

# ERODING ASPIRATIONS

## OUR GOALS DRIFT IN STRONG CURRENTS

**"CULTURE EATS STRATEGY FOR BREAKFAST" IS A PHRASE ORIGINATED BY PETER DRUCKER<sup>1</sup>. IT CONCLUDES THAT NEW APPROACHES WEAKEN IN THE HANDS OF EXISTING CULTURES (A GROUPS EXISTING CHARACTERISTICS, BELIEFS, OR PRACTICES). IF YOU MERELY CONSIDER HOW DIFFICULT IT IS TO START OR STICK TO A NEW DIET DURING THE CHRISTMAS SEASON, YOU'LL GET THE GIST.**

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**S**o, how critical are new approaches in business? Consider the task of any of New Zealand's 2,560 companies with 100 employees or more. These companies comprise 48% of New Zealand's employee base<sup>2</sup> and, unless they want to find themselves obsolete, are now having to learn, adapt, and evolve at the accelerating speed of innovation. Whether you're a solo entrepreneur or a sizeable enterprise, change is difficult. It is estimated that between 50 and 70 percent of reengineering efforts were not successful in achieving the desired breakthrough performance<sup>3</sup>. But why?

**Our aspirations are like sandcastles built too close to a relentless sea of old beliefs and practices.**

Entrepreneurs, business executives, and high performers are now dealing with uncharted territory brought about by cutting edge technology, innovations,

and emerging new trends. For many of us, our prevailing fitness to compete erodes with the latest software update or tech product launch. Whether you are attempting an organisational transformation or striving for personal development, why is change so difficult?

### STRONG CURRENTS

Our species is a social animal, and we organise ourselves in groups. Our social groups, teams, and organisations are the predominant means to satisfy our needs. We bring thinking and meaning to our lives through shared narratives or stories. We group around areas of interest, beliefs, or shared experiences. The primary organising factor of any group is its story. Every group is *about* something. Every congregation, community, company, organisation, institution, city, or nation carries a narrative as its organising principle.

Some stories flow through our groups for short periods. For example, we

hear or see something and pass it along to others, like a funny line from a television show, a new jacket style, or a new dietary approach. Some narratives persist for many years — for example, a religious belief, a cultural norm, or an organisation's foundational practices.

All groups (from a small friend group to a vast nation) are organised around narratives we call *The Current*. We swim in *currents of narratives*. We use this characterisation to attempt to draw a picture of a strong current that captures and carries people away and into a particular way of thinking and acting. However, if we are not mindful of it, *the current* sweeps us up. It grabs us and has us think and act in ways that may be detrimental to our interests. We are often wary of what is clearly propaganda — biased or misleading information — used to promote or publicise a particular cause or point of view. We are less suspicious or even aware of the everyday narratives that erode our most important aspirations.

## THESE OPINIONS ARE NOT OUR OWN; THEY ARE THE NARRATIVES OF THE CURRENT.

As an example, consider your personal finances. In the book, *The Millionaire Next Door*, the authors illustrate that many people fail to accumulate wealth due to hyper-consumer lifestyles. They spend money as fast as they earn it. They warn, “If you want to be rich, stop acting like it.” In case after case, the authors demonstrate how *the current* pulls you into thinking that you must have the home, car, and lifestyle of those that look wealthy.<sup>4</sup>

Think about it. Why do we want what we want? How did you come to know about the home, car, and lifestyle you so desire? Indeed, there is *the current* produced by advertising. Smallbizgenius.net claims that the average person gets bombarded with over 1,700 banner ads per month, and eMarketer.com estimates worldwide digital ad spending is predicted to reach over \$375 billion by 2021. It’s challenging to remain immune to the lure of advertising—which makes an ideal life look so much sexier than our own. Even so, let’s say you can stay neutral, what about how you compare yourself to your friends, neighbours and colleagues and their lifestyle?

## “COMPARISON IS THE THIEF OF JOY.” -THEODORE ROOSEVELT

What we want is often not a by-product of carefully crafted aims, constructed after a good bit of accurate thinking and an unvarnished look at our situation and available resources. Instead, this aspect of our human nature has us observe what others are driving, the homes they are buying, and the adventures they are taking and compare ourselves incessantly. We then aspire to things that weren’t even on our radar, wasting our resources on a life we never knew we wanted. As such, we accept temporary satisfaction and modern sedentary conveniences.

This comparison renders us increasingly overweight, ill, and ultimately unsatisfied with our lives.

We get exploited by *the current* (and those who understand it) when we are disrespectful of its influence and ignorant of its effects. We must learn to see it, observe it, and study it if we are going to be able to ignore it – or, better yet, use it to our advantage.

It’s not easy to plan for and accomplish what we want in the tech-advanced world we now live in. There are so many different and competing narratives to consider in the various environments we participate in. We also all have limited resources to use – mental, physical, people, money, etc. If we bring some accurate thinking to our aims and the use of our limited resources – and consider the pull of *the current* – we can accept or decline the narratives accordingly. With this approach, we can transact effectively to satisfy even the loftiest aspirations.

## THE RELENTLESS CURRENT OF AN ORGANISATION

Many organisations, especially technology companies, have already recognised that assembly-line thinking, or command and control management are barriers to success. They have or are transforming their companies with new organisational approaches that offer speed and agility. This momentum is mission-critical, yet *the current* of old narratives is too often the battle.

For example, for most tech product companies, there is a massive premium for being first to market. Being second or third is a losing proposition. However, the current of a product company may dictate delivery dates, not by when the customer needs it, but by old narratives of readiness or organisational capacity. For example, they can’t tell a customer, “Hey, listen, we haven’t gotten our schedule sorted out... we’ll need a few more weeks or months to get this ready.” Instead, as with Apple, there is no question that the next version of the iPhone is showing up in October. It always does. It has whatever features and capabilities they can deploy in time for that release date because Christmas purchasing is just too valuable.

In every company (and in our personal lives), the prevailing narratives are strong and relentless. But if we study them and understand them for what they are, we can insert new narratives into a culture. We can tell new stories and invent new cultures that give our aspirations a fighting chance. In our next article, we will explore why new years resolutions fail and how to think accurately about your aims for 2020 - setting you up for a successful next decade.



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1 Peter Drucker was an Austrian-born American management consultant, educator, and author, whose writings contributed to the philosophical and practical foundations of the modern business corporation.

2 New Zealand business demography statistics: At February 2018, <https://www.stats.govt.nz/>

3 Harvard Business Review, Stop Using the Excuse “Organizational Change Is Hard,” Nick Tasler, July 19, 2017

4 The Millionaire Next Door by Thomas J. Stanley, Ph.D. and William D. Danko Ph.D.