### FRONTIER Issue 1

## **Responsive Leadership**

How the Leading Companies of the 21st Century are Reshaping the C-suite

February 2016



#### INTRODUCTION

#### The Change Dilemma

Change is both more important than ever and more challenging than ever. In our work we frequently hear leaders talk about "constant," "disruptive," and "exponential" change, and the pressure it's putting on their organizations. And at the same time, we hear how difficult it is for leaders to manifest meaningful change at scale. If you've felt this yourself, you are not alone.

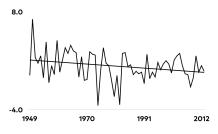
We are currently in the midst of a massive reshaping of both our economy and the way we work. A World Economic Forum (WEF) study<sup>1</sup> published in January 2016 asserts that current technological advancements will start a work revolution that is "more comprehensive and all-encompassing than anything we have ever seen." While computers launch us into the future, however, there are signs of a deflationary mode. Just when you thought the price of oil couldn't go any lower, it's now hovering near \$30 a barrel (and that's before Iran opens for business). The Dow Jones Commodity Index, tracking a range of 24 commodities, continues to fall to record-setting lows. Established legacy companies are reaching the end of productivity growth: their teams simply can't squeeze any more output from an hour of work (figure 1). Finally, Gallup's global survey of employee engagement<sup>2</sup> reveals that just 13% of employees are engaged by their work – indicating that today's workers feel desperately disconnected from the meaning of their work (figure 2).

These pressures, and others, are leading to massive, disruptive turns of the wheel within the world's largest and most impactful firms. Google went through a major reorganization in 2015, evolving from Google to Alphabet, refocusing its founders' responsibilities and distributing more authority to the leaders of its biggest business divisions. Shortly after Satya Nadella took over at Microsoft, that company also saw massive shakeups with key leaders departing and others taking over new roles. And GE, as it transitions from 20th century big-iron to 21st century big-data, elevated the role of its software and platform business and moved its headquarters from bucolic Fairfield, CT to South Boston, next door to some of the world's leading biotech, robotics, and A.I. research talent.

Leaders everywhere are wondering what they can do to survive and thrive in this new environment. How can you change your organization's collective capacity? And, if change is the new normal, how do you develop your organization's ability to continually sense and adapt? How do you become a *responsive* organization?

fig. 1

### PRODUCTIVITY GROWTH AS A FACTOR OF GLOBAL OUTPUT



Source: University of Notre Dame

fig. 2

#### GLOBAL EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT



Source: Gallup "State of the Global Workplace Report"

In recent years new practices (agile, lean startup, self-management, et al) have emerged that provide clues for how teams can effectively develop their responsive capacity. These rapid, bottom-up, human-centered methods rightfully call traditional ideas of management into question. But, at the same time, *leadership* has never been more important.

Reflecting the changes around it, the C-suite is now going through its own evolution. Established roles of CEO, COO, CFO, CIO, CMO, and CHRO are finding themselves stretched thin and taking on a daunting range of new challenges and responsibilities. Some companies are navigating this shift better than others. Rather than trying to squeeze more value out of the traditional functional domains, the world's most responsive organizations are creating hybrid leadership roles that develop organizational capacity across traditional disciplines. Depending on the organization's unique needs and mix of leadership strengths within the existing executive team, an organization may distribute new responsibilities across current C-suite members or add new members to the leadership team.

Over the past 10 years we have been studying what distinguishes successful 21st century leaders. Through our work with senior executives of Fortune 500 companies, global nonprofits, and fast-growth startups, we've identified 4 key principles that responsive leaders are using to unlock new enterprise capabilities and increase agility, innovation, and engagement.

#### WHAT WILL I FIND IN THIS REPORT?

Inspiring examples, actionable recommendations, and lessons that leaders can use to multiply their impact.

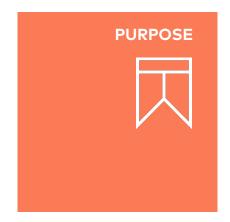
#### WHAT CAN I DO WITH THIS REPORT?

Rally your colleagues, and bring your fellow leaders together to transform your organization.

#### WHO IS THIS REPORT FOR?

Leaders who are frustrated by big, overly complicated change initiatives that take too long, cost too much, and don't go anywhere; this is for leaders who want new ideas to drive sustainable change in their organizations.





#### A GOOD PURPOSE STATEMENT IS:

- User/Customer-centric: express the impact you aim to make for those you serve
- Brief: ~140 characters or less
- Clear: jargon-free and easily understood
- Ambitious: inspire the team to be their best

## Give people a reason to work that's bigger than the bottom line

Most executive teams would quickly affirm that defining and communicating the organization's collective reason for being is one of their most critical responsibilities. Yet, when contrasting today's most successful organizations with the rest of the pack, there's clearly a difference in how they both think about and *use* it.

Responsive leaders communicate the organization's overarching purpose clearly and repeatedly, returning to the core idea like a heartbeat at every significant moment. Elon Musk reminds audiences at every Tesla product event that the company exists to accelerate the advent of sustainable transportation.<sup>3</sup> When Xiaomi passed 100 million users, the first paragraph of their press release thanked "the first 100 users who took a chance on us when we had nothing but an idea." Patagonia, whose purpose includes tackling the climate crisis, celebrated Black Friday in 2015 with a letter from their CEO Rose Marcario urging customers to "become radical environmentalists" by repairing their worn clothes instead of buying something new. Studies of workplace design<sup>6</sup> even show a trend toward communicating purpose throughout physical spaces, including artwork with elements of cultural personality displayed in common working areas.

As a leader, you can use that essential spark to empower and inspire people at every level of your organization. The purpose becomes a touchstone that enables individuals to align their personal missions with the rest of the organization. The purpose acts as a currency of trust, enabling executives and managers to hand over authority to their teams. The purpose inspires creative thinking and an entrepreneurial spirit, as people seek out previously unimaginable ways to achieve the organization's collective ambition.



#### WHO'S SETTING THE EXAMPLE?

#### Slack

In July of 2013, on the eve of the company's beta launch, CEO and Founder Stewart Butterfield sent a memo<sup>7</sup> to the entire team at Slack, now a wildly successful team communication startup. Butterfield's message lacked much of the boilerplate content you would typically find in similar messages from leadership that aim to define what an organization is trying to accomplish together: investors' revenue expectations, growth and sales goals, and profitability targets.

Certainly these more traditional business metrics are part of the Slack leadership team's accountabilities, but Butterfield's early memo makes it clear that these outcomes are the result of committing to and delivering on a grander purpose. As Butterfield put it to the team, "our job is to build something genuinely useful, something which really does make people's working lives simpler, more pleasant and more productive."

LEADING CHANGE TOGETHER

#### **Chief Purpose Officer**



#### **ATTRIBUTES**

- A clear vision for how the organization's collective capacity can be mobilized in service of a mission beyond the bottom line
- Ability to communicate complex ideas and ambitious goals in a way that inspires action
- Ability to define compelling missions in a way that drives experimentation, autonomy, and rapid learning

- Revalidating and redefining the organization's collective purpose, i.e. Why does it exist?
   What positive impact does it hope to make in the world?
- Aligning team and organizational structures to the purpose
- Aligning functional, divisional, and all team-level short-term goals to the purpose
- Prioritizing investment and allocation of resources based on progress toward purpose



#### **NETWORK**



## Make your people your most valuable competitive advantage

For over a century, industrial-era thinking encouraged organizations to treat humans as if they were component parts of a machine. As a result, in many organizations the Human Resources function became an apparatus for centralized control. Human Resources, Operations, and Information officers managed people within narrowly defined roles and strict hierarchies that no longer reflect the true collaborative nature of contemporary work.

Today, jobs that can be easily reduced to repeatable mechanics generally don't need people at all. These jobs either already have been, or soon will be, replaced by software. And as advances in A.I. accelerate software's appetite for previously human-dependent tasks, the role of HR leadership is evolving and refocusing on what matters most: people. Shifting to a network mindset means empowering people to redefine the limits of hierarchy, functional silos, cultural norms, and even the organization itself.

Responsive leaders are redefining what it means to be responsible for the human capital within their organizations. They are doing this by playing a more central role as a strategic partner with other business and operational leaders, driving culture creation and culture evolution, and cultivating a work experience that engages and inspires the workforce. Beyond her titular role as COO, Sheryl Sandberg has driven massive people and culture initiatives both inside and outside Facebook. Sandberg has become a vocal proponent of gender equality in the workplace, and has championed specific initiatives like the company's Managing Bias educational program.

In the past, many C-suite executives would see these issues at the intersection of talent and culture as beneath their pay grade; but responsive leaders are recognizing that they are core to building a high performing business. Gimlet Media, the two year-old podcast production startup that already has two of the most popular podcasts in the world, addressed issues of team diversity and organization design head-on in recent episodes with the company's CEO and Founder, Alex Blumberg. And over the past year many organizations have signaled their adoption of this new mindset by introducing the role of "Chief People Officer." A few of the diverse organizations that have added this role, or something equivalent, in the past year include: BuzzFeed,8 Bonobos,9 Burberry,10 and UK Government's Civil Service.11

#### WHO'S SETTING THE EXAMPLE?

#### Google

Laszlo Bock, head of People Operations at Google and author of *Work Rules*, has created a new paradigm in which the "people" function is valued as an essential driver of differentiation for the business. Bock and the People Ops team at Google have developed their practices to such a high level that they are now being used by Google to further the corporation's overall mission as well as help other organizations to change themselves. In addition to Bock's book, Google has created a public, online people ops resource called <u>re:Work</u>. On this website, other companies can access tips, in-depth guides, and case studies about how to support and empower their people. The content covers a broad range of topics including: goal setting, performance management, hiring practices, unconscious bias, feedback, and management.

#### **LEADING CHANGE TOGETHER**

#### **Chief People Officer**



#### **ATTRIBUTES**

- A passion for inspiring people to be their best, and a deep belief in the potential of people to learn and grow within a supportive culture
- A future-oriented perspective on the importance of diversity in driving innovation, creativity, and relevance within any business
- An understanding of and appreciation for human and organizational psychology

- Increasing employee engagement and motivation
- Instilling a learning mindset across the organization, and reinforcing this behavior through core processes including performance management, promotions, and compensation
- Developing tools and processes that facilitate learning and development
- Developing a recruiting and hiring system that drives positive change while increasing collective capacity
- Building an adaptive organizational structure that makes it easier for people to change roles and teams based on the changing needs of users and customers



# LEARNING

#### Optimize for agility even over certainty

Long-term plans are a bureaucratic scourge in most organizations. While their intentions may be worthwhile, they tend to do more harm than good. Long-term plans lead to poor decision-making and sunk cost bias, where loyalty to the carefully prescribed plan for its own sake trumps the ability to sense and respond to new information as it emerges. Creating overly detailed plans consumes valuable time and resources, particularly the time of business unit leaders and middle managers who often spend months trying to predict what might happen in the future while missing opportunities to learn what is happening in the present. And because of how long these plans take to make, and how disconnected they are from ongoing learning, they are inevitably outdated and irrelevant by the time they're done.

Contrasted with this traditional approach, responsive leaders prioritize agility over certainty. Their operating behaviors and core processes are designed to maximize the organization's ability to learn and adapt quickly to their changing environment.

A recent McKinsey study<sup>12</sup> showed that companies who manage both speed and stability are more likely to rank in the top quartile by organizational health. Additional research showed that sales growth over a 5-year period among the most responsive publicly traded companies was 10x the average among the S&P 500 for the same period.<sup>13</sup> Best of all, responsive companies are more successful at shipping products and services that their customers love, more reliably and more frequently. Agility is imperative for business survival; it is a core competency and a competitive advantage.<sup>14</sup>

Avoiding the busywork and vanity rigor of 5-year road maps, responsive leaders find ways to turn real-time customer feedback into better products as fast as possible. Organizations are allowing decisions to be made at the edges of the organizational hierarchy to increase response time. 15 Michael Sippey, former VP of Product at Twitter, says his first rule for building successful products is to talk to at least one customer every day. 16 Before it was acquired by Microsoft for \$1.2 billion, Yammer enabled their product teams to ship better and faster by breaking the work down into smaller projects that could be shipped in 2-10 week increments without external reviews or dependencies. 17 At Slack, they treat project missions like experiments, each with a clear hypothesis to be tested and reevaluated on a regular basis. 18



This approach, however, isn't limited to software engineering and tech startups. Fast-fashion leader Zara blazed this trail in the retail industry by minimizing the bureaucratic overhead of planning new collections a year into the future, and optimizing a manufacturing and distribution chain that enables Zara's designers to turn their creative hunches into products on racks in weeks instead of months. Zara's business has been rewarded by an inventory turnover rate of 70% every two months, and customers who average seventeen visits per year, compared to the industry average of only three visits. <sup>19</sup>

WHO'S SETTING THE EXAMPLE?

#### **Spotify**

Spotify's music-streaming service has been growing exponentially since it first launched in 2008. Recent estimates<sup>20</sup> say that Spotify is now serving over 25 million subscribers. Remarkably, Spotify has successfully managed this incredible growth while also building a standout model for how organizations sustain agility at scale. Early on, Spotify created their own nimble organizational structure that prioritized user needs and the ability for teams to iterate and ship working updates frequently.<sup>21</sup> This approach is supported by a range of unique, but replicable, practices. For example, working teams choose for themselves what flavor of agile process works best for them, and what specific tools they use to manage their work. "Fail Walls" are a common feature, on which team members are encouraged to share their mistakes and lessons learned in public, both to minimize the stigma of failure and to maximize the organizational learning that comes from constant experimentation.<sup>22</sup> Each multi-disciplinary squad of 5-7 people has their own collaborative workspace, including open desks, casual break-out space, private 1-on-1 space, and whiteboards on nearly every wall. These practices at Spotify all help to create an environment that strengthens the sense of psychological safety and encourages productive teaming. As Spotify's inhouse agile guru Henrik Kniberg puts it, "Agile at scale requires trust at scale."23



#### **Chief Agility Officer**



#### **ATTRIBUTES**

- Strong bias toward experimentation
- Preference for taking action to uncover new evidence when facing uncertainty
- Keen ability to break down large bets into smaller initiatives in which failure is more survivable
- A willingness to protect autonomy and minimize interdependence even at the expense of efficiency

- Optimizing core processes to increase user or customer feedback
- Driving shorter iterations and more frequent product updates
- Cultivating a culture of continuous learning across all functions and aspects of the business
- Coaching teams on agile habits and behaviors
- Policing unnecessary planning and review processes that are based on predicting the future rather than learning from the present



## OPEN

## Lower the barriers to collaboration and make information easily accessible

Thanks to the digital revolution, our ability to access, share, and process information has grown by orders of magnitude over the past few decades. By 2020 the number of connected devices in the world is estimated to top 50 billion.<sup>24</sup> The demand for and pressure on internal IT systems is unlike anything we've experienced before. IT leaders' responsibilities are expanding into every corner of the business. They are expected to maintain a secure and resilient infrastructure, drive efficiency and lower operating costs, increase employee productivity, uncover customer insights, and deliver digitally-enabled products and services. They must do all of this while shifting from desktop to mobile, jumping from one cutting-edge programming language to the next, and competing (and partnering) with tech behemoths like Facebook, Amazon, and Google as those companies maraud across industry boundaries.

Rather than attempt to control or resist the natural state of digital technology, responsive leaders have embraced its most transformative aspects. Expressed powerfully by Google's mantra "default to open," organizations who reap the most benefit from technology systematically minimize any friction that gets in the way of anyone who wants to contribute to the organization's collective purpose.

One of the most widely adopted methods for this is implementing cloud-based document sharing and collaboration tools. Box, the ten year-old cloud storage startup, has become a leading partner for some of the world's largest companies, including GE, AstraZeneca, and P&G. These companies have recognized that "cloud-based or secure" is a false choice, and that the benefits of enabling collaboration outweigh the potential risks. Microsoft, Amazon, and Google are all driving this shift and building a robust backbone for both under-the-hood software development and employee and customer facing applications.

These tools are much more than an IT solution, however. They are all part of a broader mindset shift toward a way of working that sees transparency as a key enabler of collaboration and innovation. As Steven Johnson wrote about in his book *Where Good Ideas Come From*, an innovative culture depends on increasing access to and expanding your view of "the adjacent possible," the range of alternative ideas and potential solutions to any problem you face. Carefully controlled channels of communication become an impediment, as 80% of



organizational learning occurs in informal channels.<sup>25</sup> One of Slack's key benefits is that it brings conversations that were once trapped in closed email chains into open and searchable conversations that other team members can passively observe or access as needed. Lightweight task-tracking tools are also starting to introduce best practices from agile methodology and lean manufacturing into new teams in other disciplines and industries. Trello, Asana, Basecamp and other similar software all make it easy for teams to track tasks, clarify ownership, and share their progress in public. All of these tools are part of a broad strategy that makes it as easy as possible for people to explore new opportunities and help their business pursue its mission with speed and agility.

WHO'S SETTING THE EXAMPLE?

#### 18F

Operating on the leading-edge of transparent and open ways of working, the recently created digital product consultancy 18F is driving quick and meaningful change within one of the most bureaucratic institutions in the world: the U.S. Federal Government. Operating as a startup inside the General Services Administration, 18F has been prolific in its delivery for other government institutions as well as sharing open tools for other organizations - inside and outside the government - to use themselves. The organization maintains software code repositories on Github where it shares a wide range of software tools and building blocks for things like federal spending transparency, a college scorecard, and a skills-toopportunities work-matching platform. They have created and shared fully functional collaborative team software for publishing work (Hub), for recruiting collaborators for new ideas (Midas), and sharing team updates (Snippets). Everything 18F does is documented in public, and all software projects are open-source so that others are free to adapt and build on top of them.



## Chief Collaboration Officer



#### **ATTRIBUTES**

- Believes that collaborative software is a driver of business value
- Recognizes that in a world of abundant information, it is more valuable to enable novel uses of data than it is to predict and manage uses of data
- Embraces emerging tools and is comfortable with continuously changing tools and user needs
- Appreciates the exponential value unlocked by building platforms for others to build on
- Recognizes that easily updated and loosely coupled systems increase adaptivity, while overly robust and vertically integrated systems increase tech debt

- Championing the virtues of platform and interoperability across all systems
- Identifying points of friction within and between teams, and developing or implementing solutions
- Discovering insights about the changing collaboration habits of teams and individuals
- Building bespoke tools to solve business-specific collaboration problems
- Identifying and implementing existing tools to increase collaboration



CONCLUSION

## Embrace a responsive leadership mindset to unlock sustainable change

Adapting to such massive cultural, macro-economic, and technological shifts can feel like a Sisyphean undertaking. How can scaled organizations ever hope to keep up?

Fortunately, these four responsive principles *can* create a path forward. They are not a quick fix, however. They require commitment, vision, and true leadership. If you want the change to stick, you need leaders who are ready to rethink what it means to lead. You need leaders who will champion and steer the organization toward a compelling, meaningful collective purpose. You need leaders who multiply the potential of their people by building networks and cultivating a culture of continuous learning. You need leaders who understand that agility and innovation depend on user feedback and continual iteration. You need leaders who see software as a powerful tool to enable better communication and increased access to information.

We invite you to be one of these leaders.

#### **Chief Purpose Officer**



#### **Chief People Officer**



#### **Chief Agility Officer**



## Chief Collaboration Officer





#### **PURPOSE**

#### **ACTIONS**

- Run a vision and purpose workshop with the executive team to align specific and explicit missions for each executive's team with the organization's overall purpose.
- Publish the official organization-wide purpose publicly within the organization, and facilitate an open dialogue about its implications. Invite people to discuss. What initiatives would they start? What would they reprioritize? What would they stop doing?

#### **NETWORKS**

#### **ACTIONS**

- Run an engagement survey (depending on your company culture, you may want to go traditional: <a href="http://www.gallup.com/topic/employee\_engagement.aspx">http://www.gallup.com/topic/employee\_engagement.aspx</a>; or 21st century: <a href="https://www.cultureamp.com/">https://www.cultureamp.com/</a>).
- Identify a core people process (e.g. reviews, hiring, promotions, etc.)
   that is ripe for improvement, and commit a small dedicated team of ~3
   people to test and validate a prototype of a new version of the process
   within 8 weeks.
- Bring the leaders of a key division together for a Team Design workshop to map out the purpose-aligned jobs to be done, current rolefillers, critical skills and accountabilities, and talent gaps – independent of established titles.

#### **LEARNING**

#### **ACTIONS**

- Identify the teams in your organization who are already practicing "agile" (likely within your IT department). Ask them, what's working? And where are they getting stuck as they attempt to engage other groups in the organization?
- Find a project that can be delivered autonomously by a single team of 5-7 people, end-to-end without any reviews or approvals. Draft a brief charter that clearly outlines the project mission, the hypothesis you aim to test, and an iteration cadence (likely every one or two weeks). Carefully protect the team's autonomy and ability to focus.
- Ask for volunteers, across multiple levels of seniority, to participate in an initial training on core practices of agile project management. Ask each participant to introduce one new practice to their day-to-day teams, and share learnings in a group review 4 weeks after the training.



#### **OPEN**

#### **ACTIONS**

Within a clearly defined pilot team:

- Capture weekly tasks and task-ownership in a shared, digital system (e.g. Trello, Asana)
- Use an open and shared virtual chat application for team communications (e.g. Slack, Hipchat)
- Move working documents to either cloud-based multi-tenant software or cloud-based file sharing (e.g. Microsoft OneDrive, Box, or Google Docs)



**ABOUT US** 



## August is an organization development consultancy that builds high-performing teams for the world's most meaningful missions.

August was founded with the belief that today's most valuable work depends on teams of people who work well together. We believe that every organization already has the potential to make an exponential impact in the world as long as it creates a culture where teams flourish. August helps organizations unlock this potential by working with leaders to transform their organizations into purpose-driven open learning networks, able to adapt and thrive in the face of constant change.

We welcome the opportunity to speak with you and your team. Please email us at team@aug.co.

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Mike Arauz is a trusted advisor and consultant to Fortune 500 and Global Fortune 1000 organizations, and a sought-after public speaker on the subjects of organization development, self-organization, digital transformation, leadership, and business strategy. Before joining August, Mike was a Partner at Undercurrent, where he worked with executive leaders of global companies to transform how their organizations work and thrive in the 21st century, including GE, Pearson, and The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Before joining Undercurrent, Mike worked at the digital agency Deep Focus and at Pompei A.D., the design firm behind the vanguard retailers Anthropologie and Urban Outfitters. Mike is also a co-author of the Responsive.org manifesto and a leading contributor to the global self-management and future of work movement. You can reach Mike via email at mike@aug.co and on LinkedIn at www.linkedin.com/in/mikearauz.

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