

# Using the S-Curve Concept



## Organisations as living systems

### **Organisational change**

The concept of 's-curves' has been developed by Professor Peter Robertson of Human Insight to describe the different stages through which organisations develop within a business cycle.

Organisations are seen as sharing many characteristics of 'living systems' - nothing that grows is static, and change, whilst being a common factor of all organisational life, is chaotic and unpredictable. The 's-curve' represents the universal lifecycle and, when applied to



organisations, is a very powerful way of describing present conditions and the future course of change.

## **The dynamic nature of change: 's-curves' explained**

Organisations, like living organisms, have a natural cycle of birth, growth and decline. They experience constant change and complexity during this process. Paradoxically, when organisations are at their most successful, they can, and do, fail. Without anticipation, re-invention and resilience, leadership teams are unlikely to be sufficiently agile to face the next inevitable s-curve jump, along with all its organisational and leadership demands.

Associated with each stage of the curve are the leadership skills needed to take the organisation or team from a position in its current cycle to the start of the next 's-curve'. The role of leaders is to recognise not just where they are - but also the implications of the next stage.

## **Different stages pose different challenges**

Each stage of the s-curve presents leaders with unique challenges. Their skill will be in understanding how to adapt and lead their team and organisation forward to the next stage; ensuring the right conditions are created for the organisation to evolve naturally and successfully.

Early on in the cycle, the role of leaders is to explore new ideas, engage others around these ideas and build a new vision. The next challenge is to convert this thinking into reality – up-scaling the business. During the operational growth phase of the s-curve, the challenge is to keep the business on track, whilst starting to **think** about the next curve. This involves investing time and energy away from the current model which, in itself, presents a challenge to leaders and their priorities. Towards the end of the cycle, the leaders' focus should shift and ensure that processes are as lean and efficient as possible, so that management time can be devoted to the next s-curve transition. This is the toughest challenge - managing the transition from one cycle to the next, and creating the emotional and psychological conditions within which sustainable change can be achieved.

## **Using an 's-curve' approach to support your organisation through change**

At Leading Minds Consulting, we use the s-curve analysis as part of a business ecology model, to help you think about your business and your organisation - so that your change is rooted firmly in your strategic context. The approach is a strategic intervention, and draws on conceptual models from psychology, complexity and systems thinking, and cybernetics. It offers a powerful way of thinking about your organisation as part of a business ecosystem,



and whether it is fit for purpose and phase, ready for change, and what needs to be done in the organisation in the context of leadership, and at individual and team levels.

Sustainable business performance and stakeholder value are delivered by people working together in leadership teams, with a clear understanding of how the business environment is changing as well as their particular strategic tasks. In delivering strategy and business results over the long term, human factors are critical to success, and need to be understood. The natural cycle of business will require leadership to build in renewal, set new directions, and transform business practices. During such periods of uncertainty the leadership challenge will be around retaining and motivating people, nurturing core values and matching skills to future needs.

The different phases of an organisation's or team's life will benefit from different skills and abilities from its leaders and staff members, at particular times. The AEM cube is a robust diagnostic 360 degree tool, developed by Professor Peter Robertson (with high levels of validity and reliability), to help organisations and teams understand their position on the s-curve, and identify the skills and abilities required at each stage of the developmental lifecycle.

## **Working with you**

We will work with you to help you reach a clear understanding of your organisational phase, and your strategic challenges as you lead your organisation into the future and your next stage of growth and development. The way in which we do this, is tailored to your individual circumstances, following a consultation with you to explore your organisational needs and your business context.

Mary Joyce  
Director  
Leading Minds Consulting

[maryjoyce@leadingmindsconsulting.com](mailto:maryjoyce@leadingmindsconsulting.com)