



## A FRAMEWORK FOR ACHIEVING CLARITY FOR YOU AND YOUR ORGANIZATION

BY JIM RITCHIE-DUNHAM

**I** am going to take things you already know and show you how to put that knowledge to work in your organization. One of the keys to being effective in your role, whatever it may be, is to understand the complexity of your organization, what it seeks to achieve, and how you can contribute to that objective. Doing so isn't hard because you don't have the tools; it's hard because you haven't been shown how to use them. The process outlined in this article takes the understanding and tools you already have and shows you how to use them to gain greater clarity about how to get your organization to where it wants to go.

### Your Relationship with the Organization

You contribute to and depend on the success of the whole organization. As part of a group, department, or business unit, you must have access to certain resources (including people, capital, physical assets, and technology) in order to do your work. In turn, you use these resources to create value for the organization.

Your contribution to the organization depends on the quality of the decisions you make. Every decision is based on your understanding of what is important to you and to the organization and how to most efficiently and effectively achieve those goals. This is true for long-term decisions as well as daily ones—you act based on your own perspective of reality in your organization.

Obviously, the clearer you are about what you and the organization truly want to achieve and how the whole company actually works, the more likely you are to reach those

results through your decisions. This is not strategic planning, but *strategic action*. So, your understanding of what you and others want to accomplish and how the organization actually works greatly influences your day-to-day efficiency and effectiveness.

You know better than most others what is important in your own work and how your part of the organization functions. You have gained this understanding through lots of experience and training, so you would not expect that others without that experience and training would have your clarity—and they don't. Likewise, you do not have the same clarity that others have of their part of the organization.

While this point may seem obvious, most people assume that their understanding of different functions is sufficient, while others obviously misunderstand their part of the system. Why else would workers in other areas make decisions that cause problems in your area? The truth is that you probably do not have a clear understanding of what other parts of the organization are trying to achieve or the reality of how they function, and others have the same lack of clarity about your area.

### Clarity

Clarity is the correspondence between what is understood and what is actually observed.

### Increasing Your Clarity

To gain clarity so that your actions help you achieve what is important to you and to the organization, you need to understand:

- what values drive the system's behavior
- how the parts of the system function
- how the values and parts relate

To help you gain understanding of these three items with as little effort as possible, my colleagues and I have developed a comprehensive, rigorous, and integrative framework called "GRASP" (Goals, Resources, Actions, Structure, People). GRASP is relatively simple to understand and focuses on the purpose of different areas and the overall organization. The three exercises on page 8 are intended to improve your clarity; each exercise is linked to one of the necessary understandings.

I mentioned in the beginning that you could do all of this with the understanding and tools you already have. As you will see in the exercises, all you need is some time (25 to 40 hours), the ability to ask questions, and the ability to listen with empathy. While some people are better at this than others, we all have the experience of asking questions and listening. I have found that these exercises are practical for both individuals and groups. If you are in a relatively autonomous part of the organization, they can help you understand how you and your team relate to others in your unit and in other departments. If you work with or oversee a substantial part of the organization, these activities provide a more strategic view of the whole enterprise and help you see how you contribute to it and how it fits in the larger system, such as your industry or community.

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### Understanding the Values That Drive the System's Behavior

**Overview of Exercise:** You want to understand the goals that define the “reason for existence” for the overall system, for each functional area, and for each key stakeholder.

**GRASP Elements:** “Goals” describes what the organization and its external stakeholders want to achieve through the organization. “People” describes what the internal areas of the organization want to achieve. (For more detail, see “Reconciling Local and Global Goals,” *The Systems Thinker*, Volume 11 Number 2).

**Set-up:** In this exercise, you want to talk to people who have insight into the key areas of the system. We find that, in a 45- to 60-minute interview, you can inquire into why individuals think the overall system exists and what they think is most important about their work. The key is to approach the task with empathy and inquiry—you care about how they experience their part of the system.

**Example:** When we did this exercise with the Mexican Secretariat of Health, participants agreed that the overall goal was to minimize morbidity from an epidemic, which involved keeping the epidemic from entering Mexico, keeping people from getting it if it did enter, and helping people if they got it.

### Understanding How the Parts of the System Function

**Overview of Exercise:** You want to understand how “experts” from each part of the system see the functioning of their area, including the resources they use to create value for the organization and for the different stakeholders they influence, and the actions they take based on those resources.

**GRASP Elements:** “Resources” describes the inputs used by each area to achieve its goals and those used by the overall organization to satisfy its stakeholders. “Actions” sheds light on where people can actually take action in the organization.

**Set-up:** In this exercise, you want to talk to people who have enough breadth and depth of experience to know how their part of the system works. We find that in a 45- to 60-minute interview, you can inquire into the resources they use to achieve their functional goals and the actions they take using those resources.

**Example:** When we did this exercise with an electric utility firm, we interviewed people who were considered the “go to” people in key areas—they knew how things worked much better than did the leaders in charge. They were able to explain to us how the operations group developed strategic human, equipment, and infrastructure resources to deliver on its promise of safe, reliable electricity. Likewise the call-center expert explained how the resources at the center’s disposal influenced its response quality.

### Understanding How the Values and Parts Relate

**Overview of Exercise:** You want to understand how the values and parts of the system link together.

**GRASP Elements:** “Structure” describes how resources and actions relate to each other and to the overall and local goals. (For more details, see “Breaking Down Functional Blindness,” *The Systems Thinker*, Volume 10 Number 10).

**Set-up:** In this exercise, you can talk to the same people as in the previous exercise. We find that, in a 30-minute interview, you can learn how people think they influence and are influenced by other areas. Whether you use systems modeling tools such as causal loop diagrams or stock and flow models or simply develop a deeper understanding of these relationships, you will gain insight into how the values and functional parts of the system relate to each other.

**Example:** When we did this exercise with a European equipment manufacturer, the different experts we interviewed were quite clear how their work in sales, design, and assembly was influenced by the actions of the other areas. What was most interesting was when they did not know how they influenced other groups!

With this integrated understanding of the reality of what the different organizational areas want to achieve, how they function, how they interrelate, and how they are doing, you will be much clearer in how your day-to-day actions will help you achieve the desired results for your area and for the organization. This understanding will give you clarity about what resources you need to do your work and how you can help others do theirs most efficiently.

### Not Just for Top Executives

Most people think that this more systemic, overall understanding is probably important for senior executives and strategic planning, but not for getting the real work done in their area. This is not true. By understanding the whole system, the interrelationships within the system, and their own role in it, people from throughout the organization become more efficient and work together more effectively. The alternative is to remain in our own individual silos, where we focus on strengthening our part of the organization and our results, often to the detriment of other areas and the whole on which we ultimately depend. ■

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### Research Supporting These Exercises

The selection of the five elements of GRASP and their relationship is based on research and experience over the past decade, trying to understand how these principles improve a person’s “intuition” about the dynamics of complex organization. This minimal set of exercises includes the comprehensive rigor of most previous strategic frameworks in a simple, useful format.

### YOUR THOUGHTS

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