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The Essentials of Great Innovation Teams, Part II:
Building Meaningful Missions

by Robert Ogilvie and Jeffrey McNally

Teams need great missions. But what makes a mission great? For starters, it must be clear enough to communicate well (both verbally and visually). Second, it should lead to worthwhile results. Finally, it must be challenging enough to bring out each team member's best while also boosting learning and development. Gone are the days when it's sufficient for managers to simply say, "This is a profitable activity so staff should fall in line." On the contrary, the magical circle between "What are we doing?" "Why should we do this?" and "Why do I personally care?" is a complex art that taps into not only mindset and soft skills but also the strategic acumen and exploratory prowess of managers as they try to engineer myriad preconditions so that people and projects can thrive. In Part II of this three-part *Executive Update* series, we explore how to build meaningful missions.

Let's jump off from where we started in Part I of this *Update* series, which examined building teams and addressing the invisible talent gap, and focus on the team mission. Here in Part II, we tackle two critical areas: (1) *impactful visioning*, which addresses the central need for purpose, the strategic foresight for leveraging emotional intelligence (EQ), the balancing of goals and mission, and mindfully organizing teams; and (2) *motivation management*, which covers organizational culture, the people side of needs, and the journey of becoming a self-governing team.

Before we break down the components of impactful visioning and motivation management, let's first touch on team focus and group agency. Typical HR and task management tends to focus on the individual: who to hire, when to fire, who's responsible, and who's not. Certainly, it's great to dig into that specificity when needed but, as suggested in Part I, this deeply misses the mark when it comes to boosting performance and setting up good organizational contexts. Even an ace team will flounder in a bad context! Furthermore, many researchers have stressed the value and impact of focusing on teams, validating the potent statistical importance of teams (over individual factors) but also weaving in the social cognitive side of group agency and creating shared mental models. At our evolutionary core, we are hunter-gatherers who love teaming up and sense-making together.

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Impactful Visioning

There are myriad reasons why visioning (or missioning) work is important, and some recent mega trends in play (e.g., the push toward digital transformation, the quest for improved agility) make simplified missions less acceptable. Moreover, the COVID pandemic has accelerated some alternate working trends, particularly the "new normal" focus of remote teams and Zoom meetings. These mega trends — working from home, in particular — highlight the critical value of teamwork and also slaughter the many sacred cows of our 20th-century zeitgeist of what the industry workplace should look like. Here's where impactful visioning comes in and the four critical reasons why we need it:

1. Profit is now seen as a means to an end; *purpose* is taking center stage to help align goals and emphasize long-term impact.

2. Developing strategic foresight is a matter of versatile readiness across many possible futures and stresses leveraging the *EQ competencies* that drive strategy, especially optimism; this demands building up dynamic capabilities.

3. Teams need to balance "should happen" goals with the "could happen" mission. This requires a gut check; teams must explore their long-term mission to ensure it's flexible, exploratory, and able to optimize what *could* happen.

4. Vision requires precision to be brought into everyday work and team dynamics; approaches like *mindful organizing* offer a way for teams to prepare and respond better in accordance with what they really value, especially in complex situations.

Post-Profit Life & Differentiation via Purpose

The "craving for purpose" outlook implies that the motivational and social value that true purpose unlocks is of primary strategic concern for managers and executive leaders.

Research shows that salary increases stop making a motivational difference after about US $70K per year. Given that one's survival needs have already been met, the added tradeoffs of how a raise would impact one's workload (whether in time, intensity, or responsibility) are simply not perceived as worth it. Of course, this varies a bit by personality; those with low agreeableness and high neuroticism are among the most at-risk groups for materialism and workaholism. The same is becoming true for organizations: on one hand, they just need enough revenue and profits to survive. On the other hand, the big impact companies hope to make (on society and with customers) and thus how and who they resonate with are becoming more important questions than ever. Classic corporate social responsibility (CSR) tends to approach people and ecological pursuits as a Band-Aid afterthought, while the "craving for purpose" outlook implies that the motivational and social value that true purpose unlocks is of primary strategic concern for managers and executive leaders. This interest toward a "win-win-win" strategy (between staff, shareholders, and outside stakeholders/impact) has now become a market demand and a strategic differentiator.

There is a growing number of standards and operations certifications around sustainability, talent engagement, and good governance (e.g., benefit corporation "B corp" status, Reporting 3.0 standards). But the most frequent use case is actually not large enterprises with physical products reducing their ecological waste but rather the small firms (often agencies under 50 staff) of intellectual workers that are deeply committed to specific outside causes (e.g., the clothing company that plants trees, the food producer that donates breakfast to needy schoolkids, the agency that gives 5% of its capacity to community charity projects) and socially broadcast that purpose. Why? For these tiny yet mighty small-to-medium enterprises, it's not about "greening up" but rather about finding a just cause worth fighting for. That purpose becomes a beacon to attract the right talent and keep the caliber and engagement of their human capital high.

Great leaders must be perseverant enough to commit to impactful, just causes despite obstacles and flexible enough to spot emerging trends and change direction, as needed, in order to create sustainable win-win-win plans.

Indeed, visionary thinker Simon Senek's work has shifted from the big "start with why?" questions to a long-term leadership attitude of the "infinite game." He rightly notes the value of having both a *just cause* that is impactful and inspiring as well as the *existential flexibility* to adapt and reinvent strategy over time. Great leaders must be perseverant enough to commit to impactful, just causes despite obstacles and flexible enough to spot emerging trends and change direction, as needed, in order to create sustainable win-win-win plans.

Seeing Preferred Futures via EQ: Willpower, Optimism & Noble Purpose

According to a competency-based model of EQ — the Six Seconds Emotional Intelligence Assessment, or SEI — three EQ factors comprise our overall drive: intrinsic motivation (and willpower), optimism, and the pursuit of noble goals. These factors affect how well we can engage in the strategic management and foresight work at hand. Engaging intrinsic motivation means "to be energized and driven by personal values and commitments rather than by external forces," and having the willpower (or grit) to persevere and enact

them into the world. This is true, too, for organizations with clear short-term interests to survive and goals to fulfill. Certainly, achieving small goals that match the team's values can feel empowering and occasional sprints of intense work can even enhance team building, be motivating, and catalyze new visioning. However, overly striving for these small goals and continually demanding grit "as the answer" without seeing the big picture leads to burnout and risks myopic fixed thinking. Intrinsic motivation also locks us into operating in single-loop learning mode, where we are only able to improve tactical efficiency but are not interested in alternative options or creating new capacities. Of course, this can be useful if a clear and effective plan and purpose/direction are already in play.

Optimism reminds us that we do not have to do everything at once because good options abound and are systematically created over time, allowing complexity to be managed through ever better available choices.

Optimism, on the other hand, allows us to conceive good potential futures and buffers us from daily stressors. Exercising optimism means "taking a proactive perspective of hope and possibility." Modern positive psychology would contrast this against naive and insular tactics to queue false confidence or ignorantly only look at the bright side, avoiding evidence that contradicts that view. This optimistic capacity to explore and freshly reconsider opportunities based on actual data, people, and environment enables new options and operational choices — clearly the lifeblood of successful industry, from scrappy entrepreneurship to large enterprise product development. Optimism also reminds us that we do not have to do everything at once because good options abound and are systematically created over time, allowing complexity to be managed through ever better available choices. Exercising optimism gets us operating in the double-learning loop, exploring options and managing short-term versus long-term capacity choices; thus, it's the realm managers should be spending most of their time within. This dual function of optimism — as both a drive factor and an element that impacts our decision making through seeing better options — makes it perhaps the most potent EQ competency to cultivate, for operations or strategy work.

Finally, we have the last drive factor: noble purpose. Building clear missions that truly "see the future" requires tremendous sensemaking and storytelling skills, particularly at the C-suite and board levels. Pursuing noble goals is simply "connecting your daily choices

with your overarching sense of purpose." In working with complexity via the two practical realms of the [Stacey Matrix](), the "expert sensemaking" approach requires robust data and better models to deeply yet adaptively understand the nuanced long-term system forces and trends in play, while the "people collaboration" approach requires unifying trust building and needs clarifying among an ever larger group of engaged stakeholders. Weaving together these two halves — the big vision of what's ultimately worth doing and all those served by that impact — is hard enough, and linking it to daily choices might be the hardest part. Pursuing noble goals gets us operating in the [triple-learning loop](), questioning deep assumptions and getting us to what exactly the greatest big-picture win could and should look like. This style of learning is crucial when new strategy and change management is required but can also be intangible and even endless such that you do not want normal operations to visit this realm too often.

Combining noble purpose and optimism is the best combination to unlearn no-longer-needed habits and remove technical and operational debt as new directions are set, and accumulated processes can be easily removed as needed.

Now, we can envision how these EQ drive factors might interact in teams and strategy. For example, when contrasting various futures against each other, the team must explore new strategic pathways and then narrow down its field of worthwhile options, using optimism and then intrinsic motivation. This is often the place for good scenario-building work, such as using four quadrants that map positive and negative trajectories of the two most critical issues. When faced with unprecedented, quick, tactical choices, knowing which type of big impact the team and organization prioritizes is incredibly useful when navigating intrinsic motivation with clear noble purpose. More commonly, middle management is full of optimism and noble-purpose demands as they metabolize big-picture plans into operational choices and refactor people and infrastructure in new directions. Combining noble purpose and optimism is also the best combination to unlearn no-longer-needed habits and remove technical and operational debt as new directions are set, and accumulated processes can be easily removed as needed.

Strategic planning is a perfect use case for futures work. This application area is technically called "foresight work" because it focuses on future options along with the EQ of an organization and its preferred futures (in lieu of, say, trendspotting, designing prototype

solutions, or building up perspective via specific stakeholders or technical lenses). What makes foresight work different than typical strategic planning is that classical strategic planning typically focuses on "one big idea" and finding reasons and methods in which that idea could work. Fueled by EQ, particularly good optimism, we not only have more drive but are in a much better place to do good foresight work.

Releasing Tension via Balancing "Should Happen" Goals with "Could Happen" Mission

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The tension between short-term and long-term goals is continuously in play, whether or not we are conscious of it. On the mission side of the equation, even when we can feasibly lay out the specific project/mission at hand, the larger vision is typically so overloaded that it fails to provide any useful strategic clarity or sense of decision-making priorities in the short term. So is a mission just a long-term goal? Although the mission taps into a longer time horizon, it may fail to capture the impact and flexibility within a specific strategic direction. One of the gifts that Agile brings is the ability to manage complexity, including technical debt and direction of a business product. The tension between what *could* be built long term and what *should* be built short term lies at the heart of why conceiving a mission is important. That long-term sense of what really moves the needles forward provides better strategic value. This is crucial in pulling teams and operations out of the trap of busyness and blind productivity. So gut check: how flexible, exploratory, and able to optimize what *could* happen is your long-term mission?

Powering Complex Work via Mindful Organizing

So what can make a missioning or visioning exercise better? Mindfulness. General research in the mindfulness community shows that preplanning out larger goals (as individuals) and being reminded of those goals later on when doing our daily work is

beneficial — first, it boosts motivation; second, it helps prioritize decision making. It turns out that this is true in teams as well; this is what we call "mindful organizing." This approach works through both proactive/preventative mechanisms (that might nudge us to remember top priorities or common risks to anticipate when working) and recovery/resiliency mechanisms (mostly around how swiftly, clearly, and cooperatively the team responds) while the team works. Whether the focus is on safety or innovation, or all manner of adaptations, the point is that complex environments seem to benefit from mindfulness; thus, this practice among teams is widely needed and useful. But this requires the team to create good, healthy, adaptive norms that they can be reminded of by their team member peers; this is the team's operational level of mission and vision. Once in place, a team that follows mindful organizing is better able to anticipate and adapt the complex challenges of work ahead.

Motivation Management

Finding ways to boost engagement and motivation is a huge, ongoing issue with several dimensions.

Flow psychology research reminds us that work is our best chance for a peak experience since it is the best place for us to deeply use our best skills, be challenged, and learn. But motivation is composed of many elements — short- and long-term goals, personal and contextual reasons, essential and hierarchical levels — so finding ways to boost engagement and motivation is a huge, ongoing issue with several dimensions (hence, it's a complex adaptive system). To have a fighting chance of managing motivation well, we must consider three core points about organizations, people, and teams:

1. Organizational culture is like an iceberg with the formal vision/mission/values concept barely breaking above the surface, so getting staff, and particularly leaders, to see clearly and reflect upon their culture (a requirement to actually change it) is inherently defense-provoking.

2. People are driven by five basic needs and a personal vision of what will make them happy.

3. We need to move from manager-led teams to those that self-govern, especially as company environments shift to increased remote work and virtual teams.

Culture Goes Deeper Than Vision & Values

As we aim to link up projects to accomplish small "g" goals to big "V" vision, we stumble into familiar territory — mission, vision, values — but does this trio of elements truly help? Usually not, for a few reasons.

First, many common attempts to measure culture (or values), whether by internal HR managers and organizational leaders or external coaches/consultants, are problematic because they attempt to shoehorn culture as if it's a natural and fixed derivative of personality (with boxed-in traits and oversimplified types). This often makes acquiring data about culture simply an exercise of "garbage in, garbage out." Included within this poorly conceived exercise is the (now typical) high-growth startup faux pas to simply use "culture" as an offhand way to inadequately outline role requirements (which we tackled in Part I in describing poor job design and a classic case of manager confirmation bias causing cultural groupthink).

Second, asking an organization to accurately describe its culture by means of a broad qualitative or "pick from a list" rubric isn't much better, according to expert practitioners on trust and engagement. Even value assessments that try to skirt around "observer bias" with hidden mechanisms (e.g., Barrett Values, where you select 10 values from a list of 100) make effective reassessment, which is needed for ongoing apples-to-apples measurement, impossible. Moreover, aside from formal measurements, merely describing or reporting on the culture of an organization always has some small (or large) degree of pushback. Just as humans are self-affirming in their instrumental rationality, groups of humans (i.e., organizations, teams) do not fully appreciate when assumptions thought to be off limits are brought up for discussion.

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Thus, stating your vision and its accompanying values is not sufficient to create an engaged culture. Culture is a complex living system comprising *expressed and implicit* norms and values, which informs staff members on how to survive in your organization, how to get rewarded, and how to avoid punishment. Everything that you do *and don't* say creates the assumptions and beliefs that fuel the culture. For example, if you say that you value innovation but then point out failures on a daily basis, the underlying assumption is that in order to avoid punishment, staff members believe that they must succeed in any innovative endeavors undertaken. The result: a drop in risk tolerance throughout the organization and an unwillingness to take responsibility for experimental projects. When you don't create an engaged culture where personnel is comfortable in its environment, you can't support innovation. This is why you should care about culture in a way that goes beyond vision and values. People's level of engagement is influenced by the culture in which they work. If you are not currently getting the performance or results you want, then the answer likely lies in the culture you have created.

> *When you don't create an engaged culture where personnel is comfortable in its environment, you can't support innovation.*

Changing company culture is a coaching problem that will require figuring out what's working and what's not. This is best done through a hybrid approach consisting of both validated team and organizational assessments alongside the qualitative investigation of group facilitation to make change happen. A good assessment example is the Six Seconds Vital Signs tool, which looks at five drivers that compose outcomes around strategy, organizational agility, operational results, and client/staff satisfaction, and the facets that compose them, allowing for baseline and remeasurement. Top criteria for a team coach/group facilitator includes a coaching designation (e.g., Associate Certified Coach [ACC] or Professional Certified Coach [PCC] from the International Coaching Federation or a European Mentoring and Coaching Council [EMCC] designation more popular in EMEA regions), eclectic training in a few methodologies for both effective methods and the required agility approach, ability to measure and weave data into the coaching process, a live sense of professional presence and a trusting rapport, and a preemptive ability to clarify what reasonable outcomes could look like (which often means gently reframing lofty or vague expectations).

Only then can you perform the team coaching work that aligns behavior to embody the values that actually support your mission.

5 Basic Needs & Personal Vision

Your team is a collection of human beings driven by physical and psychological needs. They seek a specific working environment — a team of colleagues, an organizational culture, a worthwhile purpose — that lets them (attempt to) fulfill these needs.

Social cognitive psychologists have studied human needs and the concept of "self" for decades. Choice Theory streamlines this area of social development by describing five basic needs of all individuals:

1. **Survival** — gaining stability, having appetite for risk and comfort, raising a family

2. **Love and belonging** — the full spectrum of intimacy, affiliation, and relatedness

3. **Power** — being influential, effective, recognized, and upholding good status

4. **Freedom** — to make choices (in work or life), seeking fairness, living our values and a purposeful life

5. **Fun** — playing, learning, experimenting, and having variety — a known spice of life!

Although the level of each of these personal needs doesn't change much over time, the means through which each need gets met does over a lifetime. This means that, over time, we usually get increasingly better at fulfilling our needs. This is true whether we're just starting our career and building up signature skill sets to enter our chosen field, building up the business generalist and soft skills that all managers require, or envisioning great futures and shepherding brilliant strategies that today's executives are demanded to do. Thus, the elements of our personal vision expand bit by bit and change over time.

Since the same set of choices could fulfill various needs, we must continually ask ourselves, "What's the best way to get my needs met

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now?" This helps in composing a personal vision meant to guide our choices. The five basic needs are straightforward and even quantifiable; the ongoing qualitative question of how we fulfill them through our personal vision, however, is endless. Thus, an important question to ask yourself as a leader is: how does your team mission serve in satisfying these basic needs?

Moving from Manager-Led to Self-Governing Teams

Creating a sustainably great team — developmentally, operationally, strategically — takes time and many factors to come together. Richard Hackman's Authority Matrix (manager-led teams → self-managing teams → self-designing teams → self-governing teams) is a reminder that there are stages beyond simply being able to do a task well without the manager's supervision (see Figure 1). We want teams to be able to specify and create the context around them so they can enable great work and thrive in doing their tasks. Moreover, we eventually want teams to understand value delivery, strategy, and adaptive opportunity enough that they become self-governing. As we now rightly shift to evermore remote work
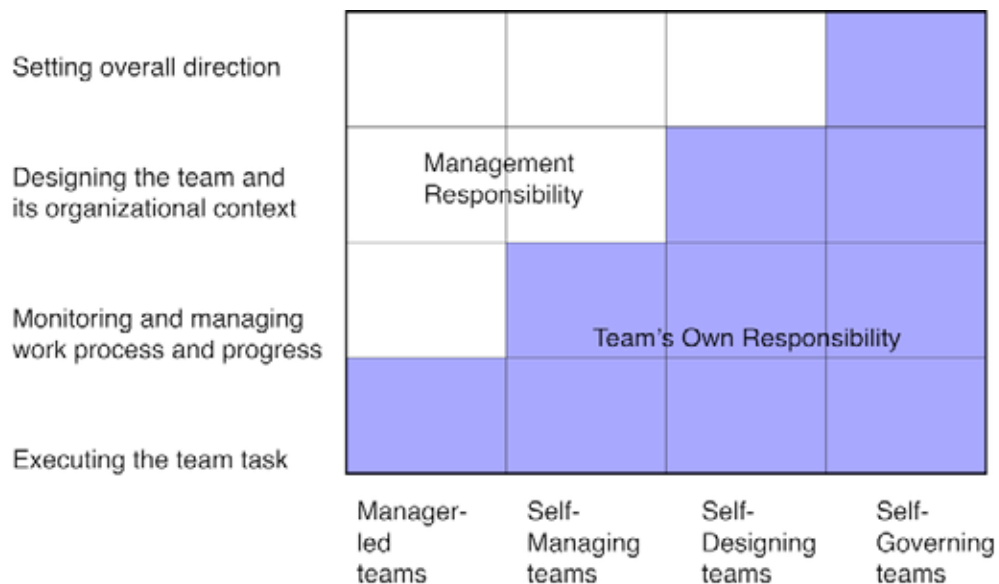

Figure 1 — Richard Hackman's four-stage Authority Matrix.

and virtual teams, it's these organizational support and business strategy drivers that will separate the good remote teams from the truly great ones. Simply knowing which self-management stage your remote teams are currently at should help direct the kind of questions, learning, and processes that can help teams further develop.

From Meaning to Teaming

We all crave more purposeful work and have less and less patience for companies and industries that cannot put our human needs front and center. This demands for us to know ourselves, our needs, and what personally is driving us. Being able to find and especially create the kind of work context that taps into that meaning is the hard part. Building up our willpower, optimism, and noble purpose is the best chance to make this happen.

In Part II, we will touch on team and process factors, which contribute 30% to overall performance. We'll also explore the perfect-sized team to focus on: big enough that you can make a difference, yet small enough that you can get a handle on things and show significant progress in weeks and months — not quarters and years.

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Robert Ogilvie helps growing businesses that are ready to establish themselves as a leader in the market through strategic organizational engagement and foresight-led innovation. His background in psychology and assessments combine with his C-level tech industry experience and International Coaching Federation (ICF)–certified coaching. Mr. Ogilvie's focus on transferable skills around innovation, capturing business value, and adaptive strategy apply to all mid- and upper-level managers, ensuring measurable and predictable leadership development that organization can truly see. He blends strategic foresight, flow, and business intelligence to help executives tackle complex problems in an era of inevitable disruptions. Mr. Ogilvie has been lead organizer with several organizations, including Startup Weekend, Google Developer Groups, and the Project Management Institute (PMI). He holds three degrees, spanning psychology (with honors), business management, and technology management, in addition to his coaching qualifications in emotional

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