The Illusion of Controlling People

By making the distinction of having people "under our control" or "not under our control", what we tacitly do is to say that we have a well-designed, robust action pathway for some business roles, and that we don't have those same action pathways for other business roles. From this perspective, then, the answer to the question is simple: create a capacity to design and build strong action pathways with targeted business roles.

In a business, the territories across which to build action pathways have different textures. There are significant differences if we are trying to coordinate functional roles inside the organization, process roles across our supply chain— including vendors and customers, if we are assembling a design collective with some particular purpose, or if we are working to activate a vast distributed network. Each of these spaces is configured by different patterns. In general, functional roles inside organizational structures, in general, are accountable for long-term (these days, long-term may be quite short) returns on investment, where the investment is some strategic capability critical to sustain a business model. Their performance often is evaluated in a set of structured conversations that include business model evaluation, operating model benchmarking, ROI measurement, risk management, and focalization of strategies, among others. If the functional roles don't perform, some restructuring or re-coupling with the rest of the organization is needed. Actions to improve coordination among these roles often include: restructuring, out-sourcing/smart-sourcing, consolidating, or spinning-off. The fundamental challenge to improve action pathways in this space is coming-to-resolution in investment/disinvestment conversations.

A different scenario is to improve action pathways across the supply chain. The basic components of the supply chain are a set of recurrent exchanges between customers and performers. Ideally, these recurrent practices will produce continuous improvements in value to customers and investors. Designing action pathways across the supply chain (or any other extended business process) is always focused on reshaping process roles, adjusting customer/performer exchanges, and developing more effective and efficient practices. Toyota and Dell are exemplar players of this game, keeping a relentless focus on articulating and removing waste. Of course, it is also often the case that major changes in the overall process architectures are needed in order to re-invigorate action pathways.

Coordinating boundless distributed networks is a whole different game. As far as I can see, those action pathways require a very transparent and neutral setting (as opposed to hierarchical), and demand significant authenticity. The core of that game is to activate word-of-mouth in critical communities and clusters, scanning swarming reactions and emergent collectives, and creating agile platforms to enhance "user-generated-initiatives" and target potential opportunities of business collaboration.

No matter in which space we are moving, there is a relatively common set of design principles we need for building action pathways. Becoming habituated with those principles, starting from the more basic and fundamental, is critical to later building more extended and complex action pathways.

Finally, the other side of this story is that of "being controlled." And that exploration I am going to leave up to you.