

Maletz MC, Nohria N. Managing in the whitespace. Harvard Business Review, 2001; 79 (2):103-11.

Maletz and Nohria suggest that the conventional wisdom is that a business is doomed unless it overturns its status quo.

They contrast two 'spaces':

- The 'blackspace' which is all the opportunities which the organisation has formally targeted and organized itself to 'capture', and
- The 'whitespace' which is the area where budget is non-existent, rules are vague, authority is fuzzy, and entrepreneurial activity can reinvent and renew a company.

Maletz and Nohria look at three aspects of the 'whitespace':

- Moving into the whitespace
- Managing/working in the whitespace
- Nurturing those who work in the whitespace (by those outside it).

They argue that the initial move into the whitespace involves:

- Recognizing that, within the organisation, there is substantial uncertainty over a recognized opportunity
- Making the evaluation that the organisational politics make it impossible to pursue the opportunity within the blackspace
- Determining that the organisation's sound performance would be risked by diverting resources into the initiative

A reader needs to conclude, as it is not stated, that the organisational approach is different where the organisation lacks a sound/strong base in the blackspace.

The paper proposes that there are four challenges to be faced by those working/managing in the whitespace:

- **Establishing legitimacy** (for example, by choosing to work on something at the core of the organisation's mission, or applying unique technical skill that gives the whitespace leader legitimacy in pursuing the innovation)
- **Mobilising resources** (for example, by asking many people for a small amount of help over time, mentoring emerging talent, being persistent and creative, and 'working with what you've got rather than what you think you need')
- **Building momentum** (for example, by rapidly developing a prototype, running experiments, creating pilots, presenting visible products, and 'sharing the wealth' by publicly praising and acknowledging the source of contributions)
- **Measuring results** (for example, by creating innovative progress indicators as 'traditional' modes of assessing progress may be inappropriate).

Maletz and Nohria argue that managers and workers in the whitespace need to walk a fine line between communicating their (risky) work to the rest of the organisation and the external environment; and remaining invisible. Communication may help mobilize resources, but invisibility can protect fragile and unresolved ideas.

Decision-makers who need to nurture work in the whitespace need to:

- Frame the strategy – they need to ‘position’ the innovation as part of a broad vision/future for the organisation and develop plausible, beneficial scenarios for the outcomes of the whitespace activity
- Provide support – the whitespace need to be fed, but not too much. It also needs moral support and occasional organisational support through hurdles
- Build support – it is important for leaders to communicate positively about the initiatives internally and externally in a purposive way that opens doors and yet protects the initiative from premature exposure
- Monitor progress – this might involve getting feedback from experienced people who are not involved directly, but who know about the project and its potential.

Successful whitespace initiatives need to be migrated into the blackspace. It is helpful for managers/workers in the area to know when to ‘let go’ of an initiative that have developed in the whitespace.

Maletz and Nohria also suggest that it is important to have the willingness and ability to ‘kill off’ unsuccessful whitespace initiatives in order to maintain organisational success.