

## The Clay Papers

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### Paper No. 7

### Organizational Noise

**An institution can be extraordinarily busy and still be unclear about what matters most.**

Institutions rarely run out of things to do.

There is always another meeting.

Another initiative.

Another report.

Another request.

Another priority.

Another problem requiring attention.

Over time, calendars fill.

Teams become stretched.

Dashboards become crowded.

And activity begins to resemble progress.

Yet beneath all this motion sits a deceptively simple question:

**What matters most?**

Strong institutions return to this question repeatedly.

Not because they lack ambition.

But because they understand that resources are finite, attention is finite, and organizational energy is finite.

Everything cannot matter equally.

Clarity is therefore not merely knowing what an institution wants to accomplish.

It is having the discipline to decide what deserves attention and what does not.

## **When Everything Becomes Important**

Most institutions do not suffer from a shortage of priorities.

They suffer from too many.

A strategic plan may identify five priorities.

Then a leadership meeting adds three.

A crisis introduces another.

A new stakeholder request arrives.

A promising opportunity emerges.

A senior leader develops an interest in something else.

None of these things may be unreasonable on their own.

But organizations experience them collectively.

Eventually, employees receive an impossible message: ***Everything matters.***

And when everything matters, people must quietly decide for themselves what matters most.

That is how institutional clarity begins to fragment.

One department optimizes for one objective.

Another responds to the latest request.

Another protects what it believes leadership truly values.

The strategy still exists.

But the organization begins operating through interpretation.

## **Clarity Is More Than Communication**

When priorities are misunderstood, the instinct is often to communicate them again.

Another presentation.

Another email.

Another town hall.

Another poster.

Communication matters.

But sometimes the problem is not that employees have failed to understand the priorities.

The problem is that leadership has failed to make choices.

You cannot communicate your way out of unresolved trade-offs.

If an organization declares twelve things equally critical, repeating them more loudly will not create clarity.

Clarity requires choice.

And choice requires courage.

Because saying **yes** to what matters usually requires saying "**not now**" to something else.

### **Strategy Lives in Trade-offs**

Strategy is often expressed through aspiration.

Where do we want to go?

What do we want to achieve?

What should the institution become?

But strategy becomes real through trade-offs.

Where will we put our best people?

What will receive funding first?

Which problem will leadership personally track?

What will we stop doing?

What opportunity will we decline?

What will have to wait?

These decisions reveal an institution's actual strategy far more reliably than the language in its planning documents.

Budgets reveal priorities.

Calendars reveal priorities.

Management attention reveals priorities.

What leaders repeatedly ask about reveals priorities.

Institutions eventually learn the difference between what leadership **says matters** and what leadership consistently **treats as mattering**.

### **The Cost of Organizational Noise**

Lack of clarity does not always produce dramatic failure.

Often it produces something quieter: **dilution**.

Good people spread themselves across too many objectives.

Meetings multiply because coordination becomes harder.

Teams struggle to distinguish urgency from importance.

Initiatives begin strongly and fade when attention moves elsewhere.

Employees become tired, not necessarily because the work is too difficult, but because too much of it competes for significance.

This is one of the hidden costs of institutional noise.

People can work extraordinarily hard while feeling strangely uncertain about whether their effort is moving the institution anywhere important.

Busyness can consume enormous energy without creating corresponding value.

### **Clarity Is an Act of Stewardship**

There is a temptation to think that keeping every possibility open is prudent leadership.

Sometimes it is the opposite.

Every additional priority consumes something.

Money.

Time.

Attention.

Leadership bandwidth.

Organizational energy.

Clarity protects these resources.

It asks leaders to steward not only budgets but also **attention**.

Because attention may be one of an institution's most scarce resources.

What leaders repeatedly attend to receives energy.

What receives energy develops momentum.

What develops momentum eventually shapes the institution.

Clarity therefore becomes a form of stewardship:

***We will not ask this institution to carry everything.***

We will decide what matters.

And we will protect it.

### **The Courage to Stop**

Perhaps one of leadership's hardest responsibilities is stopping work that is good but no longer important enough.

Not everything that should stop is failing.

Some initiatives were once useful.

Some activities still produce value.

Some projects have passionate champions.

Some programs have history behind them.

That is precisely why stopping is difficult.

But institutions cannot continually add without occasionally subtracting.

Every strategy needs space.

And sometimes creating that space requires the courage to say:

***This was valuable.***

***It may still be valuable.***

***But it is no longer where our limited energy belongs.***

*That is not failure. It is discipline.*

### **Clarity Must Travel**

Leadership clarity that remains in the boardroom is not institutional clarity.

A frontline employee should be able to understand:

What are we trying to accomplish?

Why does it matter?

How does my work contribute?

When competing demands arise, what takes precedence?

And perhaps most importantly:

***What can I safely deprioritize?***

That last question is rarely asked.

Yet it may be one of the clearest tests of strategy.

If employees know what the organization wants them to do but have no idea what they are permitted **not** to do, priorities will continue accumulating.

## Reflection

Perhaps every leadership team should occasionally clear the agenda and ask:

***If we could accomplish only three things exceptionally well this year, what would they be?***

Then ask the harder question:

***What would we have to stop, postpone, or decline in order to protect them?***

The first question identifies ambition.

The second reveals discipline.

Institutions do not become stronger merely by doing more.

Sometimes they become stronger by becoming clearer.

Clearer about purpose.

Clearer about priorities.

Clearer about trade-offs.

Clearer about what deserves their finite attention.

Because enduring institutions understand something deceptively simple:

***Focus is not the absence of ambition. It is the discipline that gives ambition somewhere to go.***

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