

The Meaning Organization

Traditional businesses are struggling to recover from the economic downturn. They'll need to shift their focus from profits to authentic social engagement to have meaningful impact in the world.

By Umair Haque



Welcome to the roaring teens. We're in the aftermath of the worst economic crisis, many people argue, since the Great Depression. As mightily as governments, central banks, and scholars have labored, a jobless, fruitless, and suspiciously *meaningless* recovery has begun.

Perhaps that's because the so-called Great Recession wasn't truly a recession at all. What if the downturn was actually a Great Transformation instead?

Ponder, for a moment, a troublesome paradox: The noughties (2000–2009) were a lost decade for America. Net job creation, wealth creation, shareholder value creation, and median wage growth were not just marginal, but *nil or negative*. Today, the ranks of the long-term unemployed have exploded, and their jobs seem to have simply vanished. Yet, corporations are hoarding cash, struggling to figure out where to invest it. Yesterday's jobs, already replaced at lower and lower cost, won't pass muster and neither will yesterday's factories, fleets, brands, "products," or "outputs." So what might?

A better and very different global economy made up of novel, more beneficial industries, more purposive types of organizations, and more passionate work will bring radically more fruitful approaches to commerce, trade, and exchange. We're in the midst of a bumpy, lengthy transition from a lackluster present, to an uncertain future. The grinding gears and titanic motors of the industrial age are coming, finally, to a clattering, juddering halt. What you might call the age of wisdom is being painfully and noisily born.

In this era, it's the ability to make up for the shortcomings of the prior decades—the belching, wheezing, crashing economic engine that gave us plenty materially, but has left us spiritually, relationally, emotionally, and developmentally empty. The age of wisdom is about attaining a more *authentic prosperity*, one that doesn't just “grow,” but that sustainably nurtures the growth of people, communities, and society.

Consider an analogy: Just as we're learning to improve yesterday's internal combustion engine, radical innovators in the age of wisdom are learning to build better economic engines and novel, disruptive institutions. What do they look like? Let's delve into history to gauge the future of organizations. First, there was what you might call the executing organization that capitalized on the industrial age factory. Success was about churning out the most commodities. Then there was what the eminent author and MIT lecturer Peter Senge famously called the Learning Organization. Success was about integrating knowledge faster than rivals. Yet, the great crisis of yesteryear that includes mass unemployment, growing distrust in business, and the evisceration of community, to name just a few, all suggest that neither learning nor doing are sufficient for 21st-century prosperity.

Enter, the Meaning Organization. Meaning Organizations create micro- and macro-structures that fuel radically meaningful work, life, and play. They're concerned first and foremost not just with *making* goods, or *learning to make* goods, but with ensuring that production, consumption, and exchange scale ever more *meaningful* peaks of prosperity.

Here's a brief overview of the Meaning Organization: what its competencies are, what its potential is, and why a business might want to think about becoming one.

Significance. A product or service is meaningful only when it has a positive economic impact. Impact happens when an organization creates what I call *thick* value or authentic economic value. We're all-too-familiar with thin value—value that's merely transferred from others rather than created anew, which is essentially an economic illusion. CDOs (collateralized debt obligations), for example, were a value transfer machine, from homeowners to banks, and their example illustrates that thin value builds a house of cards liable to come crashing down. Thick value is more than the immediate, isolated value of a thing to shareholders, managers, the tuned-out market or consumers; it's the deep, enduring, human worth of a thing to everyone.

Outcomes thinking. The wise general, it is often said, is one who can see several moves in advance. The Meaning Organization is one that has mastered deep vision: it can see several steps into the distant future, to the outcome of a product, service, or business model. Did the solution *actually* make people tangibly and authentically better off? It's a vital question for organizations to ask because the industrial age created negative outcomes, like Big Macs, SUVs, and McMansions. So, did the outcomes of your organization reach only a local optimum, or did it truly help people scale a higher peak? We're used to thinking that being “customer-centric” is the ideal companies should seek, but Meaning Organizations go further. They are *outcomes-centric*, seeking not merely to satisfy consumers, but to better them.

Harmony. From outcomes-centric thinking flows harmony. In music, harmony happens when notes and chords fit together, to create a “good” sound. For the economy, harmony is a state in which *outcomes* fit together, to create a common good. Companies often put financial interests first. A Meaning Organization puts *people* first, on an equal footing with communities, society, and tomorrow's generations. Mastering the art of positive impact means understanding the outcomes of a product, service, or business model on all. Where there is a negative impact, the organization must strive to ameliorate it, so harmony, instead of discord, is retained.

Purpose. Solely pursuing near-term profit will always yield discord by elevating the immediate rather than the sustainable interests. What harmonizes an organization is a *higher* purpose. What, beyond profit, knits the company, shareholders, individuals, and society together? What is the common goal that is meaningful to all and that everyone can be enriched by? What is the larger, more enduring conception of prosperity, whether it is happiness, wellness, or worthiness, that an organization can contribute toward? Those are the questions of higher purpose.

Peace. Higher purpose cannot be created through economic violence like the hardball tactics of intimidation, brinkmanship, and unfairness that are part and parcel of industrial age business as usual. The costs imposed destroy the bond with stakeholders necessary to discover, create, and renew a higher purpose for the organization, therein turning the thickest of value vanishingly thin. So Meaning Organizations must learn to become masters of economic nonviolence. They must master not just free trade, but fair trade; not just enterprise, but ethics; not just innovation, but integrity.

Love. Nonviolence, purpose, harmony, and impact can't be created by de-skilled, frightened, disengaged workers, bought and sold in bulk by the lowest bidder. Nor can they be created by calculated, soulless talent. Meaning Organizations aren't just composed of a bigger brain or cheaper muscle. Meaning is about what industrial age business always lacked: a bigger *heart*. The stuff of meaning can only be created, maintained, and re-created by people who are passionate enough not just to love what they do, but to *do what they love*.

Ambition. Yes, organizations can start by taking small steps—and many organizations should. But to tightly knit these threads together, organizations must take the quantum leap in the final analysis. Instead of focusing on how to outperform competitors in terms of operational efficiency and customer service, they need a larger ambition. How are we to change the world radically for the better? Organizations are a cause, so what is the effect they want to have?

No doubt, to some, this approach sounds a bit *soft*. But then again, perhaps the dictates of yesterday's dogma were suspiciously *hard*. We were told that greed was good, penury was the price of progress, plenitude had to be exacted from nature's bounty, and efficacy demanded the dulling of the heart and the deadening of the soul. Today, these commandments of a tired scripture seem less like apothegms for sowing a more fruitful harvest and more like the faded myths of a rusting yesterday.

Perhaps, then, like me, you believe that we must do better. This is neither easy nor, I suspect, acceptable for most organizations. But then again, revolution rarely is. We're in the midst of a historic structural transformation. Its challenge isn't merely revival, or recovery, but revolution: *building* the novel, unseen institutions, like Meaning Organizations, of a 21st-century economy. The age of wisdom won't happen courtesy of Ben Bernanke, Lloyd Blankfein, or Paul Krugman. Rather, it begins with *you*.

I've sketched the barest portrait of seven competencies here. But, it's the renegades of tomorrow who will ignite, deepen, and develop them, by staring down the complexities, difficulties, and fine-grained nuances of each. So if you yearn to be a revolutionary, it's time to get radically meaningful. Be one, become one—or contend with one.

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