# With your organisation on a snowboard

*8 tips to avoid getting off the slope*

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Do you recognise the following pattern? A highly centralised organisation gets stuck in its decision-making and effectiveness because everything has to go through the narrow bottleneck of its top management. Moreover, the top becomes completely alienated from the workplace and from what customers really are all about. After a few incidents, the Board of Directors as the highest authority needs to intervene as the situation has become completely untenable. The management team is sent home and a new management team is installed, uncontaminated by the past. This should give a breath of fresh air. A U-turn will need to be made! Everything that previously was part of the solution has now become part of the problem.

The new management team starts decentralising with great enthusiasm, by setting up autonomous business units, self-organising teams, etc. The dysfunctional excesses of the previous approach are removed and plenty of room for bottom-up initiatives and entrepreneurship is created. In the short term, this gives the organisation a boost of new vitality. However, because of those initial successes and because the new direction was presented with a lot of élan and bravado as 'THE way forward', it is difficult to critically question or adjust the course taken. Critical questioning is actually seen as a lack of loyalty and an inability to detach from the past. It is dismissed as 'old thinking'.

Because the organisation continues zealously on its chosen course, it crosses an invisible boundary at a given moment. In addition to the initial advantages, the disadvantages are also increasingly becoming manifest. For example, the autonomous business units are mainly concerned with their own goals, they compete with each other or even fight each other outright. The synergy of the collaboration has disappeared and the wheel is being reinvented everywhere. The self-organising teams mainly do what they think is important and the question is whether that also contributes to the whole.

Again a number of incidents occur, so that the only conclusion is that it cannot go on like this. The turning point has been reached and history repeats itself: the old management team is dismissed and a fresh new management team sets a new course by tightening the strings again, focusing on 'one organisation' and strongly limiting the power of the autonomous parts in favour of the corporate center… Until the line of (dys)functionality is crossed again, and so on.

The pattern that is illustrated by this specific example of centralisation and decentralisation is of course applicable to any core polarity with which an organisation struggles. Organisations may, for example,

zigzag between 'diversify' and 'back to the core business', between 'initiative entrepreneurship' and 'strict operating procedures', between 'dividing into autonomous business units' and 'integration into one company', between a 'visionary' and an 'opportunistic' market strategy, etc.

In the figure below, the pendulum motion is visualised by the red zigzagging line with its abrupt, spiky turning points. In this figure, two vertical lines represent the boundaries between which the course of direction is still functional (the benefits outweigh the limitations) and outside of which it becomes dysfunctional (the limitations outweigh the benefits).
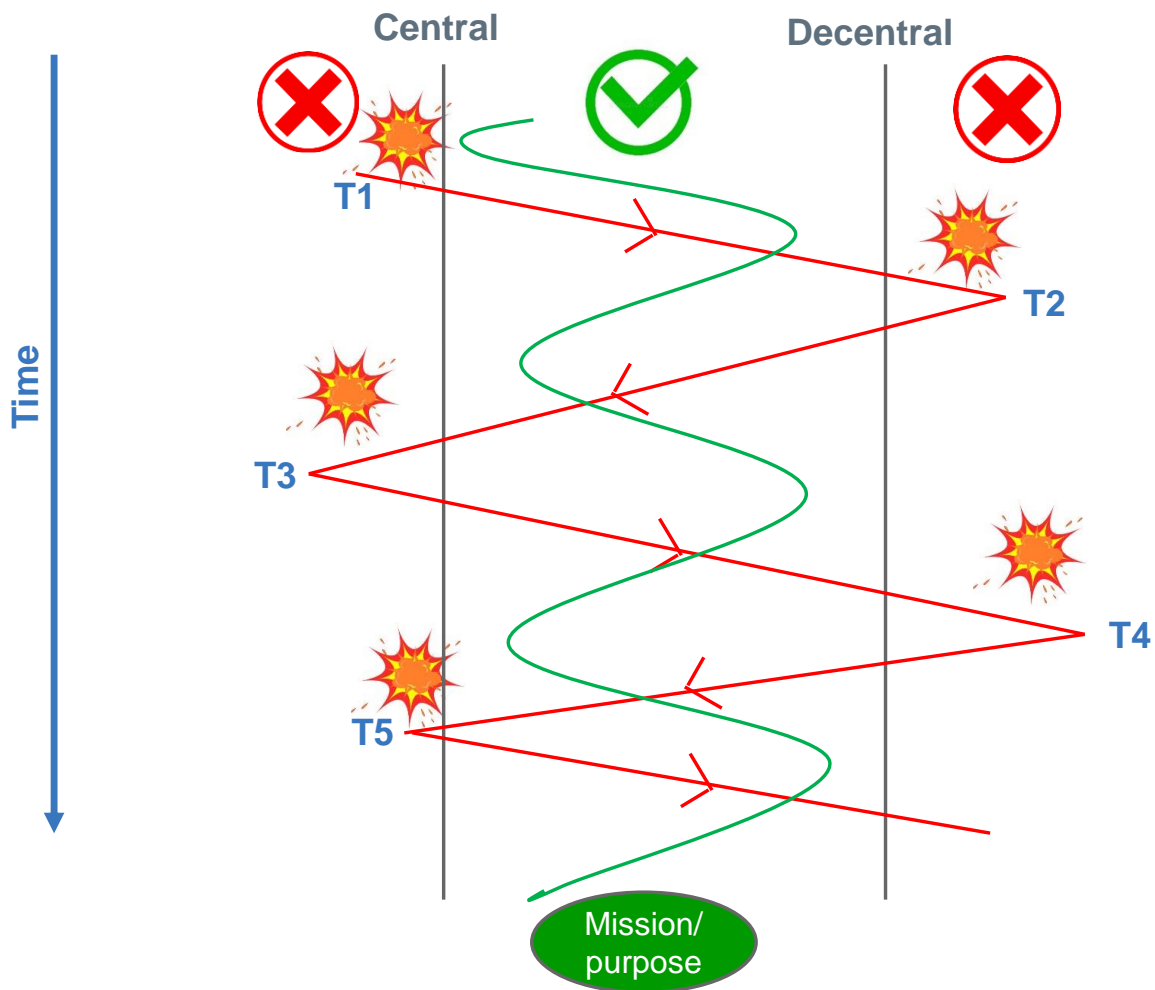


*Figure: How an organisation oscillates between the two poles of a core polarity*

Why are these pendulum movements so undesirable? In essence, every turnaround involves a massive destruction of value and capital. Everything that was previously built with a lot of energy and effort is broken down in the next pendulum movement. People implicitly or explicitly get the message that what they were doing is the past was not like it should and that therefore things need to be done in a completely different way. It goes without saying that employees do not really experience this as an appreciation of their work - to put it mildly.

Of course, an organisation must be able to dynamically move along with changes in the wider environment. Both poles are necessary to be able to switch flexibly between them and thus provide an answer to the changing context. And that also requires a change of course at regular intervals.

The key question is whether we can also take the corner? in a smoother way so that we do not keep slipping into the dysfunctional zones. This is like the green line in the figure above. Or to put it with a wintery metaphor: how can we snowboard in an agile way, instead of always dragging off the slopes and ending up in loose snow? Here are 8 tips for leaders:

1.  **Explore and identify.** Find out together which pendulum movements tend to repeat themselves in your organisation and which polarities are involved. You can get a good idea by talking to people who have been working for the organisation for a longer period of time. They form the collective memory of the organisation and can often tell you in full colour what the recurring patterns are. For example, if you enthusiastically proclaim that the organisation will have to be split up into sub-units because it has become too large and unmanageable, then someone with a long track record might say, somewhat cynically, that this was how the organisation was run 10 years ago before senior management back then announced, with just as much enthusiasm and urgency, the need for upscaling and greater synergy.

    By explicitly naming the recurring polarities of an organisation, they will become a topic of discussion in the strategic debate and become more manageable. As part of the management team, you can therefore include both opposing aspects when formulating a dual strategy or a paradoxical task challenge for the organisation: How can the strength of both of these aspects be used? For example, how can the short and informal communication lines typical of small-scale organisations be combined with the efficiency of large-scale organisations?

2.  **Make the overall goal of the organisation clear** and always use it as the ultimate point of reference. Polarities such as 'centralised' vs. 'decentralised' or 'autonomy' vs. 'hierarchy' are only means to achieve the overall goal. This goal is what we ultimately want to achieve for our clients or for society as a whole. For a social care provider, for example, this might be: Clients who can take responsibility for their own lives. This ultimate goal or the actual 'intention' is depicted by the green oval at the bottom of the figure. Always ask yourself: How does the course we're on contribute to the ultimate goal, and what is the most suitable approach in the current situation to achieve this goal? In the example of the social care provider: What kind of support will help this particular client to lead their life more independently? Would it be better to focus on actively stimulating this person and on proactively giving them advice and assistance, or should the initiative mainly come from the client himself/herself with support being provided only when it is explicitly requested? There is probably a smart way to combine both approaches, or maybe a diversified approach for different target groups would be more effective. For more details, see also sections 5.1 and 6.3.

3.  **Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each pole and determine together the desired range** between what is still considered to be effective and what is considered to be dysfunctional. This is best done in work teams (due to size and similar field of work) using concrete examples and cases. For example, in a team of project controllers, you could discuss the desired range between 'controlling' and 'advising': "OK, as a project controller, you want to think along with the business upfront and not just wave your red pen around afterwards saying that it is a no-go business. But where's the limit? What if, for example, a business manager asks you to help think about a creative solution that is correct to the letter but that deviates from the ethos of the organisation?" You discuss this with each other. What do you consider acceptable and what goes too far? You will often quickly agree on what is completely unacceptable. The dialogue will mainly focus on the 'grey areas' and may not always lead to a new and unanimous standard operating procedure. That's not really a problem, as long as you keep talking about the topic and know where to find each other for peer consultation when such a grey case presents itself. Through this dialogue, it also becomes clear what everyone understands by certain terms and that there can be great differences in interpretation. What might be considererd as 'advising'

to one person could seem like 'giving in' to the other, and what might seem to be just 'a basic form of control' to one person might be regarded as 'bureaucratic and ivory tower' to the other. You don't have to agree on everything in this dialogue, but by making these notions concrete and by sharing them with each other, you will automatically make much more conscious professional considerations and also understand why others do what they do. For more details, see also section 8.1.

4.  **Listen to signals** from people in your organisation and from your clients and actively seek their feedback. They are often the first to feel the limitations and disadvantages of a particular course in daily practice. For example, by steering towards more 'professionalisation' and standardisation, those on the workfloor might be burdened with more administration, ending up with less time to spend with clients or residents; they will be confronted in practice with absurd situations, making it clear that these wonderful new rules may well completely contradict each other.

5.  **Make time for (self-)reflection and critical evaluation** ("Are we still on the right track?") and dare to make adjustments. This certainly 'takes guts' because you need to be able to abandon a direction that you have always wholeheartedly defended if it is in the interest of the organisation, without seeing this as personal failure or loss of face. This also means that you need to be able to rise above your own ego, self-image and personal interest for the greater good. Being a leader is not about strictly sticking to one course but about having the guts to deviate from it for the bigger goal. For example, as a leader, dare to admit that you might have underestimated certain effects of the path you chose to follow and have thus made errors of judgment, instead of forcibly and unconvincingly trying to show that you have always been consistent. Gaining new insight is part of life and a sign of a highly developed learning capacity. For more details, see also sections 5.1 and 8.3.

6.  **Organise counterbalance and diversity.** Make sure that your (management) teams include people who have different perspectives. Invest in getting to know each other's differences and in seeing the underlying positive intentions. This is not about stating "that everyone has their own truth' but about actively seeking a new and connecting perspective through dialogue. This requires a different way of speaking: not in a judgmental 'us' versus 'them' way but in terms of underlying polarities, where both sides are valued. Appreciate and reward those who adopt a constructively critical attitude, and be open and inquisitive when opposing views arise. For more details, see also sections 7.2 and 6.3.

7.  **Explain clearly why** it is necessary to make a turn at a certain moment with reference to the ultimate goal of the organisation and changing context. For example: "Dear colleagues, we have recently been strongly focusing on gaining more in-depth knowledge in our individual disclipines. As a result, we have become much more professional and effective, which is also clearly being reflected in the satisfaction of our clients. But we are being faced with more and more issues that require an integrated approach. This is why we want to focus more specifically on collaboration between disciplines in the coming period." Announcing a change of direction is not enough; you also need to explain how it fits into the overall picture and how the new course relates to the current one. It's therefore important to not only communicate what the change is but to also be transparent about the decision-making process and your own deliberations during this process. Be open in expressing what you find difficult and share with others any struggles you may have. People will also recognise this in themselves and therefore feel more recognised. For more details, see also section 5.2.3.

8.  **Appreciate what already exists** and don't discard the things that work. (Temporarily) applying and focusing more on one pole doesn't mean that the other pole is no longer important.

Therefore, refrain from using words such as 'right' and 'wrong' or 'old' and 'new'. The existing course has brought you where you are now. You may have gone a little too far in one direction and are now being confronted with its negative aspects, but this doesn't mean that the underlying value of this pole is any less important. Show how 'the new' can enrich 'the current way of working', and look for ways to connect the power of both poles rather than stating that the new one will replace the old one. For example, how can we work together in a more multidisciplinary way while still fostering teamwork and specialisation in the separate disciplines? It also prevents everyone from immediately putting up a wall of resistance, as in "we were apparently doing everything wrong in the past and we are now being summoned to the new Valhalla".

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