job titles mask the multiple roles that most employees play and can stifle innovation if the employee does not feel empowered to participate outside of their specific title. Another example of ways to take action is to remove the “tragedy of the

commons” concept, which supports the idea that employees cannot share common resources. For each of the twelve domains, there were several innovative and fun ideas for leaders to use.

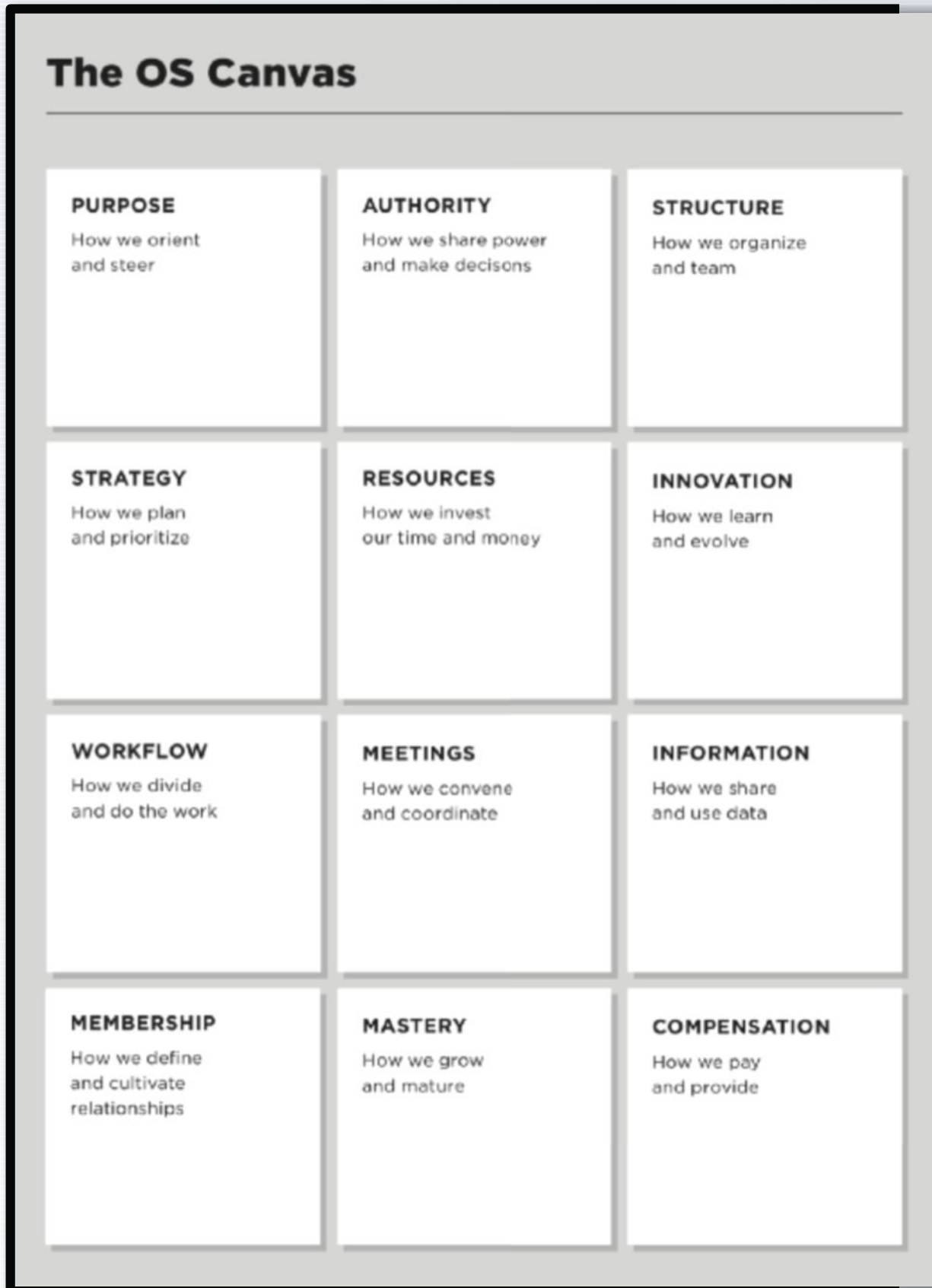
The final portion of the book may be one of the most significant: change is not a finite destination. It is so vital that we consistently evaluate how we are doing as leaders and to evaluate the opportunities for our organizations to improve. It is an ongoing process that should be done responsibly and systematically. This book outlines six patterns worth encouraging when considering responsible change. It is essential as leaders to ask teammates to consider commitment, boundaries, priming, looping, criticality, and continuity. The book emphasizes the importance of cultivating a safe space to facilitate change with multiple ideas on how to accomplish this.

In conclusion, this book has given us a challenge to look for opportunities to “reinvent” the organizations in which we work, especially in these turbulent times. The overwhelming urge to stick with the status quo in organizations with a lot of red tape is understandable, but you can be the change you want to see in the sphere that you influence. I hope that everyone is staying safe as we continue to navigate these uncertain and interesting times. Find ways to thrive now. Do not wait on COVID to enjoy what you do. Do not let bureaucracy and the status quo win. I look forward to seeing everyone on the same side of the screen in the near future. Please let me know if you have any comments or questions at tyler.s.rogers11.mil@mail.mil.

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FIGURE 2: THE OPERATION SYSTEM CANVAS



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