

# For organisations that tackle grand societal challenges, hope can be a double-edged sword

*Non-profit organisations, medical institutions, think tanks, and companies' corporate social responsibility teams many times attempt to tackle big challenges such as climate change, social inequity, and finding the cure for illnesses. In these situations, emotions are likely to mount when setbacks are encountered. **Katina Sawyer** and **Judith Clair** write that propagating hopeful thoughts and behaviours may help organisations tackle big challenges. But when hope cultures start to wane in strength, they can act as a double-edged sword.*

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In light of the COVID-19 pandemic – and other large-scale issues facing humanity – organisations all over the globe have been working to tackle challenges that are key for human flourishing, and even survival. For example, non-profit organisations, medical institutions, think tanks, and corporate CSR efforts have aimed to tackle challenges such as climate change, social inequity, and finding the cure for disease or illnesses. However, as organisations aim to address these important societal issues, they are likely to find that it's hard to tackle grand challenges. Given the magnitude of the issues they seek to address, and the difficulty in doing so, organisations may never fully realize their goals. In such situations, progress is often slow, and failures and setbacks are almost inevitable.

Literature on how organisations might tackle grand challenges in society has only just started to accumulate in the last decade. The current literature focuses on action-based solutions for promoting success. Namely, there is a strong emphasis on the need to effectively coordinate and organise people or resources as pathways towards success.

Yet, emotions are likely to play a big role in how organisations persist toward their goals in the face of frustration. Indeed, they usually do. When we are faced with traumas and challenges inherent in solving existential problems in society, the realities of how difficult it is to solve such problems quickly comes to light. Solving grand challenges is like Sisyphus, a Greek mythological character who continually rolls a boulder up a hill, only to have it roll back down again. In organisations attempting to tackle some of the world's biggest issues, emotions are likely to mount when setbacks are encountered, or goals are blocked.

We found that hope – an anticipatory emotion that emerges in light of challenging circumstances – bubbles up in such situations. Specifically, we found that organisations tackling grand challenges may build hope cultures, which we define as assumptions, beliefs, norms, and practices that propagate hopeful thoughts and behaviours in pursuit of an organisation's goals. We uncovered that hope cultures play an important and unexpected role in helping organisations keep going as they tackle grand challenges. They can also be a double-edged sword, stifling progress when the hope culture itself starts to wane in strength.

In a two-year ethnographic study, we examined Light for the Future, an organisation aiming to tackle the societal grand challenge of commercial sex exploitation. Commercial sex exploitation is a form of gender-based violence and can include such experiences as forced or coercive prostitution and human trafficking. The organisation aims to address this grand challenge through a year-long residential rehabilitation program, which provides legal, social, psychological, and health-related services to women who have survived commercial sex exploitation. We interviewed residents and staff, as well as gathered frequent observations of happenings within the organisation over the course of the two-year period. We followed best practices in qualitative methodologies to code our data. From there, we created a chronological timeline of four phases which were marked by key events happening in and around the organisation, which either bolstered or diminished the hope culture's strength over time.

Through our analysis, we found that a hope culture existed within Light for the Future. Further, we uncovered that the hope cultures consisted of three key principles. These principles were: 1) collective agency, or a feeling that the organisation could be successful if members banded together, 2) a belief that the organisation was leveraging effective methods and practices for achieving their goals, and 3) a collective, shared vision for a more desirable future. Given the importance and magnitude of their goals, Light for the Future paid close attention to unfolding events happening in and around the organisation, in order to determine whether or not they resonated with the key principles of their hope culture.

Across the four time periods, we found that, when events suggested that the hope culture's principles were accurate, hopeful stories spread throughout the organisation. For example, our first time period, called "Hopes Running High" was marked by positive, hopeful narratives about the organisation's success. Residents were achieving their goals and the organisation was fulfilling its mission to provide a new life to survivors of commercial sex exploitation. As a result, positive emotions spread throughout the organisation and the hope culture strengthened. But, over time, events started to unfold that called the hope culture into question (e.g., relapses, deaths, disciplinary issues). During our second time period, called "Harsh Realities Take Hold", hopeless stories began to circulate. As these stories spread, negative emotions caught on throughout the collective and slowly weakened the hope culture. During the third time period, "Disappointed Hopes Lead to Emotional Rock Bottom", the tragic death of a model resident caused hopeless stories and negative emotions to eclipse positive ones. Yet, in the fourth time period, "Hope on the Rebound", a new group of residents breathed new life into the organisation, restoring past positive narratives and emotions. Across phases, as positive or negative emotions spread, the organisation either became energised towards their goals or grew increasingly less vibrant (respectively). When the organisation was energised, they were more likely to continue striving toward their goals. Contrastingly, when they were de-energised, they contracted their goals.

Overall, we found that hope cultures operate as double-edged swords in organisations tackling society's biggest problems. They can both contribute to, and get in the way of, goal progress. We also found that stories that are told about unfolding events, and the emotions that spread as a result, underlie fluctuations in the strength of hope cultures. Based on our research, we suggest that organisations anticipate the double-edged sword of hope, to brace themselves for inevitable challenges to come. We also recommend that organisations carefully attend to and manage narratives about unfolding events, and emotions that spread as a result. In doing so, organisations might better stay the course when tackling grand challenges and continue to promote human flourishing.



#### Notes:

- This blog post is based on [Hope Cultures in Organizations: Tackling the Grand Challenge of Commercial Sex Exploitation](#), *Administrative Science Quarterly*
- The post represents the views of its author(s), not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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