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THE "VIABILITY TRIAD" POSES THREE KEY QUESTIONS TO HELP LEADERS MAKE DECISIONS.

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The heavy weight of decision making, felt by all leaders, is perfectly summed up in this quote by Winston Churchill from Richard Langworth's *Churchill by Himself*: "A man must answer 'aye' or 'no' to the great questions, and by that decision he must be bound." (Of course, we would expand that quote to include men and women, whether they're politicians, academics, or executives). While Churchill dealt with wartime crises, administrators and executives are facing increased competition, complex stakeholder relationships, and rising costs amid budget constraints. But they still are tasked with answering "aye" or "no" to a series of great questions.

And in doing so, they often must overcome a great degree of uncertainty. During a recent conversation we had with a major university president, he expressed that one of his job's biggest challenges is to know when his decisions are on the right track—before it's too late.

While it's impossible to predict with certainty the outcome of any initiative, there is an emerging way for decision makers to understand the likelihood of success before they overcommit resources. Called the viability triad, it focuses leaders on three key questions that help them evaluate the potential for an idea's success.

Considering Desirability

The first great question is: **Will it be valued?** That is, is the idea anchored to relevant behavioral trends? Will a lot of people want it? If not, will a smaller segment pay a premium for it?

A perfect example of misdiagnosing desirability is provided by Apple's release of the Newton, the product for which the phrase "personal digital assistant" was coined. When the Newton was launched in the mid-1990s, Apple expected it to make handheld computing ubiquitous. By 1998, the product had been canceled. Apple—which has been uncommonly successful in understanding and shaping consumer preferences—miscalculated behavioral trends. The Newton was too far ahead of the adoption curve, and consumers failed to see why they needed an expensive toy that mimicked the function of a paper notepad.

Fast forward to the development of the iPhone and the iPad. While the iPad was developed first, Apple chose to lead with the iPhone in 2007. Why? Company leaders had a better understanding of behavioral trends at the time. By the time the iPhone was introduced cell phones were already common. Apple's revolutionary additions were the iPhone's sleek touchscreen interface and the robust vertical integration. Apple capitalized on the existing behavioral trend of cell phone adoption, and then radically transformed the caliber of that experience. The firm had found the ideal balance for introducing value-centered innovation into a ready adoption curve.

A similar scenario can be seen in higher education. When administrators decide to support programs that are not grounded in relevant behavioral trends, they run the risk of diluting resources, unnecessarily increasing complexity, and disconnecting their programs from reality. They can make these decisions passively, by simply allowing outdated content models or teaching modalities to continue. Or they can make these decisions actively, by embracing programs even when it's not clear that they will have sustainable demand. In both cases, they have failed to acknowledge that these programs are not desirable.

Considering Feasibility

There is an important difference between envisioning new horizons and committing resources to unfeasible pursuits. Therefore, the second great question is: **Can it be done?** Is the experience that the organization envisions possible, both technically and politically? Can the necessary resources be accessed? Can the organization operationalize the idea in the allotted timeframe? If the answers are no, leaders should be concerned.

The University of California's all-digital online campus provides a compelling feasibility warning. By 2016, the already cash-strapped university system had poured nearly US$10 million into an initiative that returned only a fraction of its investment. The MOOC system that university leaders envisioned was technically possible, but its commercial success depended on providing an educational experience that would attract both matriculated students and students from outside the UC system. It largely failed to deliver this experience, and student enrollment from outside UC never materialized. The MOOC approach burdened resources that were already in short supply, relied on demand that didn't exist, and couldn't succeed within the estimated timeframe. The university system eventually swallowed the cost within its budget.

Ideally, feasible projects are structured into incremental stages: opportunity identification; technical and commercial validation; prototype development; move to scale; and refinement. Projects that aren't feasible tend to follow a more regressive pattern: initial euphoria; emerging concern; panic; disillusionment; and blame. Whenever leaders are faced with a big decision, they first should determine feasibility by iterating the concept and validating the opportunity before committing resources that may be better used elsewhere.

Considering Sustainability
It's not enough for an idea to be superficially attractive; it also must have staying power. Therefore, the third great question is: **Should it be done?** Will it generate the intended returns, now and later? Is it repeatable and difficult to imitate? Does it rely on economic, intellectual, and environmental resources that are renewable or in abundant supply?

A commitment to environmental stewardship is only one component of long-term sustainability, but it's an important one. Organizations like Unilever, Toyota, DuPont, GE, Patagonia, Henkel, IKEA, and P&G have successfully positioned environmental sustainability as a strategic imperative. So have universities such as Arizona State, Stanford, and MIT.

But other forms of sustainability also have become crucial to businesses today, largely because of two shifts in mindset. First, firms that have flipped their focus from driving down costs to pursuing greater efficiency have improved their returns, developed more durable processes, and created stronger barriers to competition, while utilizing fewer resources. Second, these organizations have set a tone in their value chains that ripples into the operations of their partners and suppliers. A more nimble, responsive value chain is better able to leverage resources, reduce waste, and scale operations.

At universities and business schools, administrators who encounter fierce competition sometimes are tempted to trade long-term sustainability for short-term gains—a temptation that also permeates other organizations. A focus on sustainability is more likely to create the desired returns over time.

Clarity Amidst Complexity
An abbreviated definition for "viable" is "likely to succeed." In today's economic climate, leaders and administrators cannot afford to make decisions with anything less than success in mind. Too often, however, the complexity of a decision distracts their focus away from the most important things that they must get right. As a result, the initiatives fail.

Churchill was correct. Before proceeding with any project, decision makers need to answer the three great questions of the viability triad: Will it be valued? Can it be done? Should it be done?

Administrators who embed these great questions into their classrooms, staff meetings, and advisory board sessions will train learners, leaders, and stakeholders to focus on what is most relevant to the success of any decision. And when all these individuals can confidently answer “aye” to these three questions, they are more likely to make the decisions to which they will gladly be bound.

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