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Preparing for Growth; Don't Get Left Behind the Curve



Having business growth catch you by surprise isn't a unique experience. It's very possible that you've experienced it first-hand—as a CEO, an employee, a consultant to a growing firm, an entrepreneur or as an executive.

Here's how it often plays out: a newly created firm begins to expand; adding employee numbers 3, 10, 15, 25

—creating a team driven by the opportunity to spread their wings and do what they do best: Help grow a business.

Staff is brought on fairly quickly. Onboarding happens on the job because no one has time to devote to a more formal process. Everyone does what is needed to serve customers, independent of whether or not colleagues are doing it the same way. No one is really concerned at this point because all share the same entrepreneurial spirit.

There are few formal meetings, conversations happen on the fly—in the hallway, through e-mail, conference calls, GoToMeeting—even late night gatherings for food or drinks. Problems are solved in the moment, for that particular situation. Documentation is scarce or non-existent. Weekdays are long. With weekends being used for catch-up work. And the energy? It's contagious. It's as though everything you touch turns to gold.

Until one day the company hits that magical number: 50, 60, 70 or 100 employees... and something starts to change. You find the need for more finance controls, more consistent internal and external communications, human resource compliance, systemic processes, scalable technology, brand portrayal in the marketplace, and you need to define how work gets done in a consistent and repeatable way. In other words: you've hit the tipping point... that point where, as Ichak Adizes (in *Corporate Lifecycles*) says, you've shifted out of "infancy" and "go-go" (overcoming negative cash flow and sales are up) to "adolescence" which demands delegation of authority, a shift in leadership style and a mindset of working smarter, not harder.

One of the biggest surprises for CEOs of companies of this size is the speed and level of transition that occurs at this point. During this transition, they want to preserve the core aspects of what makes the company great, while planning and executing a business strategy to keep the momentum.

Through our work with CEOs who are going through this transition, we've noted below the top challenges they face... the things that keep them up at night. Proactive and intelligent planning for growth is key to minimizing that lost sleep. Undoing people, process and technology issues that are not scaleable is hard work. Below, we outline the top challenges and what you, as a leader, can do to offset them.

Challenge #1: CEO Has Too Many Roles

The CEO begins to feel stretched and starts to lose touch with his/her ability to be proactive. Complexities arise demanding his attention in specific areas, while other areas go unattended. The ability to respond to the important opportunities and threats wanes and the entrepreneurial flare is replaced with barely covering the bases. This often occurs because the CEO has single-handedly guided the firm from its inception.

Solutions:

- Define the true long-term CEO role based on key functions, core competency, and where the organization needs to head in the future.
- Focus on strategy and leading the organization.
- Define key roles needed to make the business successful and find the right talent to fill them.
- Turn over the reins of these key areas to others who are experts and delegate responsibilities into the defined roles.
- Serve as a mentor and coach to leaders.

Challenge #2: Communication Challenges Arise

Communication at the lunchroom table is no longer good enough to ensure clarity and consistency across the organization. Internally, standard communication systems and key messages are not communicated at regular intervals or as part of the early stage operations, which creates problems during high growth periods. Customers start to get conflicting information. Internally, there's conflict about messaging protocols and

what's been said and to whom. Confusion sets in.

Solutions:

- Define a communication strategy with set venues and timeframes to disseminate key information to everyone. All-hands meetings and monthly company updates by the CEO are most effective.
- Unit leaders provide regular communication and clear messaging to their teams and across the organization.
- Look below the communication challenge to see if breakdowns are symptomatic of larger issues: missing processes, systems or inadequate technology. Consider these areas as a way to understand the root cause issue and resolve that versus symptoms.
- Create a customer-facing communication process to provide customers with timely and relevant information through one department (typically marketing or service).

Challenge #3: Silos Begin To Form

As you define new roles and hire talent to fill roles, functional area silos begin to appear. Leaders continue to be laser-focused on their own area, rather than understanding and affecting the synergies and integrated work systems required across functional areas in a larger company.

Solutions:

- Create clear roles and responsibilities with key performance outcomes for each leader and functional area.
- Map the organization as a series of linked work processes to help define hand-offs and transition points across functions, and to establish team key performance outcomes.
- Develop performance and compensation plans that reward both individual and shared performance. Where team and organizational performance is necessary to succeed due to work system interdependence, team goals would take precedence.
- Communicate and demonstrate this philosophy frequently to the entire company to ensure everyone understands its importance especially as it relates to the customer experience.

Challenge #4 Lacking Systemic Work Process

In early-stage companies, everyone knows each other and has a sense of the work each person does. When something needs to get done, a conversation usually does the trick. Or the work gets done and apologies are issued afterwards if toes get stepped on. Work is done based on relationships and who you know, versus a set of systemic processes. As the company grows and roles get more defined, systems and processes need to be developed to ensure consistency, clarity and authority of work effort.

Solutions:

- Once roles and responsibilities are defined for each functional area and the leaders are in place, the end-to-end workflow process can be defined for all processes.
- Together, the leaders map the organization as a series of linked work processes. This is especially true in order to define the most effective, holistic process and clear ownership and accountability.
- Once the series is documented; sub-process, procedures, communications and policies are wrapped around it to provide clear end-to-end ownership internally and, for the customer, a consistent, repeatable experience that drives loyalty.
- Create position descriptions based on this work. Keep in mind, "form follows function" in organizational design so the work needs to get mapped before talent and core competency can be identified and the organizational structure can be created.

Challenge #5: Scalability is Difficult

As the company expands; onboarding, serving customers, and general operations become more complex and cumbersome. It is crucial at an early point to ensure that systems, processes, tools, equipment and technology are effectively in place. If this does not happen, complications cause delays, frustration, rework and wasted dollars – not to mention that undoing systems and process later gets very complicated, costly, and wastes valuable resources on non-productive work.

Solutions:

- Craft a clear strategy on how and when the strategic plan cares for systems that need to be scaled. Create both short and long term roadmaps with associated costs and timelines.
- Use of end-to-end definition of linked work processes and customer journey mapping helps to ensure you have the right systems and tools in place to support growth.
- Create process and systems agile and robust enough to accommodate faster and bigger workloads.
- Use technology to support the enablement and automation of specific processes to provide effective and efficient workflow. If you need to make a technology change, make the case for it now.

Challenge #6: Lack of Clarity; Mission, Vision, Long Term Planning and Execution

Early on, it's usually very clear why the organization exists. However, as more staff joins the company and are not formally oriented, their own agendas may not fully align with the original mission and vision.

Additionally, as the organization offers its products and services to the marketplace, adjustments may be made that take you away from that place where you started.

Solutions:

- Consider adding an environmental scanning function to the organization to continually track long-range trends, innovations outside your industry (you never know when and how they may impact your business), risks, and wildcards.
- Annually, review the organization's mission (what we are collectively paid to do) and vision (what future consumers will need/demand from your business) to ensure alignment.
- Define and communicate ownership and accountability for each long-range goal and objective and their associated execution plans.
- Define core values in the form of stories – how they are best put into use and when they haven't been followed. Merely using descriptive words isn't sufficient.
- Ensure advanced customer management through continued review and improvements to the customer experience. Just because high retention and satisfaction exist today does not mean it will continue as you grow. It's important to continually focus here to ensure revenue preservation and growth.

So, how do you, as a leader, start on this journey from a small to a medium-sized company? It is common to start where the pain is greatest and then stop the process. While this may temporarily alleviate the issue at hand, you will not have fully prepared yourself for the wild ride fast growth may bring to your organization.

At Lori Carr & Associates, we suggest a “both/and” approach. Take action to mitigate BOTH the short-term need AND begin the work on the larger pieces that your business needs to put in place. We can't promise that you'll grow exponentially without any challenges, but we can promise that, with proper planning and excellent execution of those plans, your growth spurt will be much easier for you and—more importantly—for your customers.

Many CEOs find it helpful to engage our team to complete a basic assessment of the specific need, as well as the overall situation before taking action. This enables our clients to move in the right direction for the long

haul and have the necessary resources to go forward quickly.

Please call us today at 617.879.0793 to schedule your complimentary 30-minute consultation.

Article written by Lori Carr and Lori Silverman

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• Suggested Media Resources

Links to our favorite business media resources, coming soon

• Inspirational Innovators

A few of our favorite organizations, people, and leaders who inspire change:

[The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#) works to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. In developing countries, it focuses on improving people's health and empowering them to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the U.S, it seeks to ensure that all people have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life.

[Students First](#) is striving to build a national movement to defend the interests of children in public education and pursue transformative reform, so that America has the best education system in the world.

[Executives Without Borders](#) serves as the critical link between experienced business leaders eager to serve the global community, and humanitarian projects directed at improving the quality of life around the world. These business leaders are able to apply their experience to existing resources and continue their successful careers by contributing to communities in need.

A former Vietnam prisoner of war, motivational speaker and author [Captain Charlie Plumb](#) shares the lessons he learned during his near 6-year imprisonment, and draws parallels between his experiences as a POW and those of every day life – both in and outside of business environments. In his speaking engagements and in his book, "I'm No Hero," Plumb inspires us to reconsider what challenge and adversity really are, and discover new ways to think about these issues and overcome them within a business environment.

[Marcus Buckingham](#), an executive trainer and popular keynote speaker, teaches individuals and business leaders that people are dramatically more effective, fulfilled and successful when they are able to focus on the best of themselves. By dedicating his career to helping people discover and capitalize on their personal strengths, Buckingham has helped to usher in the "strengths revolution." As leaders, this is a revolution that we need to embrace for ourselves; as well as for our staffs.

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