

The Star that ate Itself

Submitted by the IdeaSquare self-appointed Innovation Team and accepted as an oral presentation for the 25th Conference of the Anonymous Committee of Organizational Astrophysics and Cosmology

It is very difficult to overestimate the role that metaphor plays in making sense of organizations, particularly when the metaphors are cosmic and dramatic. Stars, galaxies, black holes. These concepts have been borrowed by the so-called strategic experts with such enthusiasm that physicists now flinch when they hear the word “vision”. But never afraid to gently reinvent the cosmic wheel, the IdeaSquare self-appointed innovation team set itself the challenge of understanding organizational implosion through the historical journey of black hole research. In other words: “black-holifying” the study of organizational collapse, a word that, much like many others, exists only because someone insisted on using it.

Armed with this galactic ambition, the team decided not to follow any strict methodological roadmap (as it is already traditional) but instead float freely through the universe of ideas, allowing gravity, coffee, and meeting fatigue to guide its inquiry.

The Discovery that Something might be Wrong

It began, as most revelations do, during a casual chat between two team members waiting for a meeting that could have been an email. One mentioned that in 1783, the clergyman-scientist John Michell proposed a radical idea: A star so massive that not even light (aka corporate communications) could escape its pull¹. The other nodded politely, uncertain whether Michell was talking about collapsing stars or collapsing organizations. The metaphor, however, stuck: could organizations, like stars, collapse when they accumulate too much mass in the shape of too many processes, approvals, templates, dashboards, steering groups?

The IdeaSquare team consensus: Yes.

A Field Guide to Outside Shine

When viewed from a safe distance (say, the organization website), organizations shine impressively. Their luminosity includes:

- Vision and Purpose (hot, bright hydrogen).
- Values (steady photons of virtue).
- Sustainability principles (green-tinted luminescence).
- Innovation strategy (solar flares that appear sporadically but rarely affect anything on Earth).
- Etc.

This outward glow is polished, glossy, and much like starlight, often billions of Megaparsecs removed from the messy thermo-nuclear reality within.

The Beginnings of the Collapse: Laplace enters the Chat

Pierre-Simon Laplace mathematically expanded Michell’s idea in 1796, showing that collapse was not a fluke, but a predictable outcome of excessive gravity pulls². Similarly, organizational collapse becomes inevitable when the following forces exceed their natural limits:

- Bureaucracy.
- Excessive inwards pressure of management orbitals.
- The density of PowerPoint decks per employee.
- Etc.

Once Laplace’s threshold is crossed, the organization cannot sustain its positive expanding pressure (innovation, agility, actual problem-solving) and begins its inward slide. This moment is typically marked by

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Michell

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre-Simon_Laplace

sentences like: “We should establish a governance committee to study this” and/or “Let us constitute a task force to help the steering committee”.

The Chandrasekar Limit, or how to know when an Organization is doomed

A century later, the brilliant Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar calculated the maximum mass a white dwarf star can sustain before collapsing into something far denser and less pleasant³. Organizations have their own Chandrasekhar Limit, usually reached when:

- There are more roles ending in “-lead” than actual work to do.
- Employees need approval from five levels up to buy a stapler.
- To launch any project, one must first secure approval from the Committee of Committees.
- Job titles are inflated to the point that “Assistant Deputy Associate Lead” becomes a thing.
- Etc.

Cross this limit, and the gravitational collapse begins. Quietly at first, then with alarming speed.

John Wheeler names the Beast

John Wheeler famously coined the term “black hole”⁴. An object so dense that nothing, not matter, not energy, not even an ambitious intern, can escape. At the very start, these objects are small, and they often have names like:

- “Program Management Office”.
- “Portfolio Steering Council”.
- “Upper Executive Realignment Taskforce”.
- Etc.

However, they rapidly expand to constitute a fully-fledged horizon. Once an idea crosses the Organizational Event Horizon, it will never be seen again. Some say these ideas continue to exist inside, spinning forever in a sort of bureaucratic soup, but no empirical evidence has ever escaped to confirm this.

Hawking Radiation: How Talent leaks out

Stephen Hawking later discovered that black holes, paradoxically, emit radiation as they slowly evaporate⁵. By delightful coincidence, organizations behave the same way. As bureaucracy expands inward, small packets of organizational energy (known as “talented employees”) radiate outward into the universe, often leaving glowing reviews such as: “Great people, but processes make it impossible to get anything done.” This Hawking leakage is typically first detected by HR analytics, but by then, evaporation is well underway.

When Organizational Values become Cosmic Background Noise

Like Cosmic Microwave Radiation, corporate values tend to outlast the living systems that created them. If internal gravity becomes too strong, values no longer guide behaviour. They simply hum quietly in the background, a faint echo of a more luminous past. Remaining employees can detect them only with sensitive instruments such as:

- A mural painted during a long-forgotten “culture refresh” campaign.
- A motivational banner hanging crookedly behind a potted plant that has given up on photosynthesis.
- A commemorative notebook branded with “One Team, One Dream,” found at the bottom of a drawer.
- A fridge magnet from the “Values Week” celebration that was quietly discontinued.
- Etc.

Meanwhile, day-to-day operations are governed not by values but by gravitational forces like office politics, decision bottlenecks, and strategy and performance metrics last calibrated in 1970.

The Great Cosmic Question: Must all Organizations Collapse?

The short answer: No.

The longer answer (preferred by astrophysicists, cosmologists and consultants): Only if they forget the most important lesson from star physics:

- A star survives by radiating energy outward.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subrahmanyan_Chandrasekhar

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Archibald_Wheeler

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Hawking

- A company survives by radiating trust, clarity, and purpose outward.
- Collapse happens only when too much mass accumulates in the centre.
- Healthy stars fuse Hydrogen.
- Healthy organizations fuse ideas.
- Unhealthy stars implode.
- Unhealthy organizations hold meetings about restructuring the process to propose restructuring.

Conclusion: Escaping the Organization Singularity

As the team finished its cosmic journey, fuelled by caffeine and due respect for Michell, Laplace, Chandrasekhar, Wheeler, Hawking and many others, it concluded that:

- The more an organization meaningfully orients itself outward, the more luminous it becomes.
- A little structural gravity is good; a runaway collapse is terminal.
- Nonsense, like mass, must be carefully managed, lest the star eats itself.

At this point, the team ended with a paraphrased sentiment Hawking might have appreciated: Organizations should look to the stars not to imitate their collapse, but to remember how brightly they can shine before it begins.