

Up Close with White Space

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White space can be defined as any area that falls outside the purview of formal structures. It can serve as a potential ground for innovations, deeper conversations and promising opportunities. This can materialise through strengthening interrelated parts in systems or test-bedding new ideas to bring about breakthrough results. On the contrary, if left mismanaged, white space can cause initiatives to “fall through the cracks” or sabotage well-intentioned strategies. Hence, it is worth the while to examine where whitespace exists in organisations.

One of the biggest potential for white space is managing the expectations of different stakeholders. Broadly speaking, this can be between the shareholders or board and customers. Their common purpose is for the organisation to function well. This obviously translates into it being profitable, productive and delivering excellent service and quality products. However, pleasing one stakeholder in the short run at the expense of another can be detrimental to the business in the long run. For example, issuing huge dividends to please the shareholders while holding back research, technology upgrade or service excellence can affect customer demands. Similarly, dividend-cut can affect perception of a company’s performance, leading to plunging stock prices. In the case of the board, information could be deliberately withheld from the board by the gatekeeper to protect one’s reputation and that can caused ignorant board members to make fruitless decisions.

Fundamentally, the gap lies in a communication break-down on where the leverage points are in order to reach a win-win-win outcome for all stakeholders including the organisation. When knowledge falls into the white space, the demands for one party will not be evident to another. Sometimes, information could be deliberately withheld to protect one’s turf. At another time, extreme efforts could be put in to please the decision makers who appraise you rather than someone down the value chain who utilises the service and impacts the business outcomes directly.

Another typical white space resides between function and function. Many good plans have gone into restructuring an organisation to streamline operations and meet the mission at hand. Whilst heads of departments strive to ensure their staff are clear about their role so as to value-add to their function, little attention is being paid to the white space that lives between these functions. This results in a lack of ownership, wasted time and loss in productivity. A common phrase heard is, “This is not my job.”

In many instances, such white space requires conversations between parties of different functions to untangle the knots, especially when the issue is multi-faceted. When there is no clear ownership, the result is either having no one pick it up or work being duplicated. A simple example is the generation of more reports. For new ideas, what works for one part of the process may not work so well for another



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in the whole stream of value-chain. It is highly remarkable today when we see results of cross-functional projects that ultimately benefit the society as a whole. A good example is the creation of SingPass, the Singapore Personal Access on-line password that can be utilised at the eCitizen online portal to access e-services.

White space also exists in a programme. At offsite retreats, especially when there is an overnight component, white space surfaces during breaks or in the evening when the structured programme has ended. This is the time where participants are left to their own devices. Some choose to organise programme for the group or to be with cliques. Some just prefer to lounge around and chat. When there is no more formality and rank, white space becomes a golden opportunity for participants to mingle on their own, without organisational boundary. Often, deeper conversations take place and relationships get built upon. It is also a time to best observe the nuances and dynamics that exist in team. Similarly, getting hard conversations going may be challenging at meetings. Some things are better left said in the white space where issues could be sensitive and antagonising so as to better manage them. They can subsequently be surfaced in the black space when all parties are ready to confront them.

White space can exist outside the formal training programme too. A misconception is that learning can only take place at formal training programme and all incompetence can be resolved there. However, what is important is also the follow-up that takes place after that. Many opportunities for follow-up reside within the individuals' capacity to bring it to past if they truly apply them.

From vision to action, from strategy to tactics, from goals to performance, white space exists. The key is in knowing how to leverage it. Can you think of a white space that you can influence? Manage it before it manages you.



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