



# The 6 essential organizational traits to face disruption and be future-ready.

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I firmly believe that companies bear a shared responsibility alongside regulators, investors, and citizens to **steer human activities towards sustainability**. Simultaneously, they must **navigate the challenging BANI world**—characterized by brittleness, anxiety, non-linearity, and incomprehensibility—facing turbulent headwinds, **while remaining productive and profitable** for their economic sustainability. We call organizations that successfully navigate this landscape ‘futureproof.’

What sets them apart? To answer this, I conducted semi-directive interviews with 50+ business leaders, including board members, CEOs, and executives from public and private companies of large and medium size in Europe. The insights gleaned from this research finetuned my initial assessment, which I had built thanks to my 25+ years of professional experience as a leader, manager, consultant and coach. This article encapsulates the key findings from this research and how to make them actionable to leaders.

**The business context is increasingly challenging**, shaped by BANI / VUCA dynamics like globalization, A.I., polarization, and climate change. Tangible business impacts include **shorter product life cycles** and **declining customer loyalty**.

**The concept of company success is pivotal** because our innate drive as humans propels us to achieve set goals and elaborate organizational strategies fittingly. According to the 50 interviewees, the notion of business success has evolved. While economic prosperity remains fundamental<sup>1</sup>, the traditional theories of Adam Smith and Milton Friedman no longer suffice, even though they profoundly drive financial markets.

The growing net assets<sup>2</sup> of a company, a metric long used to measure value generation, now requires a broader perspective that includes external assets critical for its functioning, such as air and water quality, education levels, and social dialogue.

The trend observed from the interviews is **an expansion of the notion of net assets to encompass these externalities**, whether in actual terms (already being priced, like the increased scarcity of resources or the wave of employee burnout) or by anticipation of new regulations, or even by moral duty.

Nonfinancial reporting requirements are growing, exposing performance on ESG matters, and companies are proactively anticipating future shifts, such as CO<sub>2</sub> pricing. For few sustainability-focused leaders, the concept of net assets includes (at least morally) the planetary and social boundaries, aligning with Doughnut economics<sup>3</sup>.

**ESG dimensions are increasingly shaping the notion of success.** Integration of relevant ESG dimensions is now a prerequisite for a **license to operate**, gaining favour with regulators, banks, investors, clients, and potential employees. **This expansion makes success more comprehensive and multidimensional, but also complex, particularly in the current low economic cycle where leaders focus on productivity gains and business resilience.**

**As the context and business objectives have evolved into a more complex and disruptive landscape for companies, we explore here how organizations should also adapt to deliver company success. We named this Organizational Development Goals (ODG).**

<sup>1</sup> In the public sector, effectiveness and efficiency of the public action are more relevant.

<sup>2</sup> Assets net of liabilities reported in the balance sheet, traditionally expected to grow over time.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.kateraworth.com/doughnut/>

# Organization Development Goals to face disruption

An organization is the human system where people can thrive, engage personally, collaborate effectively, and align their efforts with shared goals, fostering resilience, innovation, and sustainable success for both individuals and the company. This research highlights 6 traits and 21 characteristics that are most relevant in the current context.



The 6 traits of Organization Development Goals (their share indicates the approximate number of spontaneous mentions by 50 interviewees)

**Having a robust purpose stands out as the primary and central trait of a future-proof organization.** To energize and unite people, it should be more than a statement but also guide actions that contribute to society and/or nature. The strength of a purpose is supported by three key characteristics:

- 1. Connected to Real and Specific Issues:** It addresses tangible problems in our world, communities, or environment, emphasizing sustainable solutions.
- 2. Clearly Stated as a North Pole:** It is explicitly defined as the guiding principle of the company, accessible to all stakeholders.
- 3. Genuinely Lived with Coherent Integration:** It is authentically integrated into the company's vision, strategy, and values. Failure in this integration can create an impression of "greenwashing" or "altruism-washing," damaging employee engagement and company reputation.

The second most crucial trait is **the strategic narrative**, depicting the chosen adaptive path to a possible future. Here are the most stated characteristics:

- 1. Clear, Coherent, and Compelling:** Serving as a common GPS (to all employees) for chosen ambitions and priorities, with the ability to generate cash. Clarity also extends to the ability to take acceptable risks and adapt to changes.
- 2. Integration of ESG Commitments:** Balancing profit, planet, and people, reflecting anticipated ESG regulations, its spirit, and the moral lines of shareholders/management.
- 3. Deep Connection with Key Stakeholders:** The strategy should be deeply rooted in the needs of clients to create value, balanced with other important stakeholders.

*All interviewees emphasized the central importance of purpose, focusing mostly on the positive impact on society, although approximately 40% recognized the urgent need for addressing climate change and other planetary boundaries in their purpose.*

*Several concrete practices were mentioned to support a clear strategic narrative, such as using the "B-Corp" certification to trigger a broader and more sustainable perspective. Some referred to mandatory parallel business planning with EBITDA and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions to demonstrate relevance for lower emissions.*

## Culture, described as the “smell of the place”

by Professor Sumantra Ghoshal, is a challenging trait to define yet one of the most influential for futureproofing an organization.

Commonalities from the interviews include:

- 1. Openness to Diversity:** Most mentioned cultural trait requiring curiosity and deep connection with others. Embracing diversity of opinion & background among people and teams involves debates, critical thinking, and feedback, enabling a more robust, holistic, and creative approach to complex issues. This favours effective cooperation and innovation both internally and externally (when solving problems requiring M&A or partnerships).
- 2. Cultural Coherence:** Living desired values with matching behaviours and business practices, while supporting the company's purpose and strategy. Several interviewees emphasized the high cost of weakness in this aspect.
- 3. Experimentation and Failure:** Essential for progress and adaptability. Organizations where individuals are expected to have all the answers from the beginning face challenges in solving unknown complexities.
- 4. Accountability:** Critical for social cohesion, requiring the discipline of delivering promises, the courage of holding necessary conversations, and an orientation to results.
- 5. Humility and Authenticity:** Frequently mentioned underlying values to all 4 previous points, avoiding toxic ego and heavy politics seen as detrimental to futureproof organizations.

**Leadership quality**, identified as the fourth trait, was predominantly discussed regarding the Board of Directors, the CEO, the Executive Committee, collectively, in teams, and individually. The role modelling at these levels is critical to influence the leadership culture at all levels. Key characteristics discussed in the interviews include:

- 1. Integrative & Determined Visionaries:** Setting the tone and ambition of the company, holding a long-term perspective, making sense of the necessary risks to bear, being decisive on the big bets to pivot, and integrating new topics such as ESG and AI.
- 2. Cultivation of Self-awareness and Sense of Oneness:** Including a healthy ego, anchored values & ethics, an assumed relationship to risk, trust in others, and the ability to connect emotionally and intuitively.

The sense of oneness -the inner connection to (all) people and to nature- was highlighted as a spiritual dimension by some environmentally and socially engaged interviewees. It was described as a fundamental driver for empathy / care for “externalities” and somehow a system change. This assertion might be behind the many leaders' retreats close to nature with yoga and meditation available on the market.

- 3. Nurturing a Safe Space for a Growth Mindset:** Essential to navigate new territories, challenge the status quo, and leverage collective intelligence. Some mentioned the safe space dedicated to internal mavericks (insider-outsiders, game changers) who can productively challenge the mainstream practices, enabling surprising successes.
- 4. Facilitation of Collective Effectiveness:** Implies team alignment on intents, acts, and results, with diversity to avoid biases and blind spots. It also refers to robust governance with complementary missions for each leading body, and the ability to co-create, consult, and delegate inside and outside the company.

**The organizational structure**, referring to the formal linkage and governance between people and teams (board, the management, all employees, and external parties), emerged with key characteristics:

- 1. Empowerment and Decentralization:** Clear requirements for most interviewees to become futureproof. The Board of Directors and top management should excel in accountability for long-term strategy and pivotal decisions but should also structurally allow maximum self-determination to teams in the field, where there is a closer understanding of what is going on and the capacity to adapt / act fast. Clarity of roles & responsibilities on success fosters strong ownership.
- 2. Adaptability:** Essential for an organization to adjust to changing circumstances, requiring a willingness to challenge and change the structure when needed.
- 3. Multidisciplinary Teams:** Frequently mentioned as beneficial for lower risk, increased creativity, empowerment, and effective problem-solving. This is typical of the agile model.

*Note on Balancing Centrally Managed Processes/Functions and Empowerment: Process digitalization or decisions driven by big data / AI are examples that could reduce employee self-determination.*

*This research highlights a positive bias for empowerment, combined with selectively centralized technocracy, adding value to empowered teams or informing top management on essentials.*

As the last trait, a futureproof organization should have a good **density of adaptive talents**. Many interviewees identified the need to grow employees' talents in new topics such as ESG, digital, and AI, as well as in soft skills to better collaborate in a multidisciplinary environment. Adaptability of people is a key requirement, supported by more fluid and diversified careers.

Summary of the Organization Development Goals, its 6 traits and 21 characteristics

Purpose relevant for the world	Sustainable strategic narrative	Open & cohesive culture	Connecting & coherent leaders	Empowering structure	Adaptive talents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Connected to real &amp; specific issues</li> <li>Clearly stated as the north star</li> <li>Genuinely lived with coherent integration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clear, coherent &amp; compelling</li> <li>Integration of ESG commitments</li> <li>Deep connection with stakeholders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Openness to diversity</li> <li>Cultural coherence</li> <li>Experimentation &amp; failure</li> <li>Accountability</li> <li>Humility &amp; authenticity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Integrative &amp; determined visionaries</li> <li>Self-awareness &amp; sense of oneness</li> <li>Nurturing safe space &amp; growth mindset</li> <li>Facilitation of collective effectiveness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Empowerment &amp; decentralization</li> <li>Adaptability</li> <li>Multidisciplinary teams</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Invest in talent growth</li> <li>Mastery of new topics</li> <li>Fluid &amp; diversified career</li> </ul>

**These traits are interconnected, akin to the different parts of a living system, and they should be viewed holistically.**

Imagine the disrupted dance and ensuing confusion if, hypothetically, one of these traits were abandoned. How would the system dance if purpose regressed to mere profit, or if the structure became rigid and siloed? According to many interviewees, coherence emerges as the primary quality that sustains the harmony of this dance.

**Leaders shoulder the responsibility to maximize the coherence of the system, mitigating major paradoxes and serving as role models themselves. The result is an enhanced alignment and credibility, enabling organizations to navigate challenging contexts and achieve broader success.**

## Conclusion

Companies need to build the resilience to navigate an increasingly BANI context (Brittle, Anxious, Non-linear, and Incomprehensible). Beyond navigating the current economic downturn and disruptions, organizations should address success based on a broader notion of net asset, ultimately including social and environmental externalities.



This research identified the Organization Development Goals, with 6 traits and 21 characteristics that can help leaders assess the readiness of their organizations—making them more future-ready. Beyond these six traits, a deeper sense was summarized by one interviewee:

**“The why” and “who” are becoming more important than “how” and “what” in companies.**

The “why” depicts the company’s purpose and relevance to the world, while the “who” refers to the individual and collective adventure, where identity and adaptability become differentiating factors. **To implement this model, leaders should bear 3 key challenges in mind:** clarity, connection, and coherence.

- **Clarity:** Shared understanding of the company’s purpose, strategy, collective identity, role models, clear accountability, and required capabilities.
- **Connection:** The heartfelt sense that “we are one,” with our planet, people, colleagues, partners, and true self. Actions influence others, who in turn influence us.
- **Coherence/congruence:** The integrity to align acts with intents and grasp their reality in a systemic way, aligning different dimensions and traits as much as possible.

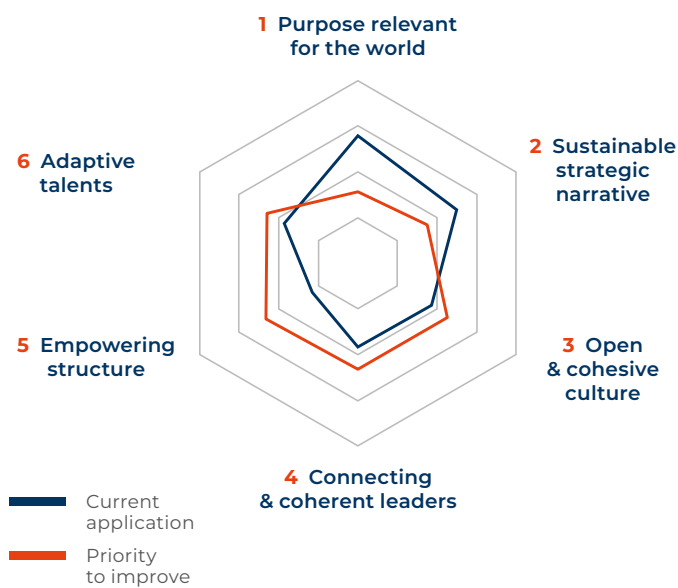
# How can I better steer my organization towards greater resilience and velocity?

## Start with a simple ODG diagnostic.

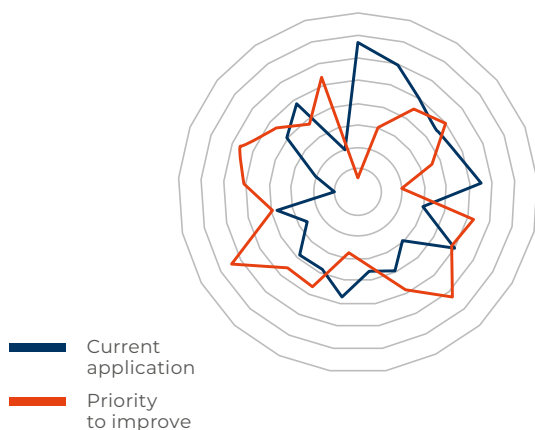


Drawing on this research, CultureWorks has developed the **Organization Development Goals (ODG) diagnostic tool to assess the 21 characteristics that drive resilience and velocity in organizations.**

This systemic tool provides leaders with actionable insights into their organization's strengths and areas for development, offering clear recommendations for growth.



Illustrative qualitative results, highlighting stronger Organization Development Goals (ODG) traits and development areas



Illustrative results per ODG characteristic (21)

The diagnostic combines **quantitative and qualitative** approaches to capture a comprehensive picture of both formal and informal organizational traits. Employees at all levels anonymously rate the current state and desired improvements for each characteristic. The **process is efficient**: over 15–20 minutes, respondents complete an online survey of approximately 60 concise statements and have the opportunity to share open-ended comments. This is followed by a qualitative phase, including a limited number of interviews and focus groups, to contextualize and enrich the quantitative findings.

In just 4 to 6 weeks, **leaders receive a detailed report.** This includes aggregated quantitative results, segmented insights by population groups (e.g., hierarchical level, department, age, or tenure), and qualitative findings. A comprehensive SWOT analysis and tailored recommendations are also provided. The results are presented to senior management in a collaborative session to align on priorities and develop a focused strategy for organizational development.

This tool has been successfully applied in organizations within utilities and biotech sectors facing significant transformation challenges. Positive indicators of its impact include **strong employee engagement in the process**, high-quality interpretative discussions, and management feedback highlighting how the diagnostic clarified root causes of observed challenges. **Leaders reported a deeper understanding of organizational dynamics, enabling more effective and targeted actions.**



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# About us

As leadership & culture advisory boutique, we are companions to leaders committed to accelerating their company velocity and transformation power.

With our systemic approach, we help them regenerating their team's and organization's inner collective power for outer positive impact.

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More on:

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