

Urban Putty

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Let's talk Team Building! Part 2

Last time, we talked about some of the macro benefits to team building, when using a systems approach.

There are some very important changes, which, in effect, amount to a seismic shift in corporate culture for some companies, if the process is to work effectively.

Shared Vision, built on the personal visions offered by all workers, is a good starting point. And then, there is the larger question of the perspective of “a systems approach.”

The systems approach has three cardinal legs of the stool of its mind-set. The first leg is extremely important. A simple phrase, “the primacy of the whole” is so easy to brush off as understandable, without examining the details of its full meaning. If the “whole” company is to become primary, then everything else, every part, has to take a “secondary” place in the conceptual, and the planning approach of the people in the organization. That includes the CEO, the CFO, the Board Chair, the delivery person, the Accountant, and the internal systems analyst.

“The primacy of the whole” requires, for many organizations, a complete re-orientation of the traditional framework of the company. From a concentration on the individual and separate parts, the lens of the discussion is now turned on

the whole company, the gestalt, if you like. What this change means is that the CEO now can expect everyone to consider the “company” as an entity, not merely the specific section or office in which she/he works. Systemic thinking, with every person from the mailroom staff, to the cleaning staff, to the middle management group, to the board of directors, can and often is very threatening to those steeped in the patterns of hierarchical thinking, which places those with the greatest authority on the top rung of the ladder. Now the “company” perspective has to be considered by all.

This does not mean that the authority of the CEO is removed, although there may be some CEO's who believe that at first. The authority to hire and fire, promote and demote, to vote at board meetings, to conduct communications on behalf of the company, to oversee the preparation of annual budgets, to chair various meetings, including the executive committee, is not at stake, just because the “primacy of the whole” has become the thought process of every worker in the organization.

However, there is a needed shift in both orientation/training, and in practice for all workers not previously familiar with this approach.

While individuals are being asked to think through the lens of “the primacy of the whole” they are still expected to perform their specific tasks, continuing to follow the directions of their immediate supervisor. Naturally, if there is a company policy and/or practice that is not congruent with the policy/practice of the smaller department, then that will become immediately evident, to both the

worker and the supervisor. “Just might be time to bring our department’s guidelines into line with those of the company,” might be heard from some supervisors. If there is a cognitive dissonance, then there also needs to be a place for such dissonance to be worked through.

The second leg of this “mind-set” of systems thinking is the “interrelatedness of human beings.” Because all humans are created, in part, as relational creatures, no one has to spend any extra energy in bringing this phenomenon about.

This means that there is no individual worker who is not engaged in what could reasonably be called a corporate culture of some kind.

As the Fifth Discipline Fieldbook puts it, “When we forget the community nature of the self, we identify our self with our ego. We then assign a primordial value to the ego (part) and see the community (whole) as secondary. We see the community as nothing but a network of contractual commitments to symbolic and economic exchanges. Encounters with others become transactions that can add or subtract to the possessions of the ego... When we do not take other people as objects for our use, but see them as fellow human beings with whom we can learn and change, we open new possibilities for being ourselves more fully.” (p. 26)

As one former colleague put it, sadly, “I will listen to you vent, and match you on every argument, one by one!” in the middle of a heated discussion about trust.

To which I immediately replied, “This is not about winning an argument, as in a debating society. It is about my complete loss of trust in you and in your grasp of reality!”

The third leg of our metaphoric stool is expressed “the generative power of language.”

As a career English teacher, whose own Walter Mitty was actively engaged in some political reporting for several years, this “leg” of the mind-set so warms my heart that I am moved to embrace it probably more quickly than the other two.

After Senge et al introduce their readers to the work of physicist, Werner Heisenberg’s 1927 scientific finding “*that when we measure the world, human beings change it,*” they then point out that Heisenberg had provided ‘hard science’ for what the philosophers had come to understand over the preceding 100 years: that human beings cannot ever know what is “really real.” (p.27) Senge et al posit the concept of “ ‘naïve realism’ to the world view which holds rigid positions like the primacy of the parts and the isolated nature of the self. This worldview takes reality as a given entity outside our perception, and sees language as the tool through which we describe this external reality ‘out there’.”(p.27)

However, if we have no way of knowing what is ‘out there,’ whenever we express what we see, our language interacts with our direct experience, bringing forth this new ‘reality’ from this intersection. Their alternative to ‘naïve realism’ is to recognize the generative role of the traditions of observation and of meaning

shared by a community. *“When we are confronted by multiple interpretations of the ‘real world,’ the alternative to seeking to determine which is ‘right’ is to admit multiple interpretations and seek those that are most useful for a particular purpose, knowing that there is no ‘correct’ interpretation. The alternative to seeing language as describing an independent reality is to recognize the power of language that allows us to freshly interpret our experience -- and might enable us to bring forth new realities.”* (p. 27)

The “primacy of the whole” the “relatedness of the self” and the “generative power of language -- three powerful notions on which to build new realities, both conceptual and human.

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