

Right Sizing Growth

Creating an infrastructure that fits your growth

By Karen Natzel, Business Therapist, K Communications



Growth takes many forms and impacts every facet of your business. When growth is guided and nurtured, it can produce amazing results. If it is unfettered, it can create chaos.

Infrastructure

Increased revenue, new services, and expansion of staff are common, visible signs of growth. The less visible, and often less enticing part of growth is making sure your organization's infrastructure matches its evolving needs.

Antiquated and divergent ways of doing business are common internal ailments. All too often businesses grow in volume and speed without tending to the **systems, protocols, and processes** that help build **predictability** and **consistency**. Failing infrastructure sneaks up on an organization's ability to perform well.

Infrastructure is more than tangible upgrades. The \$1 trillion infrastructure bill passed last fall is intended to modernize ailing roads, bridges, and trains, *while* providing broadband access and clean drinking water. Oregon is slated to repair and rebuild 1,287 miles of highways and 395 bridges, *while* focusing on climate change mitigation, resilience, equity, and safety.

"Infrastructure for its own sake is not an end" – Joel Moser, World Economic Forum, reminds us. Same is true in your organization. Creating structure for its own sake, without connection to your purpose, goals, culture, and size, is not the solution. However, *having the right structural and operational fit can optimize performance and satisfaction.*

While working with a leadership team experiencing growing pains, I suggested they needed more structure. They bristled. It felt like a threat to their very essence, creativity, and agility. We decided to speak about providing a better "**operational framework**" to get things done. Their concerns were not without merit. *During periods of growth, it's imperative to mind the very culture that is spurring the expansion.*

Recently in a conversation with another client, we were discussing their tremendous growth. There was palpable enthusiasm and trepidation in their voices. They were jazzed about the new markets, yet concerned about staffing resources, and equally, maintaining the culture that has won them internal and external accolades for years.



Caring for the Culture

In an organization's early stages, people are accustomed to wearing a lot of hats, juggling responsibilities, and doing what it takes to get things done. Small firms often have the advantage of access to key decision-makers and being nimble. There's an excitement to that start up flavor, and leaders understandably want to preserve the entrepreneurial spirit. As an organization grows, that approach becomes less rewarding and effective. Yet, it can be incredibly difficult to extricate oneself from the whirlwind of daily demands and the magnetic pull of habitual patterns to create ways of operating that better reflect the growth.

As you grow, **be cognizant of naming the cultural attributes of what makes your organization thrive**. As leaders, actively embrace the values you have defined and acknowledge others when they demonstrate a trait that exemplifies your culture. First and foremost, **demonstrate that you care** for the people who have shaped the firm's trajectory.

While the right infrastructure is essential for smooth operations, your culture will dictate adherence to any processes and protocols.

Process – How things get done

At first, **adding structure** to how you do your work may feel cumbersome. It will feel different – and **different can equal resistance**. Having established protocols and defined standard operating procedures sets an internal standard for delivering work. When it is clearly documented, it can bring **transparency** - illuminating expectations, handoffs, overlaps, even waste and gaps. When workflows are undocumented and/or confusing, it creates inefficiencies and frustrations. Without a standard operating procedure, there is a lack of clarity about who is supposed to do what, who has capacity to make decisions, who should be consulted and/or informed. When done well, it builds confidence in delivery of the work and **improves communications, and trust**, among team members.

People – Who gets the work done

A rapidly growing professional services firm that I am working with realized that with the expansion of ownership, a larger staff, and changing operational needs, it was time to move away from their "everyone does everything" way of doing business.

We conducted a **prioritization exercise** to define what was most critical to the business. They landed on bringing **clarity to roles and responsibilities**, recognizing the current approach is negatively impacting team dynamics and contributing to burnout. Without clarity of roles and responsibilities, they ran the risk of tension and resentment from **uneven workloads** and **unclear authority**.



In addition to re-examining **job descriptions** and the **organizational chart**, the leaders are looking at **workflows**, scaling responsibilities to the project, and even examining meeting structure and cadence for better flow of information. The intent is to create **stability** with defined levels of **autonomy** and diminished micromanagement. The exercise is meant to help team members understand expectations, opportunities for growth, and drive accountability with transparent, adopted protocols. It will also serve to create more buy-in on organizational direction because people will understand how and where they can contribute.

What needs to change?

Are some of your people doing too much? Are they regularly “swimming outside their lanes”? Are they feeling out of the loop? Do they have appropriate authority for right-level decision-making?

Consider conducting an **internal audit of your operations**. Pick an area you know has been neglected and is creating grief. Map the current workflow using a visual representation such as a **flowchart** with steps required to complete a process, responsibilities, and relational accountabilities, as well as decision-making points.

Often this exercise illuminates bottlenecks, redundancies, risks, as well as hidden capacity for streamlining and adding value. It defines parameters of roles, assesses adherence, protects against finger pointing, and better lends itself to quality assurance. A well-defined process helps onboard and train new staff.

Think of it as the next iteration of your business. Create value for strengthening your infrastructure. The cost of not doing it runs the risk of foundations crumbling - staff attrition, unhealthy culture, inefficiencies, and burnout. Determine how you want to grow and provide a framework for smart, thoughtful growth. *Right size it for what fits!*

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Karen Natzel serves as a business therapist to leaders who want to create healthy, vibrant, and high performing organizations. Karen helps her clients navigate change and growth by serving as a confidential sounding board; as facilitator, trainer, coach, strategist, conflict-resolver, communicator, relationship-builder, awareness-raiser, and potential-cultivator. Her passion is inspiring awareness and growth in others.

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