

## Building an organisational grammar

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A look at the basic building blocks that give full expression to an organisation's structure.

The full potential of a language can be explored once a grammar systematises key patterns. The user can focus more on creating and communicating ideas and less on creating the structural means to do so.

Similarly, a formal grammar for organisations would enable them to focus greater energies on manifesting their purpose, without constantly reinventing the basic building blocks for doing so.

In this article an attempt is made to understand some of the conceptual units that could make up such a grammar.

### COMPETENCIES AND PURPOSE

The first building block of the organisation is a collection of competencies or areas of expertise. This translates into an overarching purpose (or purposes) for the organisation. Purpose, as such, is an insight-driven discovery, but the insight is usually built upon the bedrock of manifest and un-manifest competencies.

Additionally, purpose is usually an overarching theme that may be able to successfully capture multiple dimensions of the competencies contained within the organisation. The glue that unites competencies with purpose is a shared vision.

The physical manifestation of competencies and purpose could take two forms. Firstly, it clearly influences the areas in which the firm will choose to operate in. Secondly, and, more importantly, it manifests in the choice of leaders who need to be fully aligned with both the competencies and purpose of the firm.

### PLATFORMS, APPLICATIONS AND COMPONENTS

Platforms form the third building block of the organisational grammar. A platform essentially represents a market facing or internal facing proposition that the firm has to offer. A firm may have one or more platforms with possibly overlapping competencies and purposes. A product or service line is one example of a platform.

A platform is, in turn, a collection of one or more 'applications'. Applications are fully functional, meaningful units, and can be replicated easily. For instance, an e-commerce application used by a firm in one service platform to distribute its products may easily be replicated across platforms.

A component would be small, repeatable units of competencies which may be contained within multiple applications. A component in isolation may not be meaningful, but creates value when it aggregates with other components. A collection of inter-related components would usually make up an application. Of course, components, in turn, may aggregate amongst themselves to form larger components. The linguistic equivalent of a component-application-component paradigm would be a word, sentence and paragraph.

In a really well-designed organisation, it will be evident that the very competencies and purpose that form the first building block of the grammar are found even in the smallest components, applications and platforms in the firm. This is not unlike a fractal, and its feature of 'self-similarity'.

### APPLICATIONS OF A GRAMMAR

A clear understanding of the grammatical elements available in an organisation can become an important guide to actually designing the structure of the firm. Often, one finds firms where components are embedded so deeply into applications and platforms that they aren't well understood outside them, leading to frequent attempts at reinventing the wheel. Organising around grammatical elements will ensure that everything that is created in the organisation finds its full expression. Knowledge management would be a critical element in a 'grammatically structured' organisation, in order to ensure that component level expertise is consolidated centrally and redeployed

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The second arena in which a grammatical element based approach helps is in the identification of talent to place into those elements. While some people are component level thinkers, others may think at a platform level, and still others may excel in conceptualising visions of future states.

A third area in which a grammar-based approach helps is the effective design of conglomerates which operate in multiple spaces, while operating within its overarching purpose or competency areas. Too often one comes across cases of destructive diversification that have nothing to do with the competency-purpose-platform skills of the parent firm.

While this is only a brief attempt at visualising what a formal grammar for firms might look like, it is not difficult to see that a clear, well-tested grammar may have a lot of applications that help organisations fully utilise their creative energy, with both market-facing ramifications (increased revenue, etc.) and internal implications such as enhanced fulfilment.

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