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BUILDING SHARED UNDERSTANDING

2 | Feature

IN THIS ISSUE:

Building Trust and Cohesiveness in a Leadership Team by Deepika Nath

Many OD practitioners are asked to intervene with groups that exhibit unproductive team dynamics and are often faced with a decision of how to intervene. In this case study of a senior leadership team at a Fortune 100 company, Deepika Nath describes the application of David Kantor's human structural dynamics model. The team involved lacked mutual respect, trust, and a willingness to listen to and learn from each other; for this reason, they were ill equipped to work in a collaborative and productive manner.

In seeking to address behavioral dysfunction that was hampering this team's ability to work effectively and further a strategic agenda, Nath used an approach that focused not only on addressing the behavioral manifestation of the dysfunction in the team, but also at making visible the invisible source of this dysfunction, that is, the beliefs and mental models that contributed to the behavior. This two-pronged model was a powerful approach that resulted in positive outcomes for the organization and for the team.

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Moving from Knower to Learner by Brian Hinken

Are you producing desired results? If your answer is "No," congratulations! You have just taken the first step on the Learner's Path, a roadmap for continuous improvement. While there is nothing wrong with patting ourselves on the back occasionally for knowing the right answer, the key to creating sustainable results lies not in the accumulation of information, but in our continual willingness to question, evaluate, and adjust our actions and our thinking. When our obsession with knowing prevents us from inquiring, we short-circuit the learning process and find ourselves stuck in a knower's stance.

10 | From the Headlines

How Does Malcolm Gladwell Spell Success? by Janice Molloy

Malcolm Gladwell's new book, *Outliers, The Story of Success*, is all about patterns and how they can reveal counterintuitive insights—something every systems thinker can appreciate. In the West, we typically attribute success to individual factors: a person's innate intelligence and drive to achieve. But why do some so-called geniuses rise to the top of their professions while others fail to have an impact? To answer this question, Gladwell delves beneath the conventional wisdom and finds that factors such as a person's birth month or year, family background, or even random opportunities play more of a role in people's achievement than we previously thought.

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A or B? by Kellie Wardman

Sometimes, you simply have to choose. Do I send my child to this day care or that one? Do I buy this new car or stay with my old, paid-off clunker? Do I take the new job with higher pay but a longer commute? Do I stay in this tired relationship or go out on my own? These are the hardest decisions—when you have two choices that are equally plausible. The upside of any tough decision—there's usually some learning you will get out of it. Conflict, or choice, can naturally lead to expansion.

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Now Available from Pegasus: *The Three Marriages* by David Whyte



BUILDING TRUST AND COHESIVENESS IN A LEADERSHIP TEAM

BY DEEPIKA NATH

Over several years, I had developed a strong relationship with the leadership team of a \$3 billion division of a Fortune 100 organization. A shuffling of portfolio and responsibilities had precipitated a 360-review and a new leader assimilation and coaching process for the global senior vice president of manufacturing, Sam Allard. As part of the coaching process, Sam invited me to observe a business meeting of his global manufacturing team in which they were discussing key priorities and agreeing on the strategic agenda for the year ahead.

It was a long day of heated discussions with little agreement or progress against an ambitious agenda. Sam asked how I thought it had gone. I recall saying, “It depends on your desired outcome. If success meant getting through the agenda and getting resolution on the issues, you did not meet that objective. If, however, you wanted to get a view of the team dynamics, I believe you had a very successful meeting.” He laughed and said, “What should I do about this situation? I need a team of VPs who can work together to create uniform standards of manufacturing that are necessary for us to achieve our revenue and profitability targets. Can you help me?”

TEAM TIP

Use the tools outlined in this article—the Human Structural Dynamics Model, the four behaviors of dialogue, and Kantor’s Four-Player System—as a guide for developing the skills needed for a high-performing team.

The Team’s Current State

In the meeting I attended, I observed a team that was ill equipped to work in a collaborative and productive manner. Some of the behaviors I saw included:

- An inability to focus on an agenda and make decisions
- A lack of willingness to engage in dialogue
- Poor capacity to listen to one another
- An apparent lack of respect for one another’s ideas
- A tendency to personalize the conversation and get defensive

In the meeting I attended, I observed a team that was ill equipped to work in a collaborative and productive manner.

These observations led to some preliminary hypotheses—that the group lacked trust and the willingness to operate as a team; that they were focused on furthering their individual agendas; and that they would be unsuccessful in creating a standardized manufacturing platform for the company unless they were able to come together and operate with mutual respect, trust, and a willingness to listen to and learn from each other.

During conversations concerning Sam’s 360-review, I had developed a rapport with each member of the team. I leveraged this to have open and honest discussions on what I’d observed during their business meeting. One of them commented, “It was embarrassing to have you witness that meeting. That is so typical of the way

we operate. It’s a challenge to get through an agenda with this group.” These one-on-one conversations helped validate my hypotheses around specific concerns and enlisted the executives in Sam’s overall objective—of creating a cohesive team who could work well together in executing an aggressive and critical element of the organization’s strategy.

I also used a team effectiveness questionnaire from Edgar Schein (from *Process Consultation: Its Role in Organization Development*, Addison-Wesley, 1988, p. 57–58) to get the team to self-assess and have a structured view of their current effectiveness. When I shared the results of this assessment, one of the executives commented, “I had no idea we were so disruptive in the way we operated.”

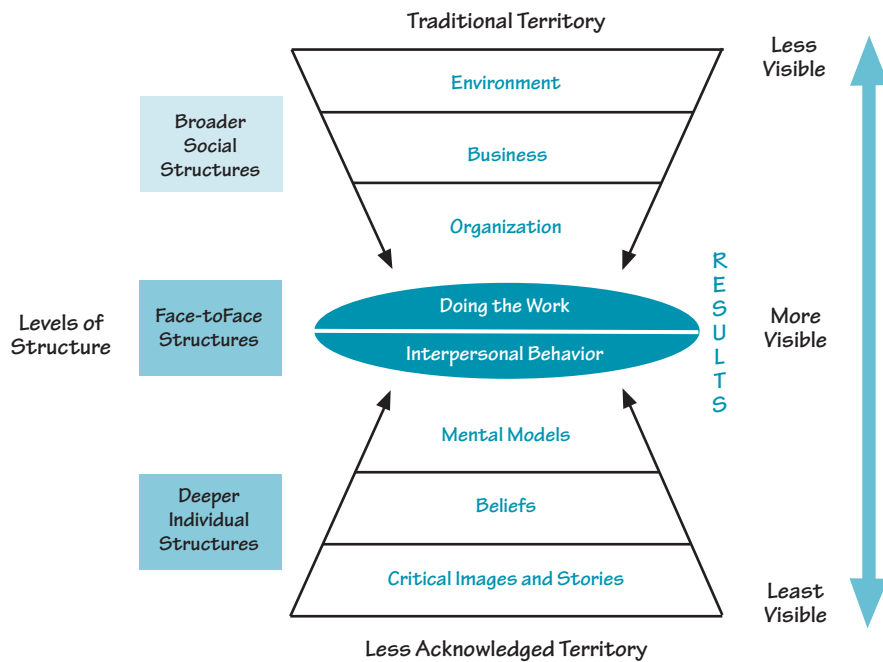
Based on the assessments, and with Sam’s agreement, my mandate for a 12-month engagement was to create a team that:

- Made sound business decisions in a considered and timely manner
- Had the ability to work together to solve critical production and quality issues
- Engaged in meetings that were productive, energetic, and constructive
- Showed evidence of listening, collaboration, and mutual respect
- Set aside personal agendas and depersonalized the conversation
- Collaborated to develop and implement a world-class manufacturing strategy

The Design of Interventions

I saw this as an amazing opportunity to delve into territory that is typically not explored. I based the design of my interventions on a model of human structural dynamics derived from the

HUMAN STRUCTURAL DYNAMICS MODEL



Source: Ober, Kantor, and Yanowitz, 1995

This model suggests that human interactions are a function of the social context in which they take place and of what goes on in people's hearts and minds.

work of David Kantor (see "Human Structural Dynamics Model"). This model suggests that human interactions are a function of the social context in which they take place and of what goes on in people's hearts and minds (Ober, Kantor, Yanowitz, "Creating Business Results Through Team Learning, *The Systems Thinker*, V6N5, June/July, 1995, pp.1-5). I chose to focus on two aspects of this model—the *team* or what is described as the face-to-face structure, and the deeper *individual* structures and how they might influence the team's interactions, either one-on-one or in the team.

I chose to include individual-level interventions because they cover ground that is typically less acknowledged and yet significantly impacts behavior—what we see at the face-to-face level. It also meshed well with my belief as an OD practitioner that all change starts with individual change, and that our behavior as adults is strongly influenced by our mental models, core beliefs, and stories—many of these arising from experiences in our formative years. I had a sense that if I was able to allow for the surfacing

and at some point sharing of deep imagery from each individual, it would help this team coalesce and begin the process of trusting each other.

The Team Interventions

At the team level, the interventions were designed to help develop trust and connection, and start to develop the capacity for listening. The following models, beliefs, and assumptions influenced the choice of interventions:

- A high-performing team is characterized in part by strong personal commitments to the growth and success of each team member (Katzenbach and Smith, *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High Performance Organization*, Harper Business, 1993).
- Appreciation of individual experiences and gifts is a powerful foundation for transformation and allows for creation of powerful outcomes (Cooperrider and Whitney, *Appreciative Inquiry*, Berrett-

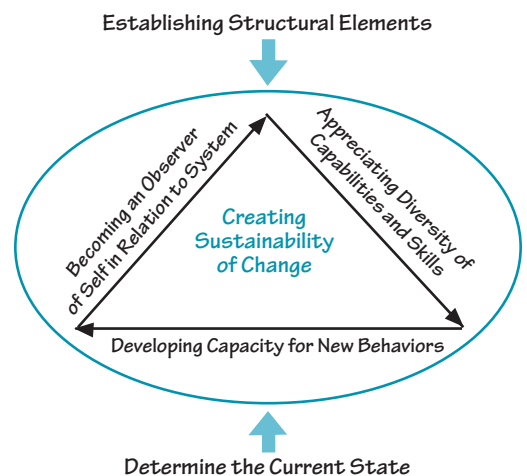
Koehler, 1999; Elliott, *Locating the Energy for Change: An Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry*, International Institute for Sustainable Development, 1999).

- The ability to listen deeply allows for connection and a foundation for collaboration and "thinking together"—the essence of dialogue (Isaacs, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*, Currency/Doubleday, 1999).
- Dialogue fosters and maintains the high levels of openness and trust that are present in healthy teams.

"Progress Toward Trust and Cohesiveness" demonstrates how the different elements were integrated to guide the team's progress toward trust and cohesion. In addition to determining the current state, five other building blocks contributed toward creating a team that was able to sustain behavioral changes that enabled an environment of trust, collaboration, and cohesiveness:

Establishing Structural Elements. Sam wanted the team to own and follow basic housekeeping guidelines. This set of interventions was aimed at establishing a process by which the team could focus its discussions and deliberations and make decisions in an effective manner. It involved clarifying roles and responsibilities, delineating decision rights, and setting up operating guide-

PROGRESS TOWARD TRUST AND COHESIVENESS



The interventions were integrated to guide the team's progress toward trust and cohesion.

lines between Sam and his team, as well as within the team.

Developing the Capacity for Deep Listening and Dialogue. The more challenging aspects of this engagement were around creating a safe container for the team to have strong dialogue. To achieve this, I introduced the principles and intentions of council to structure the meetings (Zimmerman and Coyle, *The Way of Council*, Bramble Books, 1996; Baldwin, *Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture*, Bantam, 1998). These principles included always being seated in a circle and using a talking piece that the team co-created. The intentions of council are speaking from the heart or being honest and authentic; listening from the heart or being deeply present and attentive when another speaks; being “lean of expression” and learning to be succinct; and allowing for silence as well as spontaneous expression.

To facilitate their interactions within this structure and to help them make the distinctions that would allow them to realize the intentions of council, I introduced the four behaviors of dialogue as described by Bill Isaacs—voicing, listening, respecting, and suspending (see “Developing the Capacity for New Behaviors”). At one level, the intention was to help the team develop a capacity

for listening without judgment and reaction, and at another it was aimed at helping them experience how deep listening could result in more powerful outcomes and decisions. Above all, it was aimed at building trust within the team.

Over the course of my engagement (and subsequently), the team adopted sitting in a circle as part of their meeting protocol. Initially they struggled with the some of the practices of council—in particular with holding a silence. They tended to reach for the talking stick before the person who was speaking had finished. Over time, as they became more comfortable with the practices, the use of the talking stick as a mechanism to allow “one voice at a time” and to help “hold the silence” evolved from a forced behavior to a more natural and comfortable one. Their discussions went from individuals fighting to say their piece to comments that were more indicative of listening and building on what has been said. The reaction to silence went from a rush to fill it to actually asking for a moment of reflection during the course of a conversation. Although there was evidence of progress, it was more of an iterative process than a linear progression. The awareness and reinforcement of dialogic behaviors was one that continued throughout my 12-month engagement

with this team and continues to be a core part of the team’s operating model.

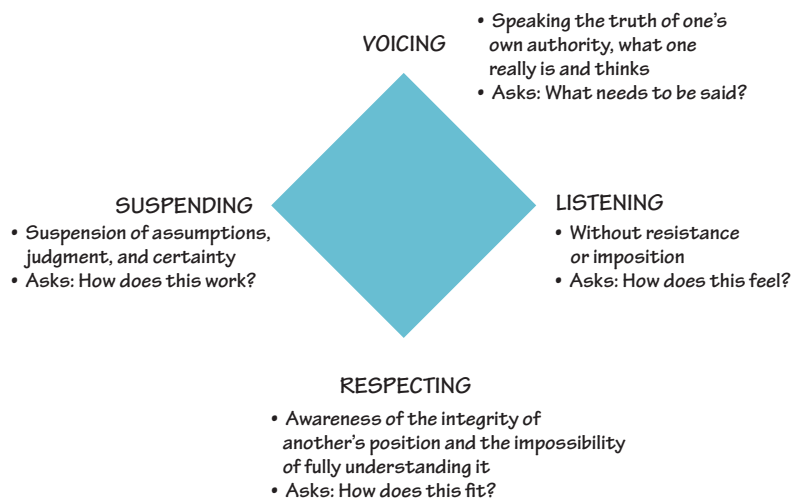
Appreciating the Diversity of Skills and Capabilities. While most of Sam’s team had been at this company for many years and had deep roots in the industry, some of the more recent additions were brought in with different industry experience, including experience in creating world-class manufacturing organizations. The input of these individuals was often not considered and valued by their colleagues. As Sam put it, “I hired Joel and Charisse for their expertise in Lean Manufacturing. I am concerned the rest of the team is shutting them out. I suppose I could be more directive by simply telling people we have to rely on their experience, but I don’t want to add to the resistance.”

The team needed to operate in an environment of respect and appreciation for the diversity of style, skills, experiences, and contributions. They also needed to understand how to work effectively with this diversity and leverage the strengths of each other. To create this culture and capacity, I used interventions derived from Appreciative Inquiry, team role preference (Margerison and McCann, “Team Management Profiles: Their Use in Managerial Development,” *Journal of Management Development*, Vol 4, No 2, pp 34–37, 1985), and individual assessments such as DiSC as building blocks on the foundation of dialogue.

These interventions had the desired impact. For instance, the Appreciative Inquiry exercise used in the first session allowed for a breaking of the ice in the team. The team found many points of connection—shared experiences, interests, hopes, and desires. After that session, some of the sources of tension dissipated, such as the resentment of the role an individual played or the lack of industry experience. In addition, the resistance to being seen as and operating as a team started to fall away as they worked through their stories of positive team experiences.

In using the Team Management Profiles, the team was able to appreciate the different work preferences and styles that were present in the room. It allowed them to identify strategies that would be most effective in interacting

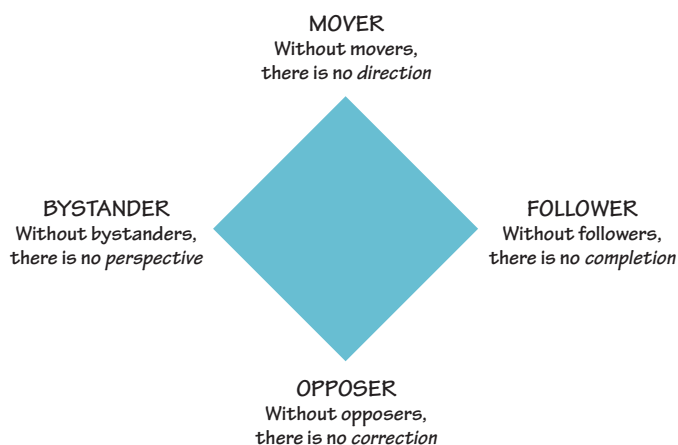
DEVELOPING THE CAPACITY FOR NEW BEHAVIORS



Source: Isaacs, 1999

The four behaviors of dialogue as described by Bill Isaacs are voicing, listening, respecting, and suspending.

KANTOR'S "FOUR-PLAYER" SYSTEM



Source: David Kantor in Isaacs, 1999

Kantor's Four-Player System helps team members understand the roles they tend to play in conversations.

with this group of individuals and to value the different roles each member of the team tended to prefer in a team setting. It also gave them a snapshot of what might be missing and how they could develop those roles as a collective.

Becoming an Observer of the Self. As I worked with the team, I felt it was important to facilitate the development of their capacity for diagnosis and action in order to make them self-correcting and self-sustaining after I had transitioned out of the process. I also wanted them to have a greater awareness of how to facilitate a dialogue by understanding the roles they tended to gravitate to in a conversation. I introduced another element of structural dynamics—that of boundary profiles and, more specifically, David Kantor's "four-player system" (Kantor and Lonstein, "Reframing Team Relationships: How the Principles of 'Structural Dynamics' Can Help Teams Come to Terms with Their Dark Side," *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, Currency/Doubleday, 1994).

My intention was to get this team of individuals to see their patterns of interaction. I believed if they were conscious of their operating tendencies, how these impacted their effectiveness, and what roles were being played out in their team interactions, they might be able to shift the roles they played and engage in more productive and effec-

tive dialogue. It would help them notice whether their conversations were dialogic in nature or at the level of discussion and debate. At a minimum, it would increase their self-awareness of how they showed up and help them develop a capacity to become observers of their own behavior. To facilitate their learning, I videotaped some of their meetings and had them analyze their interactions afterward.

One of the insights that emerged was the difference in expectations of how the team should operate. For instance, Sam expected his team to be his equal partners in the decisions they made. There were some members who would defer to Sam's decisions. Another insight came from seeing two members of the team frequently engaging in a move-oppose dynamic and how it stymied the progression of the conversation.

Creating Sustainability of Change. The emphasis of each intervention was to help them not only become familiar with the skills but also to practice and develop a level of mastery with that skill. Each session built on the previous ones. The final intervention was a visual image storytelling process (Reeve, *Creating a Catalyst for Change via Collage-Inspired Conversations*, unpublished Master's thesis, Fielding Graduate University, 2005) where the team incorporated the various building blocks (i.e., practices of dialogue, appreciation and knowledge of self and other, and observation) to co-create their vision for their team. It required them to collaboratively create the guiding principles and core values of the team, and the behaviors that would govern their interactions going forward, by building on the values and vision of each individual. I chose a visual process to shift the context from

the verbal, left-brain activities that this team was facile with to a process that would invite them to activate in a positive way some of the drivers of their behavior—their beliefs, values, and mental models. As the team moved from sharing individual values and beliefs to co-creating a shared set of guiding principles and vision, they exhibited respect for individual ideas and the diversity of opinions. There was a remarkable absence of the heated arguments that had characterized the first meeting I'd attended. In its place was an energy of collaboration and partnership, resulting in the creation of a shared vision that each individual had contributed to, owned, and had personalized through the storytelling process.

The Individual Interventions

While working with the team as an entity, I was also coaching individual members. A core outcome for the coaching sessions was to help the individual become an observer of the self and understand what drove behavior so they were able to choose how to act, rather than acting from a place of habitual tendency. The ultimate goal for the "Human Structural Dynamics Model" is authenticity; insight, mastery, and alignment are intermediate stages that lead to authenticity. In an effort to be pragmatic (and recognizing the journey toward authenticity is a life-long one), I focused on a realistic goal of building the capacity for insight through self awareness and inquiry into the underlying causes of behaviors, along with varying degrees of mastery.

Using a subset of the human structural dynamics model as a base, I worked to help each individual become aware of their feelings, mental models, belief systems, and deeper stories that governed their behavior in the team context. Specifically, the intent was to make visible those factors that were invisible or less visible and enable the individual to act in an authentic manner.

As I used this model to guide the individual coaching sessions with each executive, my role evolved in the following manner:

- Help the individual become aware of feelings, mental models, belief systems, and deeper stories

- Create and strengthen their capacity for embracing these deeper structures
- Facilitate their understanding of how these structures impact their behavior and how to recognize the shadow aspects
- Help them develop the ability to reframe and choose the internal structures that influence behavior

Interplay Between Individual and Team Interventions

Having simultaneous interventions at the individual and team levels and playing a dual role as facilitator for the team and as personal coach allowed me to observe shifts that occurred as individuals gained insight into their behavior and changed how they interacted with the team. The team meetings also provided me with direction on how to intervene at the individual level with different executives.

The Results

Over the 12-month period, there were many visible changes at both the team level and with individuals. For instance, the team's interactions were much less fractious and chaotic. Their discussions resulted in key decisions being made in a timely manner with each individual feeling heard even if their idea was not included. They had greater appreciation and respect for what their colleagues brought to the team—"I had no idea Charisse had such wide-ranging experience. It is quite refreshing to have someone who hasn't grown up in this industry."

They were able to appreciate silence and the quality of reflection and insight that came from it—"I realized how much of my time is filled with doing things—meetings, conference calls. I never get time to think. I was actually able to think about and find a solution to this problem." There was a greater sense of camaraderie and trust among them. In self-assessing their progress on the team effectiveness instrument used at the beginning of the process, on all measures, the team had moved from a "below average" score to an "above average" rating.

When I started my work with the team, I would have described members as exhibiting behaviors characteristic of

"breakdown." Probably one of the more profound changes I saw was their ability to maintain a quality of inquiry. At rare moments, particularly in our last session together, there were moments when their interactions had elements of flow.

At the individual level, the changes varied depending on the person. Certainly some of them moved more than others. As their capacity to observe their own behavior grew, it created greater awareness and ownership of their own issues, and led to more courage and honesty in their communications. As they stepped in to appreciate and value their own contributions and role on the team, their insecurities went down; they developed more confidence and demonstrated a greater sense of presence as leaders. The awareness and legitimizing of their individual stories allowed them to have respect for and appreciation of the same in others. By practicing com-

passion for themselves, they developed the capacity for compassion toward others. This in turn allowed for a level of trust and a commitment to each other's success, which provided a strong basis for collaboration.

Critical Success Factors

I was operating at two levels of the system simultaneously and addressed not only the behaviors that emerged in team interactions but also the underlying triggers of these behaviors. One reason I was able to successfully take this path was Sam's uncompromising sponsorship and support, as well as the trust we had built as a result of our long-standing relationship and my candor in the early stages of the engagement. Over the course of the 12 months, he allowed me tremendous creative freedom to introduce the ideas behind council practices and dialogue. He'd been exposed to the practices and

BEING A REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

In the course of this engagement, I found myself engaging in a great deal of reflection around my capacity as an OD practitioner. At various points, I explored different questions, including:

- What is my typical stance with clients?
- How am I showing up? How does it feel?
- How do my own inner stories and mental models influence me?
- How can I consciously choose to shift from my "tendency"?
- What will it take to shift my stance to what is needed?
- What is the impact if I shift my stance? What is the risk if I don't shift my stance?

The process of being both coach and facilitator provided me with a powerful illustration of the importance of having a strong container for individual and collective transformation. I was constantly stepping into a place of modeling the behaviors I introduced to the team—learning to honor silence; bringing a mindset of appreciation to the conversation; making the invisible visible in my own context; acting with courage in situations that challenged me personally, such as not being compelled to have all the answers, not taking their resistance to some of the ideas I introduced as personal criticism, and being a mirror for them when situations that contributed to the dysfunction in the team came up.

I used this engagement to expand my comfort zone. Since I was working closely with this team over a significant period of time, I took a reflective stance for each encounter and expressly asked, "What could I have done differently to make this session more effective for you?" It allowed the team to see that it was acceptable to not be perfect; it gave me a chance to get real-time feedback that could improve my capacity as a facilitator and helped me explore my own growing edge around feedback and criticism.

Another area I consciously worked with was to develop my ability to let go of managing the outcome. I actively practiced being present to and responding more in the moment—operating with a sense of connection to my own insight and intuition, with powerful positive outcomes. This engagement built my capacity to be an observer of myself and of the system. It has strengthened my ability as an intervener and has contributed significantly to the development of my voice and my own transformation.

was a great believer in the notion of “going slow to go fast.”

Although some members of the team were initially resistant to the team process, because of my work with them individually, they grew to trust me with their inner stories and thus trust the process I was taking the team through. Their cynicism and resistance started to wear down as they experienced having a voice in the conversation and being heard as a result of using council and dialogue practices.

One of the other unexpected contributors to the success of the engagement was my knowledge of the organization, its business, and the dynamics within the industry. It allowed me to connect the interventions aimed at strengthening team effectiveness to core business issues the team was dealing with, rather than have “stand-alone” team-building sessions. By integrating business issues into the design of the interventions, the team had an immediate context for applying and practicing their new skills, which enhanced the capacity for retention and recall of new behaviors.

Challenges Encountered

There were some challenges during the course of this engagement. Even as they saw the value of the practices of council and dialogue, the team didn't readily embrace some aspects. It took a while for them to honor silence and not jump into the fray. “I find it so difficult to sit still and not say something when no one is speaking. It makes me wonder if I did something wrong,” said one of the executives early in our sessions. While this reflected the challenge of holding silence, it was also a powerful example of how our inner story shows up in our behavior. Over time, and with the help of reflective practices in their individual coaching as well as in their team sessions, they started to see the value of having silence and silent time in their process.

Another difficulty that was more present in earlier sessions than in later ones was a desire to be “in action.” This is reflected in the comment from a team member that “we talk a lot and I enjoy our sessions, but when do we

make decisions for the business?” Fortunately, given Sam's experience with dialogue, he was able to support me and provide a context of “We are making decisions. By talking about and resolving the issues, our decisions are becoming clearer.” It took them a while to realize that by being in dialogue, they were “in action” around decisions.

In creating the experience of being an observer of the self and using the four-player model, there were some unintended consequences. During the debrief, one of the team commented,

The human structural dynamics model provided a valuable set of lenses to examine this team's issues.

“We sure were on our best behavior today. I suppose we knew we were being watched.” Had I anticipated this better, I might have introduced a disturbance to the system to raise the stakes, because when the stakes are high, people tend to revert to “default” or typical behaviors, especially in early stages of behavioral change.

Summary

The human structural dynamics model provided a valuable set of lenses to examine this team's issues. At the same time, it allowed for improvisation in the choice of interventions used to address different team issues. The occasion to work with an intact team over an extended period of time helped create a robust foundation wherein the skills introduced had a chance of taking hold. It helped build trust with each individual and created a space for personal growth. This systemic approach presented a powerful learning opportunity for all of us engaged in the process. ■

A longer version of this article appears in *Reflections: The SoL Journal on Knowledge, Learning, and Change*, Volume 9 Number 1. For more information, go to www.solonline.org/reflections.

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NEXT STEPS

Guidelines for Working with Our Learning “Selves”

The following guidelines and practices may be useful in a continuing journey toward a more expansive, open, and “learning” self:

- **Practice saying “I don't know” whenever appropriate.** You may find it to be quite freeing to admit that you don't know something.
- **Learn to “let go” of the need to be in control of yourself or others.** In order for us to learn, we must care more about learning than about being in control.
- **Continually challenge yourself to hold your perceptions up to the light.** This means continually studying them from all angles. Remember that these beliefs may reflect more truths about yourself than about reality.
- **Admit when you are wrong.** Try to freely and openly admit when you are wrong (or admit that your assumptions may be inaccurate even the first time you state them!).
- **“Seek first to understand, and then to be understood.”** Steven Covey suggests asking yourself, “Do I avoid autobiographical responses, and instead faithfully reflect my understanding of the other person before seeking to be understood?”

In “Opening the Window to New Learning” by Kellie Wardman, Leverage (Pegasus Communications, Inc., May 1999)

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Sunday, November 1 • 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM



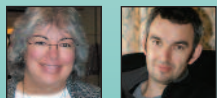
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LeAnne Grillo and Joe McCarron, *Reos Partners*

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Thursday, November 5 • 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM



Linda Booth Sweeney

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Thursday & Friday, November 5–6 • 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM



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In this two-day workshop, gain experience with several facilitation tools, including hexagon mapping, system archetypes, and causal loop diagrams, and learn user-friendly techniques for facilitating systems thinking interventions.

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Wednesday, November 5 • 2:00 to 6:00 PM



Peggy Holman; Bob Stilger, *The Berkana Institute*

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MOVING FROM KNOWER TO LEARNER

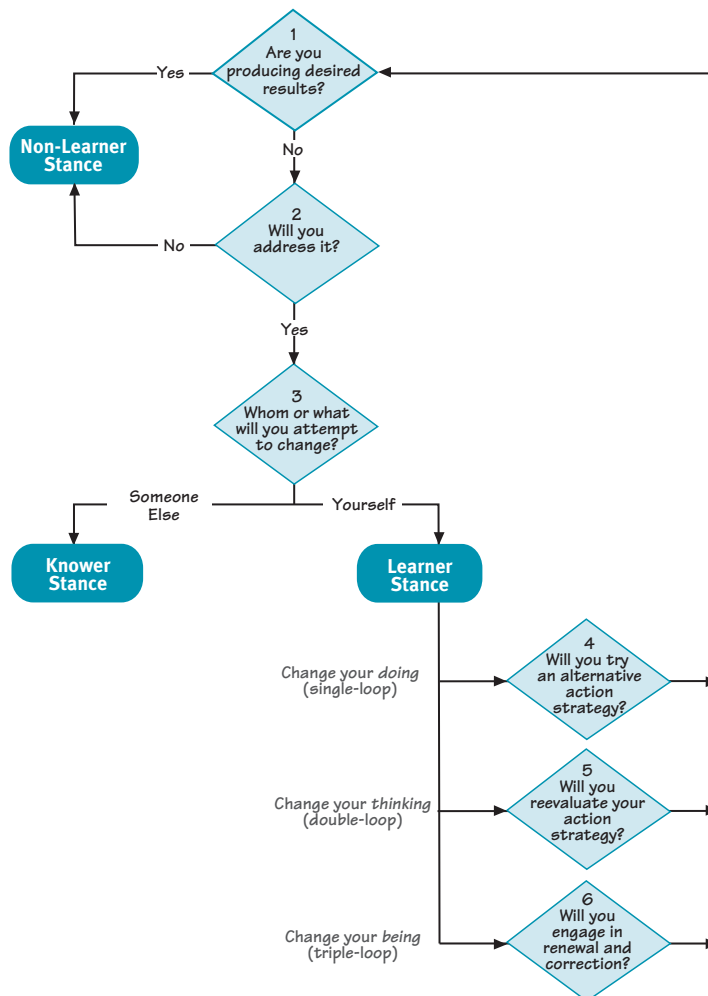
BY BRIAN HINKEN

Contrary to popular opinion, learning is not the process of merely accumulating more information. You have “learned” something only when you can produce a result you were unable to achieve before.

The Learner’s Path, illustrated here, describes the underlying process of learning. In considering a given issue, when you answer questions 1–3 successfully, you have become a learner and must now decide how deep you will engage your learning. The deeper you go with your learning, the more leverage you will have for creating sustainable results. If you decide to address question 4, you are engaged in *single-loop learning* (changing your *doing*). If you address questions 5 and 6, you are engaged in *double-loop learning* (changing your *thinking*) and *triple-loop learning* (changing your *being*), respectively.

The non-learner stance can quickly morph into a knower stance if you are less than honest with yourself or if you try to blame others for subpar results. Knowers get stuck on any of the first three questions when they can’t “go public” with their true answers. Learners successfully traverse the path because they can openly reveal their answers and are willing to be influenced by others or by data that contradicts their beliefs.

THE LEARNER’S PATH



Knowers	Learners
Publicly deny current results are less than desired unless the cause can be attributed to someone or something beyond their control.	Publicly and unconditionally acknowledge current results are less than desired.
Publicly deny responsibility for addressing less-than-desired results unless the cause can be attributed to someone or something beyond their control.	Publicly and unconditionally accept responsibility for addressing less-than-desired results.
Publicly deny the need to try an alternative action strategy to achieve desired results unless the cause can be attributed to someone or something beyond their control.	Publicly acknowledge the need to try an alternative action strategy.
Always blame an external challenge or circumstance to explain less-than-desired results.	Always examine their "ability to respond" to explain less-than-desired results.

Knowers operate (perhaps unknowingly) from a set of thinking habits, called “the secrets of a knower.” These thinking habits serve them well in protecting their egos, but have devastating effects on their ability to achieve their desired results.

Most of us have some knower tendencies. Fortunately, we also have the capacity to become “recovering knowers” by working to overcome these secret thinking habits.

Begin by walking yourself through the Learner’s Path questions whenever you realize that you are no longer achieving your desired results. Notice where you become stuck. Then use the chart below to discover: (1) the necessary “willingness” you need to cultivate, (2) the associated discipline used to develop that willingness, and (3) some specific, high-leverage practices. ■

Secrets of a Knower	Capacities of a Learner
The tendency to let other people and circumstances define desired results	The ability to bring something new into existence
The tendency to force group members to comply in order to get things done	The ability to co-create collective aspiration
The tendency to focus attention exclusively on one’s own little piece of the world	The ability to see their role in the whole
The tendency to protect oneself during conversations	The ability to distinguish between “myself” and “my view”
The tendency to direct and debate during group interactions	The ability to generate collective insight

Brian Hinken is the director of learning and renewal for Gerber Memorial Health Services in Fremont, Michigan. He is the author of *The Learner’s Path: Practices for Recovering Knowers* (Pegasus Communications, 2007) and the newly published pocket guide, *The Learner’s Path: Moving from Knower to Learner*, from which this article is adapted.

TEAM TIP

Walk through the Learner’s Path whenever you realize you are no longer achieving your desired results.

Learner’s Path Questions	Necessary Willingness	Primary Learning Disciplines*	Practices of a Recovering Knower
1. Are you producing desired results? [NO]	Acquire a desire	Personal Mastery: developing personal effectiveness and the ability to create the results one most desires	You are pulled by internal desire because you uncover your personal mission and vision. You understand success includes failed attempts. You identify your current reality and desired results, and act to move the reality toward the result (based on Robert Fritz’s structural tension model).
	Acquire a desire (collectively)	Shared Vision: creating collective aspiration and mutual commitment	You use four practices (share all valid information; give free, informed choice; ensure participation; and align with personal vision) to generate commitment and co-create collective aspiration.
2. Will you address it? [YES] 3. Whom or what will you attempt to change? [YOURSELF]	See your role in the whole	Systems Thinking: understanding the whole (including one’s own part), and how structures and systems are interconnected	You see the web of interconnections and influences by looking deeper (at patterns and structures) using the iceberg model, and looking wider (at feedback loops) using various types of causal loop methods.
4. Will you try an alternative action strategy? [YES]	Pursue a new view	Mental Models: reflecting on one’s attitude and perceptions, thereby increasing mutual understanding and insight into oneself	You seek reciprocal understanding with others by considering multiple perspectives using tools such as the ladder of inference and left-hand column, both developed by Chris Argyris.
	Pursue a new view (collectively)	Team Learning: generating collective insight by transforming how a group thinks and interacts together	You generate new collective insights through mutual learning by using the practice of dialogue and other conversational methodologies.

* From *The Fifth Discipline*, by Peter M. Senge.



HOW DOES MALCOLM GLADWELL SPELL SUCCESS?

BY JANICE MOLLOY

“People don’t rise from nothing. . . . It makes a difference where and when we grew up. The culture we belong to and the legacies passed down by our forebears shape the patterns of our achievement in ways we cannot begin to imagine.”

—Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers*

Aclaimed author Malcolm Gladwell’s new book, *Outliers, The Story of Success* (Little, Brown and Company, 2008), is all about patterns and how they can reveal counterintuitive insights—something every systems thinker can appreciate.

In the West, we typically attribute success to individual factors: a person’s innate intelligence and drive to achieve. But why do some so-called geniuses rise to the top of their professions while others fail to have an impact? To answer this question, Gladwell delves beneath the conventional wisdom and finds that factors such as a person’s birth month or year, family background, or even random opportunities play more of a role in people’s achievement than we previously thought.

Birthday Bonanza

To illustrate his point, Gladwell cites a study of Canadian youth hockey players that reveals a surprising fact: In any elite group in this league, “40 percent will have been born between January and March, 30 percent between April and June, 20 percent between July and September, and 10 percent between October and December.” A similar trend, with

a weighting toward different months, shows up in U.S. baseball leagues and European soccer teams. What explains this strange phenomenon?

It turns out that, in Canadian hockey, the cut-off date for eligibility for a certain age bracket is January 1. At age 10, kids born right after the cut-off date have an advantage over those born later in the year in terms of size, speed, and coordination. As a result, the older 10-year-olds are more frequently chosen to participate in elite leagues, receive better coaching, play with more skilled teammates, and participate in more games and practices. Over the long run, these “more talented” players are more likely to make it to the professional ranks.

This pattern of behavior describes what in systems parlance is known as a “Success to the Successful” dynamic (see “Success to the Older Child”). As Gladwell says, “The professional hockey player starts out a little bit better than his peers. And that little difference leads to an opportunity that makes that difference a bit bigger, and that edge in turn leads to another opportunity, which makes the initially small difference bigger still—and on and on until the hockey player is a genuine outlier. But he didn’t start out an outlier. He started out just a little bit better.”

This same dynamic also plays out in education. Children who are on the older end of the spectrum tend to have an advantage over their younger peers that amplifies over time. In a study by economists Kelly Bedard and Elizabeth Dhuey, older fourth graders scored significantly higher on a test of math and science skills than younger fourth graders. Gladwell comments, “That’s

the difference between qualifying for a gifted program or not.” And once students land in gifted programs, they are likely to benefit from the best teaching, the highest-quality materials, the most up-to-date technology, and so on.

Inadvertent Privileging

So, what’s the solution to this inadvertent privileging of some over others? Gladwell suggests setting up two or three youth hockey leagues per age bracket, divided by months of birth. For the lower grades, school systems could create separate classes for kids born January through April, May through August, and September through December. Another solution would be to follow the Danish system of not assigning kids to different academic tracks until they are out of elementary school, when their maturity levels out.

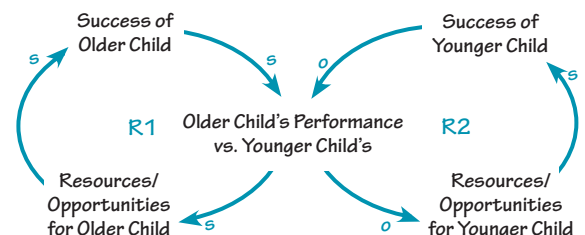
The takeaway is that simple policy decisions often have powerful unintended consequences. By looking at patterns of behavior, we can identify those effects and find ways to improve the system. Breaking free from the “Success to the Successful” dynamic would create truly equal opportunities for all, to the benefit of all. ■

Janice Molloy is managing editor of *The Systems Thinker* and content director of Pegasus Communications.

TEAM TIP

“Success to the Successful” can also play out in organizations, such as when one project gets more initial funding than another. Look for examples in *your* setting.

SUCCESS TO THE OLDER CHILD





A OR B?

BY KELLIE WARDMAN

Sometimes, you simply have to choose. Do I send my child to this day care or that one? Do I buy this new car or stay with my old, paid-off clunker? Do I take the new job with higher pay but a longer commute? Do I stay in this tired relationship or go out on my own? These are the hardest decisions—when you have two choices that are equally plausible.

I remember once trying to choose between two jobs—they both offered growth opportunities, an increased salary, and a chance to step into new territory. After hemming and hawing for a few days, I finally created a pro and con list, so I would know clearly what the two options had to offer.

Did this help? Not really.

In the end, the list did not point out a clear winner—the pros and cons lists were equally long. So I had to just go with my gut, which is often where you end up in these kinds of situations.

I recently heard Dr. Ben Carson speak at a conference on making choices—Dr. Carson is a pediatric neurosurgeon at Johns Hopkins who was the first to separate craniopagus (Siamese) twins. At the conference, he spoke about risk, and how doctors

often have to make a decision about taking a life or death chance with patients' lives. Before operating on a particular set of conjoined twins, the physicians were struggling with the danger of the operation—one that had never been done successfully before. But the twins said in response, "We'd rather die than continue to live like this."

So Carson and his colleagues tried to separate them. The twins ended up dying on the operating table. But those surgeries led to more surgeries, which led to more learning, which led to eventual success.

Carson struggled at one point in his career with how to make these decisions. But once he simply asked himself, "What's the best thing that can happen if I take this action, and then what's the worst thing that can happen?" And second, he asked himself, "What's the best thing that can happen if I don't do anything, and what's the worst thing that can happen if I don't do anything?"

We all have had to face grueling decisions. The biggest decisions you might have to make are where to go to college, what jobs to accept, whether to have children, and whether to stay in your marriage or get divorced. Sometimes we have to make major health decisions—do I have them remove this lump, even though it is likely benign? Do I take this medication, when it has so many painful side effects? How involved do I get in my kids' lives? Do I follow them to that party to see if what they said is true? Do I have my parent move in with me and my family?

These decisions put us out of our comfort zone; they are hard to make. We sometimes drag our feet in making these decisions. We wish we weren't in this position. Rather than putting a

stake in the ground, we'd rather just stay in the safe zone.

I once asked my mother if I should take a new job in the next state. I fully expected her to tell me to stay where I was (safer, less commute, a known quantity). Her advice: "I'd take the job where you'd travel the world." "Why?" I asked. She responded, "Because it will challenge you. It will put you on your growing edge. It's more of a risk, and you will therefore learn more and get more out of it."

That's the upside of any tough decision—there's usually some learning you will get out of it. Conflict, or choice, can naturally lead to expansion.

There's always the easier decisions you have to make too; the ones that have fewer real consequences. My 11-year-old son recently had to decide what language to study in 7th grade. After a few days of thinking about it, he said, "I'm going to take Spanish."

"Okay," I said, glad he had at least made a decision and it wasn't going down to the wire. "Why Spanish?" I asked.

"I am going to choose Spanish, because there are more baseball players who speak Spanish." Spoken like a true 11-year-old who was in the middle of little league and striving to hit them out of the park.

So, to add to the list of how to make a decision: Ask yourself what your long-term vision is, and let that guide you. Even if you don't end up on the Yankees' bench someday, it will probably be the right decision all along. ■

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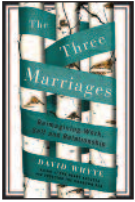
TEAM TIP

When faced with a difficult decision, following the advice of Dr. Ben Carson, ask, "What's the best thing that can happen if I take this action, and then what's the worst thing that can happen?" Next ask, "What's the best thing that can happen if I don't do anything, and what's the worst thing that can happen if I don't do anything?"



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LEARNING QUOTES

CORRECTION: “Just because everything is different doesn't mean anything has changed.”

—Irene Peter

“General Systems Theory, a related modern concept [to holism], says that each variable in any system interacts with the other variables so thoroughly that cause and effect cannot be separated. A simple variable can be both cause and effect. Reality will not be still. And it cannot be taken apart! You cannot understand a cell, a rat, a brain structure, a family, a culture if you isolate it from its context. Relationship is everything.”

—Marilyn Ferguson

“The whole idea of compassion is based on a keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living beings, which are all part of one another, and all involved in one another.”

—Thomas Merton

For information about reading and using causal loop diagrams, go to www.pegasuscom.com/cld.html.

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