

## **Visioning and Values Management: Phase Two of an Action Research Case Study**

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*This Action Research case study describes the continuation of a Top Management Team's (TMT) journey in guiding an organization through changes in its strategic direction. Phase Two of the journey toward visioning and values management has greatly aided the organization. Visioning has led, not to having a strategic plan, but to having an operational plan that is strategic. Deliberate and intentional values management has led to more transparency in management that, in turn, has led, not only to improved organizational performance, but to the development of its individual members and a more rewarding place to work.*

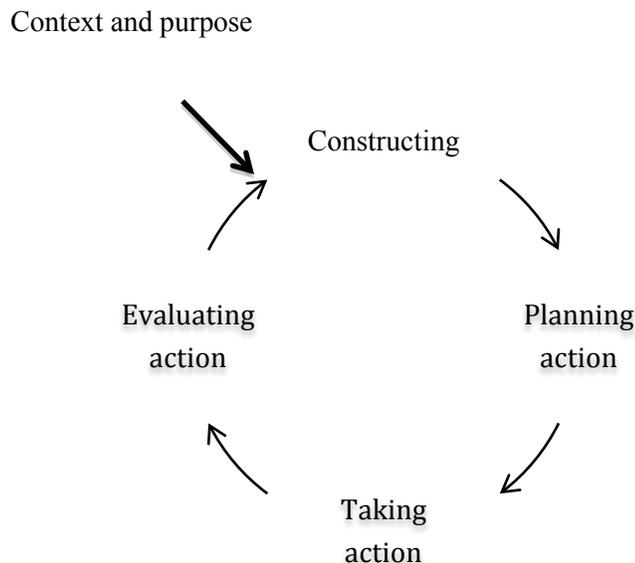
### **PROLOGUE**

This case study builds from the author's Phase One Action Research case study that investigated the use of Psychological Capital (PsyCap), a Healthily Humility Index (HHI), Sociotechnical Systems (STS), and discrepancy theory to assess the likelihood or preparedness for significant change with an organization (Whatley, 2012). The author's approach to Action Research (AR) (along with the other concepts relevant to Phase One of the study) is discussed at length in his published article (pp. 99, and 101-104). In particular, he cites Coghlan and Brannick (2010) and Coghlan (2011) and notes that they "suggested that AR change efforts occur from philosophical perspectives that differ from those of the traditional, third person social sciences. Coghlan alluded to AR being a new research method — a third method — as an alternative to quantitative and qualitative methods where the very nature of the inquiry is 'action' and the outcome is 'research'" (Whatley, p. 99). Later in the article, the author states:

Coghlan and Brannick (2010) built on Shani and Pasmore's (1985) definition and showcased four broad characteristics that encompass AR. They strongly asserted that the main focus of AR is 'research in action' and, thus, 'inquiry in action,' which they asserted is foundational, while 'collaboration' is a value of the process. They asserted that 'inquiry in action' leads to the critical characteristics of planning, taking action, and evaluating action, all of which leads to further planning, and so the cycle continues... (pp. 101-102)

The "Action Research Cycle" (Coghlan and Brannick, 2010) referenced in the author's Phase One study is found in Figure 1 below. For a broader understanding of the concepts discussed in Phase One and referred to in Phase Two, please refer to the author's article (Whatley, 2012).

**FIGURE 1**  
**THE ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE**



Coghlan and Brannick (2010)

In Phase One, the author focused on the “context and purpose” stage of the “Action Research Cycle” (Coghlan and Brannick, 2010). The study showed that PsyCap was a possible pre-assessment tool within Action Research (AR) as an assessment for the “readiness for change” and the likelihood of being successful. The previous research also showed that HHI may be a sound indicator of the Top Management Team’s (TMT) willingness to learn—to learn not what they want to learn, but to what they need to learn. Thirdly, the previous research also showed that STS was an excellent way for the TMT to view and understand the organization. Finally, the previous research suggested that discrepancy theory was an excellent tool for understanding the current context and for addressing the immediate next steps, instead of attempting to shift to an ideal.

In the current study, Phase Two, the author focused on the stages within the spiral—the “constructing”, “planning action” and “taking action” and “evaluating action” stages of the “Action Research Cycle” (Coghlan and Brannick, 2010).

Thus, the overarching research questions of this AR case study are: firstly, do the findings from the first research study still hold; secondly, what other lessons can be learned from this company’s application of discrepancy theory and STS, as it goes deeper into the intervention; and, finally, are there any other lessons to be learned from this company’s journey of transformation?

### **THE COMPANY AND ITS CONTEXT**

During Phase Two of the research study (Dec 2011 to Dec 2013), the company’s TMT used the results from Phase One of the research study to prepare two critical documents. Firstly, the TMT developed a clear purpose and values document, including operating principles (see Figure 2); and, secondly, the TMT developed a vision document (not disclosed for confidentiality reasons). Both of these documents took several months to complete.

**FIGURE 2**  
**PURPOSE, VALUES, AND OPERATING PRINCIPLES**

## **Our Purpose**

To create an environment that encourages participation, growth, and learning to improve our lives, the lives of our families, and our communities through the success of our company.

## **Our Values**

We believe that our first responsibility is to act with **INTEGRITY**. We are responsible for our decisions and actions as they inform and shape our company. We strive to build relationships with our customers, suppliers, and employees through open communication based on trust, respect, honesty, and fairness.

We are responsible to demonstrate **LEADERSHIP** by promoting optimism, patience, self-awareness, and compassion to encourage the safe exploration of ideas, so that we can innovate, invent, and collaborate to improve our processes, products, and services. We demonstrate professionalism, determination, perseverance, and courage to remain positive and passionate about what we achieve as a company.

We are responsible to **LEARN AND INNOVATE** because this is critical to our success. We are receptive to change because we are flexible, adaptable, and open-minded. We are never complacent and never accept the status quo. We encourage employees to take action on their ideas and learn from their mistakes. We capture the knowledge, wisdom, and best practices of our people to succeed in the future. We provide opportunities for employees to unlock their potential and develop their strengths and talents.

We are responsible to our **COMMUNITY**. We cultivate a dynamic and fulfilling environment where people enjoy coming to work and feel a sense of belonging. We work together to promote participation in our community through shared values, purpose, and vision.

The company's purpose and values document states specifically why the organization exists and its main objective. It is important to note that the objective of the organization is not to make profit; rather, making profit is only considered as an operational constraint. Secondly, it is important to note that the values are not simply words, but, more importantly, they contain operating principles pertaining to how to action the values. It was considered imperative by the TMT to define the operating principles and to give guidance as to how they are to be interpreted and understood, and expectations arising from them. This document was created and contributed to by all members of the TMT.

In contrast, the finalized vision document reads like a story set in the future and describes an undefined, possible future for the company. Major markets, products, and resources are all specifically discussed—not as goals but as events that would transpire on a journey. The vision document identifies the possibility of a very different company, participating in different industries and products. It describes new skills sets, new technologies, and facilities. The story speaks to not necessarily focusing on markets or segments that the company has historically invested resources in. The story elaborates on the people and their journey into a high performance company. Essentially, it speaks to a possible future—one in which people can take ownership in playing a role—and speaks about change and transformation. This

vision document was created as a result of a combined effort from a number of people at various levels within the organization and, in the end, resulted in a shared possible future with a clearly laid out strategic direction.

It is against this background that we can now inquire about what other lessons can be learned from this company's application of discrepancy theory and STS as it goes deeper into the intervention, and whether there are any other lessons to be learned from this company's journey of transformation.

## **THEMES THAT ARISE: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Strategy**

Some 60 years ago, Drucker (1954) posed a question for business leaders to reflect on that is as relevant today as it was then. Drucker asked, in the context of an evolving world, "What business will we be in?" (p. 5). Although organization strategy is designed to aid organizations in resolving uncertainty around the question of what business a firm will continue to "be in", many organizations, according to Hambrick and Fredrickson (2005), struggle to appreciate what strategy actually is. The importance of organization strategy was emphasized by Bass (1985), one of the founding fathers of transformational leadership, who asserted that there are four factors that drive organizational performance: leadership behavior; organizational culture; mission and strategy; and structure and size. Thus, understanding and appreciating the role and importance of strategy and leadership are foundational tenets to improving organizational performance.

Grant (2008) states that strategy is "a unifying theme that gives coherence and direction to the action and decision of an individual or any organization" (p. 4). On the other hand, Porter (1996), the undisputed father of strategy, specifically stated that strategy is "choosing to perform activities differently than rivals do" (p. 64) and, thus, strategy is defined as the intentionality of choosing a different set of organizational activities, relative to others, to deliver a unique mix of values. The importance of reviewing Porter's definition of strategy is that it reflects the fundamental "truth" that organizational value (the positive result of improved performance) can, and will, be only a reflection, or mirror, of the value the organization provides to its customers.

There have been many developments in approaches to strategy by both the practitioner and scholar over the past 30 years. Over this period of time, there has been an ever-increasing sophistication in the way in which strategic planning and the implementation of that strategy occurs. Historically, during the 1950's, there was significant corporate planning, which then grew in complexity and analyses such that, during the 1970's, there was more intentionality around market analysis and market segmentation (Grant, 2008). During this period of time, there was no real language of strategy and organizations were attempting to simply get better at marketing and sales in an attempt to drive market share, volumes, and value.

It was not until the early 1980's, when Michael Porter wrote in the Harvard Business Review what is considered the seminal paper on strategic management called "Competitive Strategy", that a management concept was actually coined "competitive strategy". This paper first introduced Porter's "five-forces model", which is now common language within business literature, and is still revered some 30 years later. Since Porter's original paper, we have seen three over-arching themes or major developments within strategy: firstly, the external focus, Porter's five forces model; secondly, an internal focus, as first introduced by Mintzberg (1985); and, finally, the current ideology, referred to as the "age of temporary advantage", as described by D'Aveni, Dagnino and Smith (2010).

Porter's five forces model originally asserted that competitive advantage is attained by the organization intentionally identifying specific industries and where and how to position itself within those industries as the source of competitive advantage, thus, improving performance. This is effectively achieved by analyzing various industries and determining a specific strategy as a result of perceived opportunities within them, and is considered a design approach to strategy. This perspective is congruent with population ecology, contingency, and external environment theories within organizational theory. As a result, when it comes to implementation of the determined strategy, individuals that support this type of

strategy development will also have implementation plans that are predicated on these theoretical assumptions.

The internal focus, or resource-based development of strategy, also referred to as the process approach to strategy, was originally coined by Minzberg (1985) and supported by authors such as Barney (1991) who suggested that it is the resources within the firm that create a competitive advantage. Barney builds the case that resources are heterogeneous and not as mobile as one would think, thus, the market for resources is not perfect and firms derive competitive advantage from acquiring or developing their resources. This view or perspective of the organization would then focus on implementing strategy using resource dependence and/or open systems theory as the basis for many assumptions.

There have been several attempts to build newer or alternative theories of strategy, such as Grimm et al.'s (2005) fine-grained theory, and Derfus et al.'s (2008), Lee et al.'s (2000), Ferrier et al.'s (1999), and Young, Smith, and Grimm's (1996) use of economic theories, such as game theory, to explain the interaction between the various players within industries. Smith and Cao (2007), on the other hand, introduced a model of entrepreneurial action to explain strategy. All of these various approaches reflect the current thinking on strategy and represent some combination of both external environmental scanning, and internal organizational resources identification, assessment, and development so as to develop an organizational competency or competencies that is/are then used to deliver a specific strategy. This strategy, then, may or may not result in a "sustainable" competitive advantage. The development of strategy over the years has reflected the changes within the external business environment from a relatively stagnant external environment, where changes were slow to occur and predictable, to our current environment where there are rapid, dynamic external changes. This new environment requires organizations to be very flexible, yet committed within their strategy—a paradox, of sorts.

Finally, Ghemawat (as cited in Grant, 2008) claims that there is no real evidence that strategy has produced any sustainable advantage. He likened it to "the ill-considered medieval hunt for the philosopher's stone" (p. 88), which may be relevant; however, one of the primary outcomes is that the organization is focused on key tasks and objectives with a means to self assess toward this goal/s, and, thus, communication is enhanced within the organization. The fact that the perfect or best strategy may be unattainable is no reason to not attempt to seek it for the real value is in the attempt. Thus, strategy and strategy development will continue to play a critical role in improving the performance of organizations, and should thus be part of any visioning and values management process.

## **Culture and Climate**

As previously, stated Bass (1985) also asserted that culture plays an important and critical role within organizational performance. Many writers, such as Schein (1992) and Hofstede (1997), have offered a variety of definitions of *organizational culture*, and, although the range of definitions is as vast as the number of writers, it is generally agreed that *culture* consists of deep and enduring patterns of how individuals and groups make decisions that demonstrate priorities about value differences. Peters and Waterman (1982) first highlighted the importance of shared and agreed upon organizational *values* and asserted that every organization needs to take the process of shaping these *values* seriously. *Values* are essential as they provide the framework for integrity: individual integrity that Kouzes & Posner (2003) refer to as *credibility*; and, organizational integrity that Watson and Brown (2001) refer to as *alignment*.

Isaksen and Tidd (2006) claimed that *organizational culture* is made up of symbols, heroes and rituals; however, I assert that *organizational culture* is determined by its *values*, and is reinforced by symbols, heroes and rituals. Schein (1992) supports this assertion as he claims *organizational culture* is formed by three main factors: firstly, the founder; secondly, the learned experiences of the members within the organization; and thirdly, a change as a result of new beliefs, values and assumptions. Schein's research claims that the founder has the most influence on *organizational culture*.

In 1998, Ekvall and his colleagues' work showed the interrelationship between *organizational transformation* and leadership behavior. Their research showed that what the leaders say and do is observed by others and is the single most important influence on organizational performance. What was ground breaking in their research was the discovery that influencing the *organizational climate* was found

to be the most important aspect of leadership and performance. The concept of *organizational climate* is separate and distinct from *organizational culture*, and yet is a subset of *organizational culture*. What was also critical from their research was their finding that when *organizational climate* was removed from the analysis, there was little to no relationship between leadership and productivity or performance. This is important as it shows that *organizational culture* only exists to the extent that the *organizational climate* supports it.

Isaksen and Tidd (2006) defined *organizational climate* as the reoccurring patterns of behavior, attitudes and feelings that characterize organizational life. At the individual level, it is referred to as the *psychological climate*, and is made up of the intrapersonal perception of patterns of behavior, attitudes and feelings, as experienced by the individual. However, it was Turnspeed (1994) who first defined *organizational climate* as the collection of the individual climates within an organizational setting. Thus, Isaksen and Tidd stated that “organizational climate is simply the shared perceptions that characterize life within a defined work unit” (p. 308). The important distinction here is made by McNabb and Sepic (1995, as cited in Isaksen & Tidd, 2006, p. 308) who stated “climate is more distinct from culture in that it is more observable at a surface level within the organization and more amenable to change and improvement efforts”, while Ekvall (1996, p. 120) concurred claiming that “culture refers to the deeper and more enduring values, norms and beliefs within the organization.”

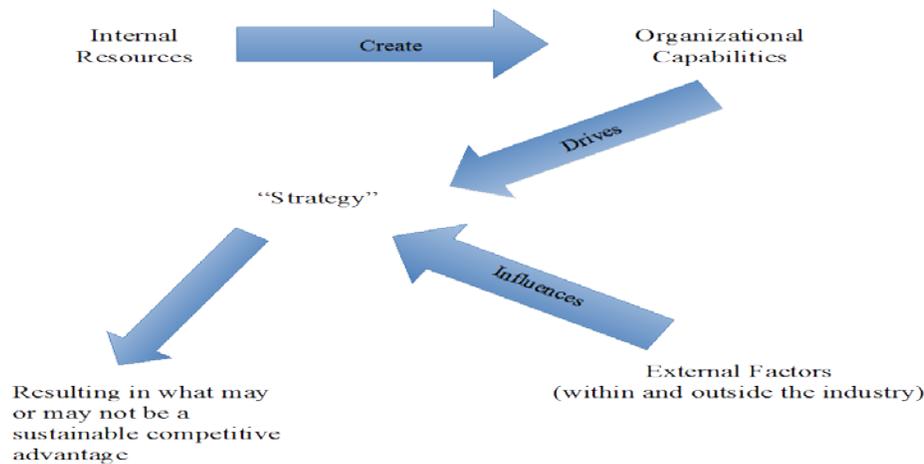
### APPLYING THE THEMES

This part of the study will discuss the themes of strategy, and culture and climate, as they pertain to the company’s journey during Phase Two of the research study.

#### Strategy Theme

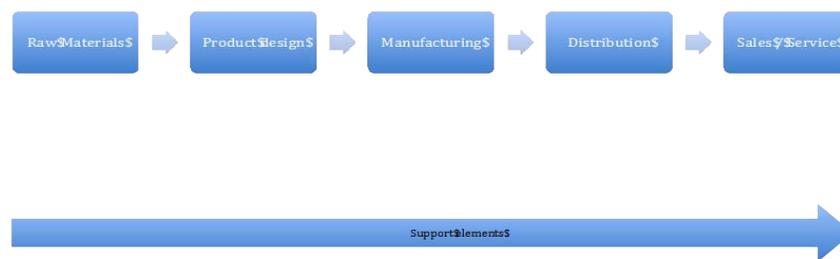
The “strategy” used within the research study was more aligned with the third mode of strategy discussed above and in alignment with the work of Smith and Cao (2007) where there is intentionality around the development of specific skills and abilities or capabilities within the organization, yet, at the same time, being open to changes within the market and available and capable to take advantage of new opportunities should they arise. This is all under the one overriding premise that each organization is perfectly designed to achieve the results it is getting. As a result, to get a different result requires the organization to develop or acquire new capabilities. Figure 3, “Sound Strategy Development”, shows how sound strategy was developed in this case.

**FIGURE 3  
SOUND STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT**



This figure reflects the contextual reality (contingency theory) that we are within a very dynamic business environment and that organizations must develop strategies that take both the internal resources and capabilities and the external industries/market conditions into consideration. What is essential in this analysis is to ensure that organizational capabilities are then identified and linked to one of the key elements of the McKinney “value chain” (see Figure 4) that the organization wants to develop. For, ultimately, it is within the value chain that the organization positions itself as being able to add more value than its competition. It is only from understanding the value chain that the organization is able to make itself different—the entire purpose of strategy. Thus, strategy is about developing organizational capabilities that enhance the organization’s relative position within the value chain so as to create more value for the customer that, ultimately, will produce better business results, ie. performance, for the organization.

**FIGURE 4**  
**MCKINNEY “VALUE CHAIN”**



This was the purpose of the vision document as it is a story, not a plan. It is a story of a possible future with new skills and abilities for employees. The vision document also discusses new markets, products, and very different customers. Finally, the vision document also speaks to new technologies within the company and how they would aid productivity. Yet, at the same time, the vision document is clear around industries and focus. It does not contain too much of a leap to not be believable. It is about what could be—not about what needs to be done or is deficient. Overall, the vision document is not a plan; rather it identifies a preferred future—one that many had input into and created together.

From there, an operational plan was developed that was made up of the logical next steps to commence the journey toward the vision document. The end result was that there was no strategic document, but, more importantly, there was an operational plan that was strategic. The operational plan was strategic since it laid out the next steps in order to reach the vision document. The operational plan detailed specific steps within both work design and structure that needed to occur in order for the vision document to be reached. This is a critical observation as it highlights the importance of making strategy operational—structural and work design changes were now seen as operationally important. This was a transformational shift for the company since, traditionally, these decisions were only made as a result of either operational crises or for political reasons; they were not seen as impacting operational activities.

### **Culture and Climate Theme**

Within the research study, climate was seen as the starting point for cultural change, although it was also considered important to clarify, characterize, and document the company’s culture. In this case, the values are seen as unchanging regardless of the environmental conditions or the markets the company serves. They are the unyielding principles by which all decisions have been and are being made. These values are not simply words but also operating principles that greatly aid individuals at all levels within the organization understand what they mean and how to apply them. These values are consistently applied and discussed in all meetings and company events.

The company surveys itself annually in regard to these values/culture. A survey consisting of 34 questions, broken into the four specific areas, ask about the company's behavior against the values and what they mean. The outcome of the survey results in each supervisor having a performance goal that is specifically related to one of the values. As per the literature review, values are seen as the reflection of the culture and work design is a reflection of the climate. Although there were significant changes within work design commenced during the period of study, they are not within the scope of this paper. This is important to note since the author suggests that any change effort needs to address both the culture and climate at the same time, as was the circumstance in this case, although we are only looking at the values/culture in this paper.

Additionally, the most senior person responsible for the company regularly stands up at company meetings and asks about where we are not achieving our values and/or where we are achieving them. This can and has led to specific discussions where one person would interpret an event a certain way and others may interpret it another. This then has resulted in transparent discussions that showcase how values will ultimately have to be traded off against each other and that, given the context of the situation, these are not always easy decisions. Solutions to these paradoxes are then resolved by ensuring that the systems are fair and equitable for all which is also an important bridge into what the climate is like within the company (to be discussed in a future case).

Based on the two years of this study, in light of actively managing its values, the company has shown improvements to every single question within its values survey (Table 1). What is important in this case is that it supports the idea that values can and should be managed intentionally. Additionally, during this time, key performance indicators improved; specifically, the company saw improved margins (by 10%), reduced turnover (from 50% to less than 5%), and increased market share (by at least 5%). These improvements occurred despite the industry experiencing a general downturn. Therefore, although it cannot be concluded that the new visioning and values management during Phase II necessarily caused the improvements, it can be stated that these changes did not adversely affect the company and perhaps aided its journey (an aspect for future research).

**TABLE 1**  
**VALUES SURVEY: TWO YEAR COMPARISON**

	2013		2012	
	Average	Mode	Average	Mode
<b>Integrity</b>				
We take responsibility for our decisions and actions	7.83	8	7.8	8
We care about how our actions may impact the future of the company	8.34	9	8.3	8
We constantly strive to build better relationships with our employees	8	8	7.4	7
At MetalBoss, we have open communication with our employees based on trust	8.39	9	7.3	7
We treat our employees with respect	8.32	9	7.7	8
We constantly strive to build better relationship with our customers and suppliers	8.43	8	8.1	8
We have open communication with our customers and suppliers based on trust	8.39	9	7.8	7
We treat our customers and suppliers with respect	8.66	9	8.8	9
How we do things matters more than the results	7.38	9	5.6	5
<b>Leadership</b>				
We promote optimism	7.86	8	7.5	7
We promote patience	7.97	8	6.7	7
We promote compassion	8.18	9	6.6	7
We encourage the safe exploration of ideas	8.39	9	7.7	8
We innovate to improve our processes	8.25	9	7.8	8
We invent and collaborate to improve our products and services	8.46	8	7.7	8
At work, I can be who I am	8.28	10	7.3	7
<b>Learning/Innovation</b>				
We are receptive to change	7.83	8	7.5	7
We are flexible, adaptable, and open-minded	7.87	8	7.4	7
We are not complacent and do not accept the status quo	7.72	8	6.8	7
We encourage employees to take action on their ideas	8.1	8	6.5	7
We encourage employees to learn from their mistakes	8.24	9	7.6	8
We utilize the knowledge and wisdom of our employees for future success of the company	8.32	9	7	7
We provide opportunities for employees to unlock their potential	8.29	8	7.2	7
We develop employees' strength and talents	8.11	9	7.5	7
We demonstrate determination/perseverance to remain positive and passionate about what we can achieve in the company	8.61	9	8	8
We demonstrate courage to remain positive and passionate about what we can achieve as a company	8.61	10	7.8	8
At work, I'm constantly learning	8.5	9	7.2	7
<b>Community</b>				
We are responsible to each other within the company	7.97	8	7.2	7
We create a dynamic and fun work atmosphere	7.76	8	6.6	7
We create an atmosphere where people enjoy coming to work	7.96	9	7.1	7
We create an atmosphere where people feel a sense of belonging	7.86	8	7	7
We are responsible to our local communities	8.18	8	6.6	6
We work together to promote participation in our local communities	7.93	8	6.4	6
At work, we care	8.43	10	8	8

## POSTLUDE

This concludes the theoretical and practical contributions of this AR research study. Since this study is a continuation from a previous study that also had some clear findings, the first logical question to ask is: Do those findings still hold? The improvements seen in the company's results and in the values survey demonstrate that the findings from the previous study do indeed still hold and are supported some two years later. That is, these results support the findings that both PsyCap and HHI are predictors of the general disposition of the TMT to move toward a preferred future, that is—a willingness to learn new ways of doing things. Additionally, the study confirmed that the use of discrepancy theory in the development of the vision document was invaluable, as was the use of STS. All of these findings came from Phase One but are also supported by this study.

The second set of contributions pertains specifically to this case. As stated by the author in Phase One of the study, “[s]ince AR is essentially a pragmatic model of inquiry, it can be argued that the contribution to theory is limited and the contribution to practice is only specific under identical contexts. However, it is possible that there are reoccurring themes or patterns that would only be attained or identified through the rigorous process of research through a variety of cases. Additionally, it can also be argued that not only is case analysis practice useful, but, as in this case, it can show the applied application of other theories within the ‘field,’ which only adds to the validity of the theory being used.” (Whatley, p. 109).

Thus, Phase Two has shown that, firstly, the use of a vision document greatly aided in the development of strategy within this organization. Specifically, it aided in making the operational plan strategic—in bridging the gap between the known and the unknown possible futures—thus, enabling members of the company to have input into the future direction. Secondly, the values and their operating principles of a company can and should be managed with intention and metrics (in this case, survey data) that are linked to performance and compensation. Both of these case study observations led to more transparency within all management levels and a more rewarding place to work.

Phase Two of our journey is now complete. At the writing of this paper, we are well into Phase Three and much of the work done from the two previous Phases continues to be relevant and continues to guide the company in its journey forward.

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