Applied Systems Thinking

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"Building a Systems Thinking Culture at Ford Motor Company"

by Jeremy Seligman

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This article describes the experiences of Ford's IT department in using Systems Thinking to improve the performance of the company. Commentary by AST Principal, Michael R. Goodman is on pp,. 14-15.

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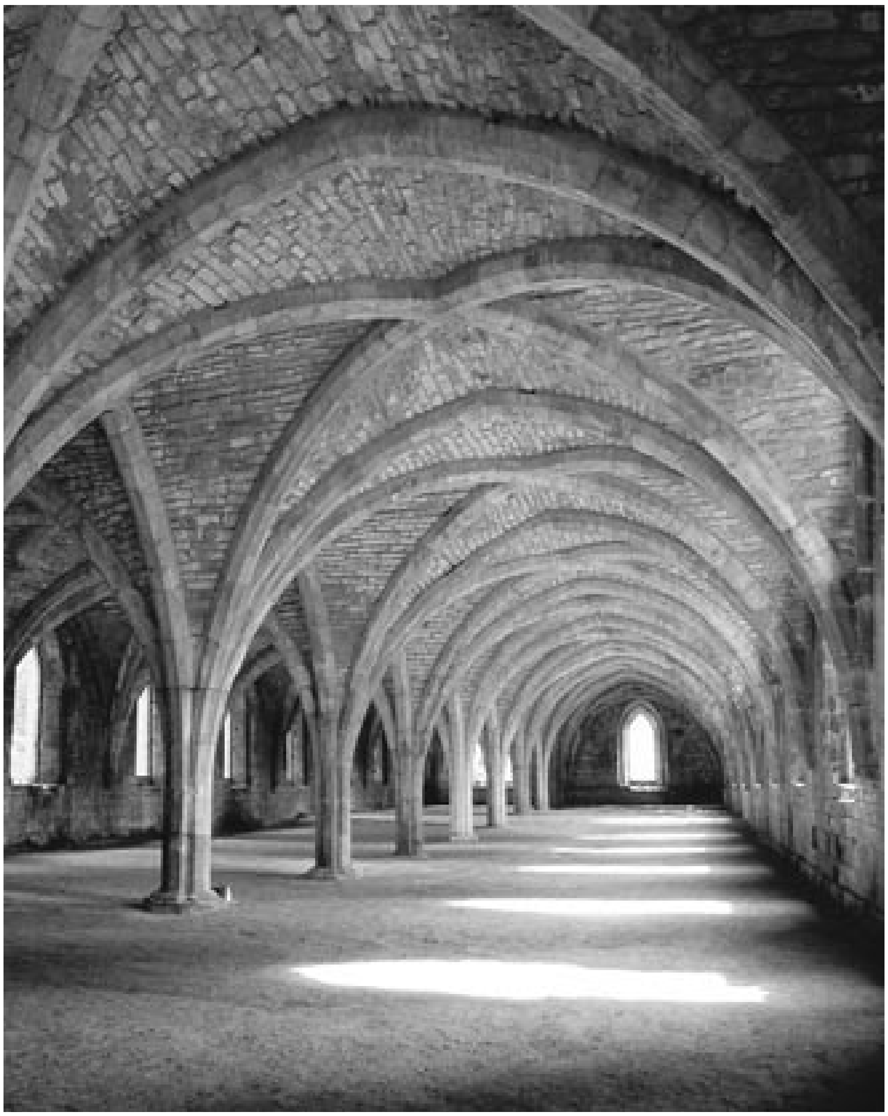
Reflections

The SoL Journal
on Knowledge, Learning, and Change



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IN THIS ISSUE OF *REFLECTIONS* we bring together the themes of systems thinking and conversation. One of SoL's unique contributions is its blend of fresh analytical perspective on the causes and consequences of structures and policies, and insight into implementing the cultural shifts that are required for effective action. The combination of these two approaches evokes the intelligence of systems whose complexity otherwise can be overwhelming.

The Ford Motor Company was an early sponsor of the MIT Center for Organizational Learning, and has been a member of SoL since its inception. In our lead article, Jeremy Seligman, a passionate systems thinker, has captured some of the story of building a systems thinking culture at Ford from the perspective of a relative newcomer. The candor of this piece helps us appreciate the fact that organizational systems will naturally limit the success of even the best-intentioned efforts. Recognizing, planning for, and learning to correct these limits helps build organizational capacity for systems thinking that survives and grows over time.

A key ingredient in developing a deep appreciation for the systemic nature of issues is the ability to consider diverse perspectives. Our Emerging Knowledge feature, "Committees and Boards in Health Care Organizations: Barriers to Organizational Learning?" presents the story of redesigning a structure in order to change the nature of conversations within an organization. The case is an interesting example of systems thinking itself, because the intention of the intervention is not simply to improve the quality of conversation, but to experiment with a structure for governance that is enabled and reinforced with new tools.

One of these tools is the World Café process. "Conversation as a Core Process: Co-Creating Business and Social Value" is our featured excerpt from the new book *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter* by Juanita Brown, with David Isaacs and the World Café Community. This chapter features two more stories of transforming working relationships and stimulating significant innovation by encouraging the participation of whole systems.

Finally, I'd like to remind you that SoL gatherings are a great way to sharpen analytical skills and deepen conversation on the topics that matter most to us. You can still sign up to attend SoL's 2nd Global Forum in Vienna – "A Symphony of Innovation" – September 13-16th by visiting *http://www.solonline.org/events/GlobalForum2005Public/*. (There will be a special pre-meeting session for those interested in the World Café process.) In future issues of *Reflections* we will share some of the work presented at this meeting, and feature work from other SoL gatherings as well.

As always, we welcome your suggestions, requests and comments. Happy reading, and we look forward to hearing from you!

C. Sherry Immediato
Managing Director, SoL

TIMELY PRACTICALITY

THE LAST ISSUE OF *REFLECTIONS* (Vol. 6, No. 2/3) arrived at a most opportune time. Over the last few months, several colleagues and I in the Technology and Manufacturing Group within Intel have been investigating the implications of social networks on diversity and inclusiveness in the work environment. Specifically, we have been looking at the nature of "dominant" and "non-dominant" networks and their impact on such things as culture formation, business process design, and the definition of what might be called the "ideal" member. The *Reflections* lead article *"The Nature of Social Collaboration: How Work Really Gets Done"* by Dennis Sandow and Anne Murray Allen, provided useful insight.

Of particular interest was the authors' definition of collaboration as "simply the social coordination of action around a shared purpose" and the related casual loop "Figure 5: Reinforcing Trust" with its associated explanation (i.e. Listening ® Understanding ® Trusting ® Collaborating ® Listening).

Several questions emerged for us that have helped to focus our inquiry. What is the quality of "listening" between members of "dominant" and "non-dominant" networks? What process might create "shared purpose" across current networks and help drive collaboration in order to form new networks?

Many of us commented on the practicality of the article – and how it seemed to arrive at just the time it was needed. Thank you for it and your continued good work.

Robert M. O'Bryan
Senior OD Consultant, Intel Corporation

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PUBLIC AND PRIVATE INQUIRY

AS AN EXECUTIVE COACH WHO SPECIALIZES in women's leadership, I found the discussion between Peter Senge and Saj-nicole Joni ("A New Tool for Inquiry," *Reflections* 6.1) fascinating for several reasons.

Joni's framework for first, second, and third opinions names a strategy that many coaches advise. But Joni's model more clearly articulates the value and distinctions of the levels of inquiry and how the connectedness and interdependencies of the opinions help to develop the thinking of the leader. Joni makes a wonderful point in emphasizing that public and private inquiry are interdependent. Regardless of how many questions are asked in public, it's essential for individuals to reflect on their own and to ask questions of others in private. This combination of public and private inquiry helps to shape thinking by sorting through and integrating what's learned.

A related point of interest is that to me, Joni's concepts reflect "feminine" thinking. It might be just coincidental, but Joni's model is reflective of the way in which many women approach leadership. In my experience and research, women tend to gather information from many sources. They ask a lot of questions, publicly and privately, before they come to a decision. This process can often be misinterpreted by men who equate the inquiry process with the inability to make decisions. Women say, as Joni herself says, that they need to "talk it out." Women look for sounding boards to process their thoughts and they recognize the value of talking to people who have insider feedback and to people who can be completely objective.

Joni's model reinforces the critical concept that leaders, both men and women, have to know when to ask particular questions, whom to ask, in what setting to ask, and how to integrate and interpret the information they receive. Thank you for bringing it to your readers' attention.

Ginny O'Brien
Executive Coach, and author of *Coaching Yourself to Leadership: Five Key Strategies for Becoming an Integrated Leader* and *Success on Our Own Terms: Tales of Extraordinary, Ordinary Business Women*

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Send your comments, questions, and suggestions to *reflections@solonline.org*

Building a Systems Thinking Culture at Ford Motor Company

By Jeremy Seligman

Jeremy Seligman

Many of us in the systems thinking (ST) and organizational learning communities have experienced frustration in creating sustainable communities of practice in corporate environments. Sharing that frustration with each other has generated much reflection and dialogue as to why these efforts are so consistently challenging. It can be disappointing to return years later to the site of initiatives – many of which were undertaken with substantial initial internal support and the best resources on the planet – to find little evidence of either measurable benefits or ongoing active practice fields. The benefits of practicing systems thinking – gaining an understanding of the dynamics of a system and how to intervene in it successfully – are incontrovertible. Yet sometimes it seems doubtful that ST will ever gain the critical mass required to make it an integral part of how major corporations practice strategic thinking.

The Legacy of Systems Thinking at Ford

There was already a rich history of systems thinking at Ford Motor Company when I arrived there as a consultant to the information technology (IT) group in early 2001, although I was not aware of this at the time. When word began to spread that there was a consultant on site who was asking about and talking about systems thinking, people quietly approached me, and hesitantly revealed that they too were systems thinkers, but that we probably ought to close the door if we wanted to continue the conversation. I found the behavior curious, and a little alarming, but over time I came to understand the behavior and the reasons behind it.

When I broached the subject of adding ST to the learning curriculum of IT at Ford, one of the survivors of the last ST era at Ford pulled me into a conference room to speak. Over time, we talked regularly, shared ideas, and learned to trust each other. It was clear that the chief information officer (CIO) was a strong supporter of ST, and slowly a small group coalesced around the idea of reinvigorating systems thinking in IT. We began to plan an approach to building capacity in the organization in a way that would be sustainable. We did not want to do anything that would reanimate Ford's quiescent but vigilant "immune system," the instinctive response of all organizations to reject anything "foreign" or new.

In the mid-1990s, Ford had opened its doors to Peter Senge, Russell Ackoff, Daniel Kim, and others in order to learn about ST and to apply it to an increasingly high-profile range of projects and programs. The story of that time is not the subject of this article, and it has been documented and reported elsewhere. It was an era that produced some remarkable results, including new model launches that were accomplished with better communication, less rework, and improved cost performance. The era also left its mark on a number of people at Ford, whose introduction to and deep immersion in ST forever changed their way of looking at the world and getting results at work.

Participants in these early efforts had some difficulties. Learning labs and coursework during this era were characterized by a "learning for the sake of learning" approach, without sufficient focus on real-world problems. As a result, many people walked away with transformational personal insights but little idea of how to apply these insights to their everyday work. Also, ST's innovative approaches, new language, and challenges to existing mental models energized the company's immune system, and over time, many of the initial champions of the ST projects moved on to other positions within and outside the company. Those who remained came to feel that espousing the language and practices of ST was increasingly unacceptable, and even risky. In the words of one of these "survivors" with whom I subsequently spoke, "We all went underground. There are more systems thinkers here than you know about, but they are not willing to come out of their caves yet."

The Edison Project

In the fall of 2003, Ford Motor Company's Information Technology Group began to look at the organization's fragmented IT infrastructure. This undertaking was named the "Edison Project" in hopes that it would "shed some light" on the complexities of the group's business of warehousing, building, and transferring data throughout the company. Everyone agreed that IT fragmentation was a costly and time consuming issue that needed to be dealt with, but not on the definition of the problem trying to be solved. Some saw it as a problem of data integration across a shared network of servers. Others saw it as a problem of mixing legacy systems with modern day applications. And everyone had questions. How would they know if they were solving the "right" problem? In solving it, would they create a whole host of new issues? Were they willing to bet their reputation with the business on their instincts about the right solution?

The champion, or sponsor, of the project suggested taking a systemic approach so that the group could see the interrelations of the system and gain a better understanding of the issue. Participants in the project first created an accurate picture of Ford's IT infrastructure. This included what the system looked like to customers, the complexity of the servers, and the complexity of the types of applications. Using systems thinking tools – which included causal loop diagrams and stock-and-flow computer models – helped them articulate and build a shared understanding of the (then-current state) of the organization's IT infrastructure without assigning blame or trying to "fix" a problem.

Eventually team members identified leverage points within three main themes, all of which were critical for the integration project to be successful. One was "technology," using factory-like, assembly-line processes that would help migrate existing applications and infrastructure smoothly into a new system. The second was called "adoption," which included the social technology to support that migration. This involved long range activities such as working with customers beforehand to improve their willingness to submit their owned infrastructure, and early identification of related software applications to the group for integration. This work became very important in building a trusting working relationship between IT and its customers in the business. The third theme was developing an understanding of the "network effect" benefits of infrastructure defragmentation. Once the team understood what the costs and benefits would be to the entire system – which had not been analyzed previously – it was easier to make the case for change to everyone who would be affected.

Initially many people thought that a change of this nature – integrating IT in a new, virtual, user-friendly environment – would be cost prohibitive. At Ford, IT is not strictly a cost center. Most funding for the Edison Project would need to come from business customers. Using systems tools demonstrated that despite a larger

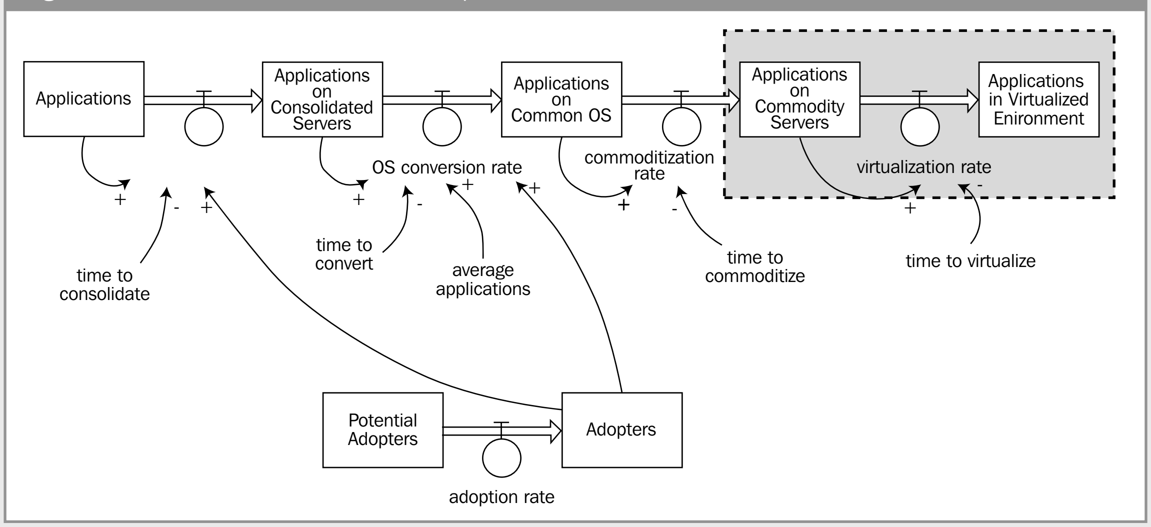
A New Champion

The existing small band of practitioners had been doing some very limited ST work, but mostly behind the scenes and on small projects, given the sense they all shared of being medieval monks preserving the arts and sciences through the Dark Ages. Around, this time, in 2001, the then-new CIO Marv Adams sponsored several very high visibility ST-based analyses and began speaking to a broad range of audiences about what had been learned from the project, "openly" using causal loop diagrams (CLDs) and praising the benefits of ST as a way of seeing the bigger picture. Partially as a result of this and partially because the ST community was taking on more public projects, interest in the discipline began to increase throughout the IT community.

Adams, an engineer by training, had long been convinced of the power of a systems thinking approach in understanding both information technology and business problems. He clearly saw that the problems endemic to large IT organizations could be understood as failures to understand the whole system of which those problems were a part. The IT environ-

initial investment, the payback over time would be larger than expected. Armed with this information and a greater understanding of the system at large, group members were able to explain the change in a way that customers could understand, encouraging adoption of the new methodology, and allowing better partnerships between IT and the business.

Figure 1: Edison Service Environment: Adoption Rate



This stock-and-flow diagram (part of a larger model) helped the group see the probable impact of the rate at which customers adopted the new "commonization" of applications and servers. The development of the model pointed out the need for policies and measurements that could offset the "worse before better" syndrome that customers would experience as the systems changed. Intuitively, the group had understood there would be a savings, but the model made it clear that costs would rise immediately and more dramatically than anticipated. The model helped the group determine how to address those cost impacts, build a truer understanding of the benefits of the change, and position the business case more clearly – which helped build trust between IT and its customers, and increase the rate of adoption.

ment has become immensely more complex in the last 20 years, but methods for coordination and control of this complex environment have not kept pace. One study was commissioned to use systems dynamics tools to look at an internal program designed to defragment the computing infrastructure. Although the program had made substantial progress in simplifying the computing environment, it was running up against many unanticipated obstacles, and the harder the team pushed to accelerate the program, the more it seemed to slow down. A systems thinking project produced a broader understanding of the causes of the resistance, and provided insights into how to intervene in the system and get things moving again. (See sidebar, "The Edison Project.")

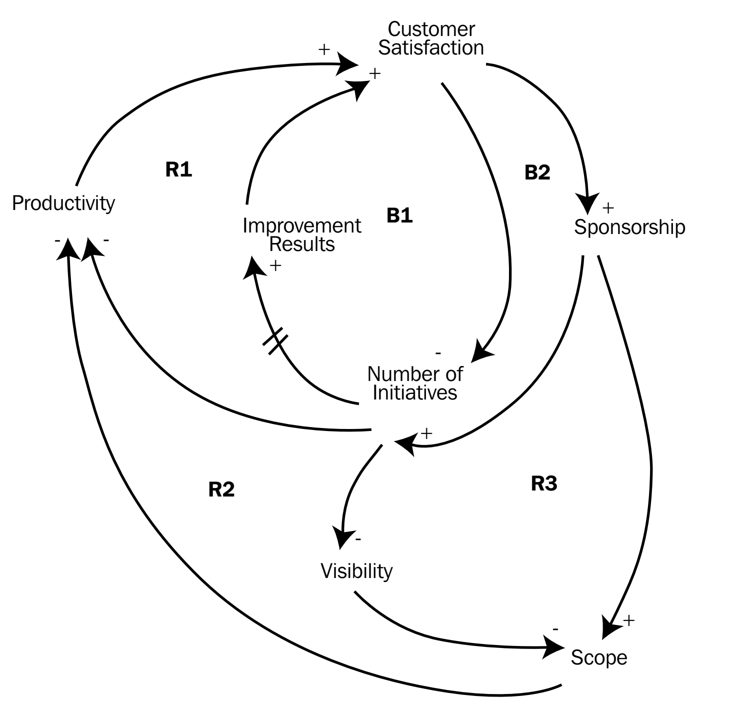
Dealing with "Limits to Success"

As the success and positive reception of some of these early programs filtered through the organization, along with the recognition and support these programs were getting from the CIO, new ideas and project requests began to pour in. By mid-2004, our list of potential projects totaled more than 75, but the resources available consisted of a small handful of people, only one of them truly dedicated to ST full time. This was a situation likely to produce a "limits to success" scenario (one of the most common system archetypes) and a probably fatal blow to the reemergence of ST at Ford.

Below is a map we put together to help us understand the phenomenon of our own limitations. As we saw this map, we began to realize a leverage point in the system: We needed more practitioners.

In response to this situation, we decided to focus all the efforts of the existing group on building capacity within the organization. This meant that we would decline almost all

Figure 2: Limits to Success



This segment of a larger causal loop diagram shows that as customer satisfaction with the results of new projects increased, the demand for new, larger, and more visible projects also increased, which decreased the productivity of the small group of people whose job it was to work on these projects.

requests to take on new projects, except as a part of training or immersion experiences for which the primary outcome was new practice capability. When accepting a new project, we made it clear that unlike a typical IT project, this project came with no promises for any particular results or findings. The primary goal was learning; the secondary goal was results or intervention. This was not an easy concept to sell to the organization, as it strongly challenged executives' mental models of what a project was supposed to be.

Building Capacity for Systems Thinking

The question, then, was "How do we go about building ST capacity in this very large corporate IT environment?" At this point in 2002, the team consisted of one full-time person, a small band of "ST survivors," and some new volunteers. We agreed that we needed to accomplish two complementary goals.

First, we needed to create an awareness of ST basics across a broad band of the organization. This would require a comprehensive curriculum, and good broad-based learning resources. It would also require ways to sustain the learning, a part of which had to include opportunities to practice in relevant ways. Since then, we have created a comprehensive curriculum that looks at ST from three perspectives:

- The mechanics of ST, including the CLDs, archetypes, and methods for designing interventions.
- The ST theory, including looking at mental models.
- "Telling the Story," learning how to package and communicate the lessons and findings of ST to the organization.

We created the curriculum, including learning objectives, activities, and resources, along a continuum leading the learner from initial acquisition of skills and knowledge to development of the ability to guide others and ultimately shape and foster the program in years to come. We have shared our work at several Society of Organizational Learning (SoL) forums, and continue to make substantial progress in establishing for the first time a phased, comprehensive curriculum for teaching ST in the corporate environment.

The second goal of the program was to create an expanding base of advanced practitioners, who were able to lead ST projects, design interventions, and eventually teach and lead others in building their capacity. It was immediately obvious to us that these two goals were deeply intertwined and needed to be addressed systemically, but it was not immediately obvious how that was to be accomplished. That's where the Multidisciplinary Action Projects (MAP) came in, and provided an important key to building ST capacity at Ford.

Through our partnership with the University of Michigan, we had been hosting a group of graduate students from the business school in seven-week internships. Three years ago we conducted the first session in what has developed into a unique internship experience for the U of M students. This internship program, named MAP by the university, involved a team of students given a project to work on, typically an analysis of a program or process at the sponsoring company's site with recommendations for improving the project due as a final report. Many corporations have been partnering with the university for more than 10 years in offering these types of opportunities to the graduate students. Potential projects are displayed at a fair each year, and students bid on the engagements in which they are most interested.

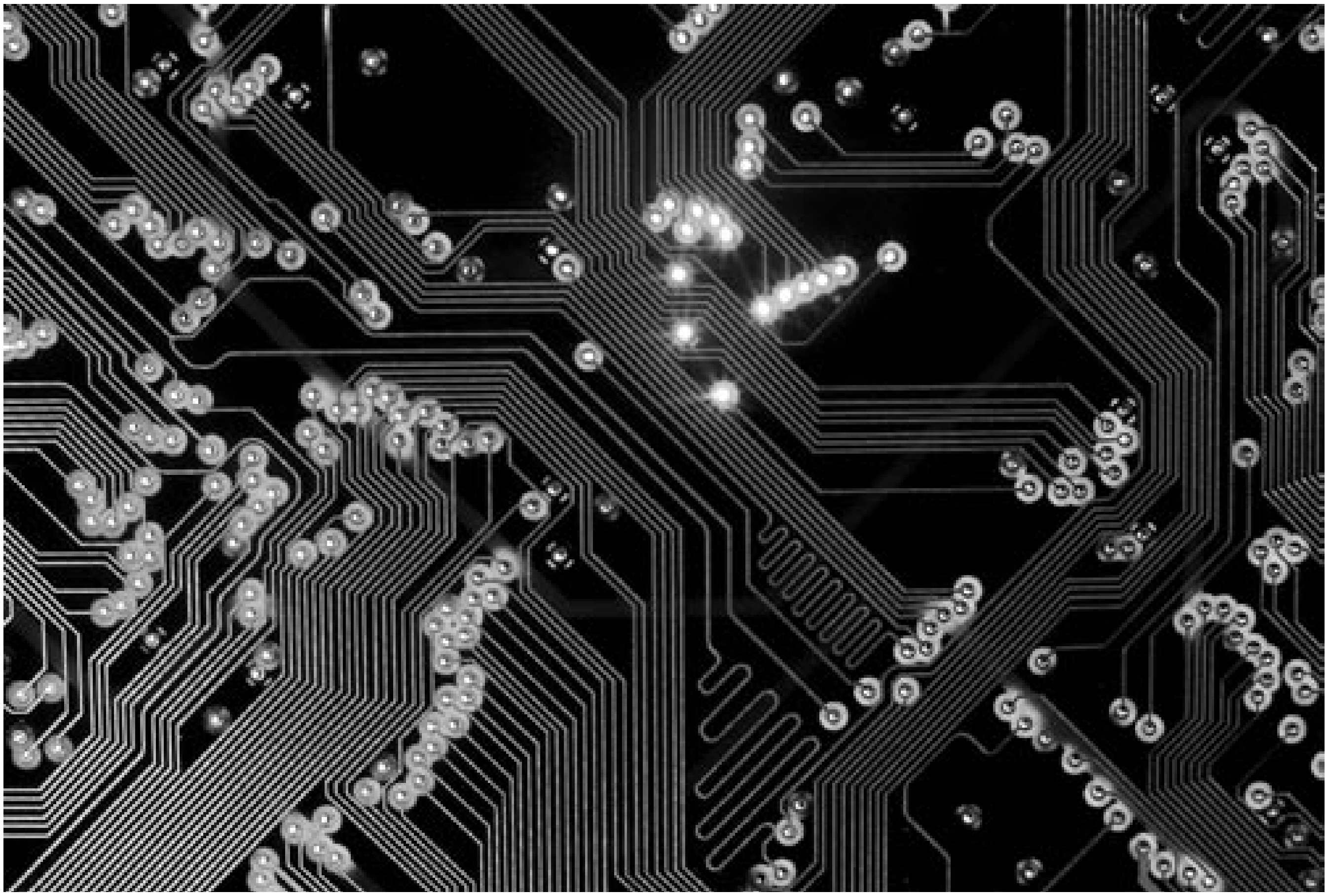
We broke this mold by engaging the students in seven weeks of intensive ST training, and although this was centered on some relevant business issue, the desired outcome was new systems thinkers, not a specific solution to the problem, which was offered up mostly as grist for the ST mill. The focus of this effort was action learning. Students would learn about the "Ladder of Inference" tool, for example, and immediately apply the concept to the data-gathering stage. Powerful results ensued when students were able to apply a tool to a real-world situation, note the results, and look for additional business issues to tackle, such as finance, purchasing, or other business units we thought had minimal input to the opportunity we were addressing.

The presentations produced the Holy Grail of ST outcomes: great dialogue and a mood of reflection among the senior team.

It was more than a little interesting to us that the MAP students, when transplanted from their collegiate setting to Ford, were able to go through the transformation required to understand the notion of mental models, examine and question their own, coalesce as a group, and learn to analyze and understand complex issues from the perspective of a systems thinker in a very short time. Further, the team noted with a mix of elation and curiosity that the presentations the MAP students made to the senior IT team produced the Holy Grail of ST outcomes: great dialogue and a mood of reflection among the senior team. These are the gateways to more informed decision making.

We realized that we now had all the elements we needed to produce an integrated curriculum and approach to ST at Ford. We proposed and got support for a series of MAP-like programs for Ford IT. These Ford–MAP (FMAP) programs would pull a small number of employees out of their regular work for as much as 15 weeks, during which time they would be led and coached through an intensive immersion in systems thinking basics, and would work through the sequential steps of an ST project. Upon completion of the FMAP experience they would return to their everyday work, but their problem solving tool set would have the additional skill of systems thinking. At present our constraint for these FMAP sessions was the numbers of coaches we had to each and lead the course; however we are getting fairly clever and adaptable at our timing without compromising the quality of the results. Recently I had a conversation with one of the FMAP groups. They were nearing the end of their project, and wanted to discuss how to make the transition back to the "real world" of day-to-day IT. They were concerned with how to deal with the corporate immune system, and we were able to strategize together about how they could take what they had learned and embed it in their work and approach to problems.

I fully believe that we are building a small core of people inside IT who will never be able to look at problem-solving with a linear approach again, who will always seek to ask the deeper, more systemic questions, and who will look for the intended and unintended consequences of every decision. Whether we will ultimately anchor ST in the Ford IT organization is still an open question, and of course will never be answered definitively. The word *organization* shares the same etymological root as *organism*, and like organisms, organizations change over time, responding and adapting to their environments in ways that will determine their survival or extinction. We recently had conversations with the organizational development group of a company once widely known for its ST practice, of which there is little trace today. We understand that sustainability is a quality that can and should be part of the design of such a practice. However, in the final analysis it is an emergent phenomenon that will depend on a number of factors not always within our control, including changes in leadership and the broader business environment.



Ford is much like other large corporations in its fondness for large programs designed to cascade a methodology or culture change initiative through the organization. It is our observation that the failure of ST to take hold and grow roots in large organizations has in part been because we practitioners of ST have forgotten the insights we ourselves developed over the years: The result of a great ST project is not a set of elegant causal loop diagrams, but a new capacity for reflective dialogue, deep insight, and shifting entrenched mental models. This is often a long, painstaking, and slow process, achieved through numerous challenging and carefully crafted conversations led by skilled, experienced, and compassionate practitioners. However, when it comes to teaching ST itself to an organization, we may forget these lessons, and rely on the power that we have seen in ST to be inherently knowable and equally attractive to the organization and the people within it. This is almost never the case, since any approach that challenges entrenched mental models, disturbs patterns of power and influence, or potentially exposes faulty thinking or causes embarrassment is certain to produce significant resistance and even active suppression.

It is too early to conclude that ST will become an ongoing integral part of how we understand our environment and make decisions at Ford, and perhaps it's best never to make that sort of conclusion in a complex dynamic system such as a large corporation. But it has been our experience that it is possible to energize an organization with the practice of systems thinking even in the aftermath of a difficult period. Indeed, the failures of the past may provide the very embers that systems thinking can fan into full blaze.

Guidelines for Practicing Systems Thinking

Understand your history

There is no ideal, perfect, or correct plan or template for rolling out ST in an organization. Every situation is unique and can best be understood as the aggregate of all the history and conditions that came before.

- What has the response to change programs typically been?
- What has the attitude to learning been in the company?
- Has ST made an appearance before? What was the reaction

Respect and appreciate the current state of the people in the organization

People love change, but they hate to be changed. Base your strategy on what the likely response will be to each part of the program, and don't try to overcome resistance. Appreciate the resistance and give people a chance to do more of what they find satisfying and nonthreatening.

- What is the pervasive mood of the organization?
- What events have taken place that might have built resistance to the introduction of an ST initiative?
- Have you spent sufficient time understanding the existing mental models of the potential participants?
- What small successes have occurred that you could leverage to bring ST practices into play?

Create the conditions for self-reflection inside a safe practice field

Building a safe and collegial environment multiplies the chances of people examining and shifting their own mental models a hundredfold, which will increase the impact of the work on both the individuals and the organization immeasurably.

- Can you make and accept provisional findings without fear of the "failure" label?
- What does it mean to truly practice, allow yourself to think about new ideas out loud, and invite others to share and build them with you?

Take the deep structures into account

The larger, older, and more traditional the organization, the more you will discover deep structures that produce patterns of behavior that explain the resistance to change you will encounter. Don't fight deep structures unless they are in your circle of control. Understand them, however, and you will know how to create micro-changes that over time can and will reach a critical mass that will impact and shift the structures.

- From an ST perspective, what are the deep structures, which will inevitably reproduce the same patterns of behavior within the organization?
- Can you intervene in those structures, or should you take them as givens, providing a set of strategic guideposts for designing your interventions?

Look for similar or parallel successes in the organization, and seek to leverage them

Spend more time studying successes than failures. Failures are enlightening in telling you which paths are likely to be blocked. Successes indicate which paths may be open to you.

- Can you think of a time in your organization when people embraced a new idea, method, or tool? What characterized that time?
- What are the ways that you can get a pilot program going in your company with the fewest bureaucratic hurdles or layers of approval?

Concentrate on building capacity rather than achieving results or completing projects

In one of our projects, the participants didn't draw a CLD until practically the last day, but this group has produced some of the most committed systems thinkers to come from any group. To be overly focused on the product and not the process will inevitably produce bad results and fail to teach the core lessons of ST.

- Have you clearly communicated the purpose of your project to the sponsors and the organization?
- Have you identified people within the organization who are likely to become practitioners, and concentrated your early efforts on them?

Create a "pull" program by concentrating on small groups of early adopters.

Large cascaded programs are an invitation to the immune system to go into overdrive. Start quietly, with people who are interested and willing to commit, and don't be in a hurry. Remember that immune system!

- Who will sponsor an initial pilot, whether it is under the radar or on the screen?
- Is there a group of alternative thinkers, survivors of an unsustained major change initiative, or a group that already meets to discuss ways to improve the work environment that you can connect with?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeremy Seligman is director, Information Technology (IT) Strategy and Organizational Development, Ford Motor Company, a position he was appointed to in 2005. After time spent in teaching and as a professional musician, Seligman began his business career at Xerox in Finance and later in Information Systems, then moved to Frontier Communications, where he was appointed CIO in 1997. A two-time graduate of the University of Rochester (with a bachelor's degree in Education and an MBA in Finance and Economics), he is a lifelong student of organizational dynamics and change and is a member of the Founding SoL Council of Trustees.
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Commentary

By Michael Goodman

Michael Goodman

When I began working as a consultant in the field of organizational dynamics and change more than three decades ago, my colleagues and I believed that once people saw the richness, compelling logic and value of thinking systemically about serious business, organizational, and social issues, they would naturally adopt this approach in making decisions and setting policy. We assumed our job was in large part a marketing challenge: "show and tell" the world about what systems thinking (and later organizational learning) offered and "they would come."

Ironically, most of us failed to think systemically about the change process itself. We did not fully grasp the power and resilience of the resistive forces and pressures inherent in every system, no matter how well intended or beneficial the proposed change. Take the case that Jeremy Seligman briefly alludes to in his article: the systems thinking work at Ford related to the launch of the Lincoln Continental in the mid-1990s. It is often cited as one of the most visible and measurable corporate systems thinking success stories. Yet upon hearing it, people usually ask "What became of all that success and learning within Ford?" It appears that despite the clear bottom line impacts the program generated, little of the tools and methods associated with the launch dispersed to the wider system. The immune system seems to have kept a local success from becoming an organization-wide success.

As Seligman's article demonstrates, systems thinking practitioners are still learning how to bring about sustainable change in organizations. The guidelines he offers reinforce the lessons many of us have learned, often the hard way. Heaving dealt with a diversity of organizational immune systems all over the world, I can offer a few additions – many developed with my colleague Cliff Bolster – that may help those who are newer to the work.

"Go slower now in order to be able to go faster later" is always a winning strategy in systems thinking work. Proceed carefully, and let expectations about results grow slowly and in alignment with internal capacity.

Doing systems thinking alone is not enough. In my experience, the practice and application of systems thinking must be used in concert with the other learning disciplines, especially mental models and building shared vision.

The process is more important than the product. How you go about using systems thinking matters. As Seligman notes, the Holy Grail is generating serious dialogue which can then produce shifts in mindsets and behavior. It isn't about getting the diagrams right, it's about getting the process right: getting the right stakeholders in a "safe" environment or "practice field" where they can start to discover the hidden consequences of their collective actions and challenge their own thinking. It's about learning.

Sheep dipping often leads to drowning. As Seligman again notes, organizations hold an unfortunate bias in assuming that everyone needs to be exposed to systems thinking.

I know of no better way to evoke the wrath of the immune system than by forcing everyone through some sort of training program.

Intervene at *organization, team,* and *individual* levels. This is an easy one to miss. Capacity building at the individual level is necessary but insufficient. Working with intact teams is very high leverage. But the policies, processes, and procedures that drive the organization's inner works are most critical. It is often here that you find some of the sources of the immune system or deep structures that resist change: the reward system, the appraisal system, the financial priorities, and the management development strategies.

Learn from the implementation experience itself. When it comes to organizational change, there is no better teacher than direct experience. In Ford's case, realizing that the MAP (Multidisciplinary Action Projects) could be used to build internal capacity was a real breakthrough. But what is true for Ford IT may not be replicable for other organizations for reasons such as access, tradition, history, etc. Start small, see what works, and build on your experience.

Watch out for initiative overload. People are overwhelmed from the number of change and improvement programs, efforts and initiatives rolling through their organizations. While each of these programs is well intended and should yield positive returns, the reality is that often individuals do not have enough time, energy, or commitment to fully engage and commit to those programs. Demand seems to have exceeded capacity, and the unfortunate byproduct of too many large-scale initiatives is often cynicism.

Do not make systems thinking a separate initiative. If you can keep your program "under the radar," you can accomplish a lot more. We often advise our clients not to label what they are doing as systems thinking. Just start using the tools and processes with people and observe what happens.

Given the difficulties in getting started implied by these guidelines, you may wonder why we should bother trying to create a systems thinking culture at any organization. My own answer is that systems thinking is a powerful language for diagnosis and action. Its focus is on the critical relationships and connections often missed or undervalued that can make or break a change effort. It enables us to recognize the often hidden and unintended consequences of our actions, to change our own thinking to match the way complex systems operate, to alter our behavior so that we are working with these complex forces instead of against them, and to expand the choices available to us. When we see those choices, we have the ability to pick the high leverage changes that will really make a difference.

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Committees and Boards in Healthcare Organizations:

Barriers to Organizational Learning?

Manoj Pawar

Manoj Pawar

Are Healthcare Organizations Learning-Disabled?

In our work, my colleagues and I have found that the organizational dynamics in hospitals, medical groups, and other healthcare organizations tend to include an overemphasis on advocacy, power and control, personal agendas, blame, and other fear-based dynamics. Although it is true that these elements are seen in all industries, these dynamics seem to be the norm in healthcare organizations.[1] Additionally, fear-based dynamics seem to manifest themselves more in healthcare teams, and especially at the board and committee levels, where managers and physicians interface.[2] This severely limits an organization's capacity to create, adapt, and innovate effectively – skills needed to meet current and future industry challenges related to cost, consumerism, patient safety, and outcomes based in quality[3]. Health care organizations will need to evolve into true learning organizations if they are to survive these industry trends.[4]

Our review examines the challenges of creating a culture conducive to team learning at the level of hospital boards and committees, the nature of the team learning skills lacking in healthcare organizations, and the approach we took with one organization to replace its "governing board" with that of a structured dialogue group, in an effort to advance its efforts in becoming a learning organization while fostering closer relationships with physicians.

One Source of Dysfunction: Hospital Boards and Committees

Although a full discussion of the factors that contribute to barriers to organizational learning is beyond the scope of this article, many can be attributed to the training environments of physicians, nurses, and other skilled healthcare professionals. These tend to be hierarchical "command-and-control" environments that discourage true creative inquiry and the exploration of new concepts or approaches through generative dialogue.[5, 6] The decision-making styles that evolve in the fast-paced clinical settings are grounded in a need to assess large amounts of data in a rigorous manner, while also doing so in a fashion that allows a team to take action quickly. When transferred to settings that do not involve potentially life-threatening clinical outcomes, however, this particular approach to conversation and decision making can be problematic.

Barriers to organizational and team learning in healthcare organizations are present on fairly high levels, in boards and committees particularly. Well-meaning managers assume that, like themselves, healthcare professionals are reasonably comfortable with learning in teams and that, via their involvement, they seek to fulfill the mission of the team, board, or committee. The mental models that arise from two substantially different types of training – healthcare and business – can lead to suboptimal performance and failure to meet mutual expectations if not addressed. Leaders in healthcare grossly underestimate the degree to which healthcare professionals expect that their roles in meetings of teams, boards or committees will be directive in nature, involving decision making, advocating for their constituencies, and mandating solutions to problems. Although the "right" people may have been selected for these teams, leaders must understand that gaps exist in terms of the skills required to achieve effective team learning. While more directive approaches do play an important role in team dynamics (a decision must be made or an action taken at some point), generative dialogue must become the primary work of these groups.[7] Failure to do so will inhibit the organization's ability to rapidly adapt to changing market trends, and to truly explore the real questions that are essential in reducing medical errors and improving outcomes.

Defining the Disability and the Nature of Its Impact

In order to better understand the nature of the "learning disability" that is common among healthcare organizations today, it is helpful to review the concepts of a learning organization and of dialogue.

Learning Organizations

Learning organizations are organizations whose members are continually focused on expanding their collective awareness, capabilities, and intelligence. These organizations are open to challenging their commonly accepted assumptions, structures, and norms, to gaining actionable knowledge, and to sharing knowledge among all their members. As a result, learning organizations are not only able to adapt effectively to current challenges, they also embrace the challenges of the future.[8] As the shared pool of knowledge within the organization grows, so does the collective organizational intelligence, making the organization more adept at quickly identifying opportunities, meeting challenges, and innovating. As many healthcare organizations strive to become learning organizations, they struggle with perhaps the most critical skills needed to foster a culture of organizational learning and trust: the skills of *dialogue*.

Dialogue

Dialogue, then, is a form of conversation through which people think together to arrive at a much larger shared understanding. Whereas discussion, or the fragmentation of thought through debate and argument, seems to be the norm for many healthcare teams, dialogue seeks to heighten the collective intelligence of the group.[9] As defined by the physicist David Bohm, dialogue implies a "flow of meaning." Effective dialogue achieves this "flow of meaning" through the use of two important skills: the ability to understand and make apparent mental models, and the ability to balance advocacy and inquiry.

Mental models are the "filters" through which we perceive and interpret the events of our worlds, and it is upon these often incomplete perceptions that we base actions and decisions. Developing awareness for our internal mental models, with all of their flaws, and continually seeking to clarify and to complete these models requires that individuals make their thinking visible to one another.[10]

The second of these dialogue skills, balancing inquiry and advocacy, places emphasis on generating conversation directed towards understanding the thinking of others. In general, our culture tends to favor advocacy more than inquiry, and the same holds true for teams in healthcare, perhaps to an even greater degree (consider the formats of grand rounds, or "mobidity and mortality" rounds in many hospitals).[11] Inquiry adds a great deal to the collective knowledge by eliciting important perspectives or facets from others that could alter the mental models within the group. Refining the shared understanding of a concept is essential before taking action, making decisions, or reacting with strong emotion.

When performed effectively, dialogue leads to higher levels of trust, true and honest exploration of important concepts and challenges, shared understanding, and innovative thinking that raises the collective knowledge of the group. In healthcare, dialogue most certainly is a critical competency[12] for effective process improvement, as it relates to cus-

Figure 1: The Compass Group: Service Excellence and Patient Satisfaction

Learning Objectives:

By the end of this session, participants should be able to:

- Describe the strategic importance of customer service and patient satisfaction.
- Describe the process by which the most recent patient satisfaction surveys were developed, implemented, and analyzed.
- Use inquiry skills to engage in more revealing dialogue with providers, staff, and patients regarding service.

Action Oriented Goals:

As a result of this session the following action can be expected:

- Participants will share their views on patient satisfaction, as well as their "best practices" in the context of their service-related plans at their sites.
- The "best practices" flip chart maintained during the session will be communicated to all providers and staff.
- The management team will assimilate observations in this forum with those of other stakeholders to potentially modify the survey content, questions, and process in the future.
- The frequency and method of monitoring satisfaction on an ongoing basis will be refined.
- The "action items list" maintained during the session will be delegated and acted upon.
- Interested provider-participants will be invited to work on this project with administrative project leaders in the future.

Pre-Work:

Participants will be expected to be familiar with the patient satisfaction survey results for their own sites, and should have already had discussed with their managers and directors regarding their action plans based on these results.

tomer service, quality outcomes, financial outcomes, and strategic dilemmas. The skills of dialogue in this setting have impact at a number of interfaces: physician-physician, physician-nurse, physician-administrator, and physician-patient, among others. Organizations that master these skills will be able to achieve high levels of success at each interface as a result. The specific dialogue skills that we have found elusive in healthcare organizations are those related to understanding mental models, and those related to inquiry. Failure to achieve successful dialogue with these skills in an organization leads to cultures based on blame, organizational rituals that are never questioned, processes that cannot be managed effectively, and short-sighted strategic thinking. In today's marketplace, the lack of this competency will place organizations at a competitive disadvantage.

Case Study: The Challenges of One Organization

The governing board of a healthcare organization with which we worked was typical of many seen in this industry. Physicians attended meetings with the expectation of advocating for their constituencies based on location or specialty, while personal agendas promoted a need for control while defending one's position. Many physicians questioned the value of the board, wondering if they really had any formal control, and these same physicians had indicated to the chairman that they were advocating and lobbying to dissolve the group. Managers learned to fear these meetings, as interactions tended to focus on criticism of the existing situation, solution, or dilemma. Reports on the progress of key departments devolved into "feeding frenzies" for the critical healthcare professionals who were accustomed to such thinking and interaction in the purely clinical setting. Not only were expectations not met, true exploration of challenges through healthy dialogue were rarely observed.

As the chairman and the management team contemplated the future of this board, we were invited to facilitate a retreat to help assess the true beliefs of the current attendees and other stakeholders. Our preliminary work with this organization revealed the following perceptions:

- Physicians and managers believed that there was, indeed, value in meeting together regularly.

- Both groups felt that the "new" strategic themes within the organization (satisfaction of customers/patients; satisfaction of employees; strengthened physician relationships, and financial stewardship) were very important to address, for the benefit of all stakeholders, including patients, and the themes resonated with many on a personal level. We were able to elicit specifics from the group that described how they would envision that their collaborative work might bring value to the following stakeholder groups:

Patients/Customers – Provide guidance for administration in monitoring and developing culture and processes that seek to improve service standards across clinics, and to leverage these service successes for contracting/market share

Employees – Provide direction for administration in monitoring and developing processes that improve employee morale, retention, and communication

Physicians – Provide administration with guidance related to reimbursement issues, contracting, and set a direction for ongoing provider education efforts related to practice management and professional development needs

The Organization – Develop physician leaders by working collaboratively to integrate provider ideas and input and by sharing information and best practices.

- Managers understood that they could not develop tactics that address these themes, and that they truly needed to have a collaborative relationship with physicians to realize the full potential of possible approaches.
- Physicians expressed a wish to help create approaches these strategic themes, but wondered if they would have the power and control to make policies and decisions.
- Both groups had difficulty seeing beyond the current formal board structure, envisioning that the same struggles and limitations would arise.
- Other physicians, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants in the organization were passionate about participating, although they had not had the opportunity to do so historically.

The Compass Group

Based on observations from the retreat and the strategic themes of the organization, it became clear that a mere evolution or transformation of the existing board structure would be inadequate, resulting in frustration and failure due to the persistence of deep-rooted norms. Nothing short of a complete destruction of the existing paradigms would provide this organization with the freedom to explore new paths to achieving its stated goals. With this understanding in mind, we recommended complete dissolution of the existing structure, in favor of a dialogue-based forum structured around the stated organizational imperatives of customer service, employee satisfaction, strong physician relationships, and financial stewardship. This forum came to be called the "Compass Group," for the following reasons:

- The group felt that these strategic themes or imperatives were analogous to the directions on a compass.
- The name seemed to convey a sense of purpose, in that the forum could be leveraged to keep the organization on track with strategic goals, just as a compass provides direction for travelers.
- The name also removed the implications and contextual associations with the terms "board," "council," or "committee." It was important for every detail to dissociate the new dialogue sessions from the mental models the group had developed from prior board experiences in healthcare, in which emphasis was placed on debate, advocacy for one's constituency, power, and "governance."

The Compass Group was seen as a risky endeavor by many within the organization, both physicians and managers. Much of this fear, as expected, was based on the uncertainty of where dialogue around these concepts could lead the group. The organization, however, was able to understand that some degree of risk is involved in any learning.

"Uncoupling" Old Norms

Old norms that prevailed in this group were important to consider. These cultural and conversational norms had been a major barrier to true learning within the organization. A great fear among many physicians and administrators was that the "old ways" of dealing with each other would carry forward into the new efforts. We recognized that a number of important steps were needed to "uncouple" the organization from old ways of interacting, thus allowing for new ways to emerge and thrive.

Associating Pain with the Status Quo

A critical event during the retreat included dialogue around existing aspects of the meetings that board members disliked, involving not only content, but also emotions, unmet needs, and frustrations. A significant amount of facilitation was required to uncover these real issues, but did result in the shared understanding that all of the participants were concerned about (1) the feeling that they were not being heard by each other or by the administration, and (2) the feeling that they wanted to "make a difference" but were not. By linking these two perceptions, and their associated emotions, we were able to markedly raise the level of discomfort with the "status quo" for this group. This discomfort created a compelling need for change among all board members that was instrumental in effecting necessary change.

Incorporating New Perspectives

The group felt strongly that the constancy of the membership of the board over the past several years had contributed to some degree of stagnation, and had been a major factor in perpetuating norms for interaction among group members that may not have been acceptable for those outside the group. Understanding that many others in the medical group expressed an interest in and saw value in dialogue meetings, it seemed natural to invite new participants that possessed new and fresh perspectives.

Eliciting Desired Norms and Expectations

Several of the current board members were able to articulate rewarding and fulfilling experiences that they had enjoyed in other meetings and committees. By identifying the specific cultural aspects of these other team experiences from a minority of board members, virtually all of the other participating physicians and administrators were able to articulate their own "best experiences." Common among these experiences were feelings of "being heard," of "contributing proactively," of "understanding one another," of mutual respect, and of building upon collective contributions to generate new and creative approaches. By explicitly listing these desired norms and expectations, the group was eventually able to develop momentum for change, striving for this "new way."

Generating "Buzz"

By communicating the themes of dialogue that took place at the retreat, along both formal and informal communications, others in the organization became aware that the Compass Group was "no ordinary board or committee." The communications were lively, genuine, informal, and carried with them a feeling of realism, openness, and innovation that was not typical of standard emails and memoranda. This "buzz" was instrumental in generating interest and participation from many others who might not have been comfortable in the traditional board setting, and set expectations that helped to "uncouple" the norms of the past.

Setting the Stage for Dialogue: Designing the Compass Group

Because of the risk inherent in any team or organizational learning process, a great deal of thought must be focused on planning for a dialogue session that

allows people to relax, and thus fosters collaborative dialogue, engagement, and exploration of creative possibilities for action. Described here is our approach to the planning of the Compass Group for this particular organization, based on some of the principles used in developing a "World Café."[13]

Establish a Clear Purpose

We understood that a significant need for this group, both healthcare providers and managers, was to have a clearly defined purpose and objectives, along with concrete actions. Without these elements, it was unlikely that either group would perceive significant value. Because participants were unfamiliar with the concept that dialogue, by itself, is a valuable endeavor, we felt that it was important to work towards eliciting clear goals that were meaningful from their perspective.

For the first of the Compass Group sessions, the management team had chosen to focus on the strategic theme of customer service. Some smaller projects and work had already begun at a number of facilities along the lines of customer service, and a patient satisfaction survey had recently been completed. The management team wished to gain insight into how to best proceed with this information. With this theme in mind, we structured the dialogue based upon a series of questions that led to greater insight and shared knowledge. Along with a memorandum regarding the outcomes of the recent retreat, the dissolution of the old board, and the creation of the "Compass Group," a communication regarding the purpose, objectives, and goals of this first Compass Group session was distributed to the medical group's management team, physicians, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants (see Figure 1).

Invite Great Guests

With a clearly defined purpose and objectives, we worked with the organization to help them decide who should be invited to attend the retreat for the Compass Group. At one time, the governing board for the organization was comprised of elected positions, which many felt excluded potential contributors within the organizations, while contributing to the dynamic of pushing personal and constituency-based agendas. More recently, the organization had appointed a representative from each of its facilities to serve on the governing body, which balanced contribution somewhat better, but resulted in apathy due to what was perceived as "forced" participation. We supported the management team's preference to offer invitations to all interested physicians, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants, feeling that true engagement can only be achieved when individuals are free to choose to participate, rather than being forced to do so.

In addition, we felt that the process of inviting participants must convey the sense that the Compass Group was "no ordinary board meeting." Participants were clear on the purpose and goals of the new dialogue-based forum, and were also aware of the sense of urgency for the change, based on the need to meet organizational and market-driven demands. Enthusiasm was also generated among invitees by actively setting the expectation that this forum, innovative for this organization, would result in dialogue that would truly make a difference.

Figure 2: Compass Group Dialogue Questions

Dialogue

During this dialogue activity, share answers to:

- How did you react to the re-enacted service
- What is your experience with customer service in your faciltiy
- How might these results best be used for improving service across all facilities

Let one person comment, then use inquiry skills:

- Seek first to understand completely
- "What leads you to…"
- "Tell me more about…"
- "How did you…"

Plan for a Safe and Welcoming Environment

In planning an effective dialogue session, paying close attention to details such as ambiance is critical to creating a physical space that is perceived as inviting, hospitable, and intimate. The purposeful creation of a welcoming space brings a tremendous amount of power, and it is surprising how often leaders fail to consider the impact such planning can have. The successful creation of such an environment changes the emotional frame of reference for participants, such that they feel a greater degree of psychological safety, with the openness necessary for true and engaging dialogue.

For this organization, we recommended that the creation of a welcoming environment begin with the invitation process itself. Rather than utilizing the typical emailed appointment scheduling that is used extensively within the organization, stationary and fonts with earth tones were used to convey the message that this experience would be different from the typical hospital board or committee meeting, while also setting the groundwork for creating a sense of hospitality and intimacy during the event.

We continued our work with the organization's planning team to assist them in designing the physical layout and ambiance for the dialogue session. A number of critical details, described here, were elicited:

- Round, café-style tables with seating for 5–7 people, staggered randomly, rather than in straight rows
- Place cards for seating arrangements to foster dialogue among diverse participants
- Flip charts for recording dialogue themes at each table
- Soft, natural lighting
- Soft jazz as background music
- Catered food around a local theme

- A table for a host or greeter to welcome guests, to orient them to the environment, and to provide them with materials for the event
- Name tags for each attendee including an interesting fact (in this case, participants were asked to write down the location of their most memorable service experience)

Form Powerful Questions

Well-structured, open-ended questions are the most important determinant of a successful dialogue session. By framing a dialogue session around a series of questions, we were able to help the organization explore important concepts in a logical progression of discovery. As opposed to traditional board meetings, where agenda items focus on one-way communication of information, or on the presentation of statements to be debated, dialogue sessions framed around questions to be answered set the groundwork for greater levels of inquiry and mutual discovery.

The formation of these questions is perhaps the single most important factor in determining the success of a dialogue session. The most effective questions are simple, yet thought-provoking, and will both focus dialogue and open the door to exploring new possibilities. Because the theme chosen for the first Compass Group session centered on customer service, questions related to service, and to the recent internal efforts in measuring service perceptions, were developed. See Figure 2 for an example of the questions for one round of dialogue during the Compass Group.

If participants are unfamiliar with dialogue as a process, planners of dialogue sessions sometimes feel pressure to create questions that lead to concrete action planning. Although in some cases this may be a rather natural progression, there is value in having

Figure 3: Compass Group Outline

Topic	Time Allotted	Objectives for Participants
Arrival and Welcome	6:30-6:40 pm	Relax, mingle, and meet your colleagues!
Intro and Overview	6:40-6:50 pm	Develop a framework regarding purpose, roles, and ground rules. Understand inquiry as the basis for dialogue. Provide an overview of the evening.
Video	6:50-7:00 pm	Observe practice site staff feelings regarding patient satisfaction, taking note of your own reactions, through this entertaining reenactment of actual patient experiences.
Project Description	7:00-7:10 pm	Gain an understanding of how the most recent patient satisfaction project took place, from the driving force, to planning, to implementation and data analysis.
Reactions and Dialogue	7:10-8:00 pm	Participants, in groups, will share their reactions to (1) the video; (2) their own experience with the project & its results; and (3) what they would like to see happen with the results. Participants will practice inquiry skills as they dialogue.
Travel Plans	8:00-8:40 pm	Participants will participate in dialogue to answer the following questions: • How do you feel about the structure and questions that are part of the patient satisfaction survey process? • How will we continue to monitor progress? • What do you envision happening as a result? Provide direction for the management team.
Forum Feedback, Door Prizes, and Closing Comments	8:40-9:00 pm	To gather feedback regarding this forum. To provide recognition to selected participants. To provide more questions for reflection.

the process of dialogue by itself as a goal without assuming that any decision or action will take place. Focusing on inquiry and exploration to truly understand is a valuable outcome by itself. With this organization, as with many in healthcare, we understood that many administrators and physicians perceived value by also arriving at some action. For this reason, we chose to provide the management team with a specific flip chart for "Action Items" to record observations that might require further research or planning, or at least further dialogue.

Facilitating for Success

By hosting the initial session, we felt that our role as facilitators was (1) to model the process for internal facilitators in the future, (2) to provide a larger structure for the evening in the context of facilitating between rounds of dialogue, and (3) to provide some training around the skills involved in dialogue, with a heavy emphasis on inquiry. Figure 3 shows an overview of this organization's first Compass Group session, focused on customer service.

Members of the management team had already received some training from us in hosting a dialogue session and in facilitating smaller conversations, mainly by encouraging a balance of inquiry and advocacy. We decided to leverage these skills by placing one management team member as a facilitator at each table. The other members at each table were carefully distributed to ensure sufficient diversity of conversations.

The Compass Group opened with a designated amount of time for attendees to arrive, get oriented, and to enjoy food and beverages while conversing with colleagues. Participants were asked to write the answer to the question "What is the location of your most memorable service experience?" on their name tags. Prior to starting the session, participants were encouraged to use this as a starting point for conversation with others.

We provided participants with an overview of the evening, as well as a brief didactic session on dialogue. We find that it can be immensely helpful to use "recipes" or "protocols" for dialogue, especially in situations where some individuals may be new to dialogue skills. The participants were reminded of the basic elements of the "recipes" for effective inquiry prior to each round of dialogue.

Each round of dialogue was structured around a series of questions. In this particular circumstance, a review of the organization's patient satisfaction data, as well as the video reenactments of actual patient experiences, was used as the starting point for forming dialogue questions. During the rounds of dialogue, facilitators at each table helped to encourage effective inquiry, and to surface hidden or underlying assumptions. In addition, the facilitators were asked to record the predominant themes of each round of dialogue.

Between each round, each table was asked to share their dominant themes, discoveries, and insights with the group and to comment on their success with using dialogue skills.

As one of the goals of the Compass Group was to provide an opportunity to share "best practices," a separate flip chart was maintained specifically for this purpose. In addition, another chart was maintained to document items that warranted action, follow up, or future dialogue.

After the Dialogue Session

The feedback from post-session surveys indicated an overwhelmingly positive level of enthusiasm, engagement, and perceived value. Participants, both managers and healthcare providers, felt that they had achieved a level of shared understanding that was greater than the sum of their individual knowledge. Most importantly, the attendees felt that they truly had accomplished a great deal in terms of the "real work" of the organization, something that had not been felt by the previous board structure, and that they felt passionate about continuing the conversations.

The themes and best practices that were identified through table dialogues were distributed to all members of the organization, and clear plan was described for future dialogue. In addition, efforts to continue the dialogue around service were implemented by providing powerful weekly questions for each manager, physician, or department to use with their staff.

Ongoing dialogue sessions continue to focus on the strategic directions defined by the "Compass," and high levels of engagement continue.

Conclusion

Based on our observations, boards and committees in healthcare organizations tend to operate in a mode that is heavily dependent on one-way communication, debate, and criticism. Indeed, the same dynamics also tend to be present at other levels of these organizations, including clinical teams. Unfortunately, these dynamics present a barrier to developing learning organizations that are able to innovate and adapt effectively to tumultuous market conditions, a necessity for the healthcare organization of today.

Dialogue – specifically, the skills of understanding mental models and of balancing advocacy with inquiry – are essential for building organizations that learn effectively. Such skills are sorely needed in healthcare at all levels.

By challenging the assumption that committees and boards in healthcare must always be structured in the traditional, formal manner, organizations may be more likely to explore formats that are more conducive to dialogue. Shifting to dialogue-based forums focused on organizational strategic imperatives can be one approach that fosters organizational learning, while engaging and improving relationships with physicians.

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The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter

By Juanita Brown
with David Isaacs and the World Café Community
Berrett-Koehler, 2005

Conversation as a Core Process: Co-Creating Business and Social Value

> *"Managing in the new economy requires not just change programs but a changed mindset…. Conversations are the way workers discover what they know, share it with their colleagues, and in the process create new knowledge for the organization. In the new economy, conversations are the most important form of work.'*
>
> —ALAN WEBBER, "What's So New About the New Economy?" *Harvard Business Review*

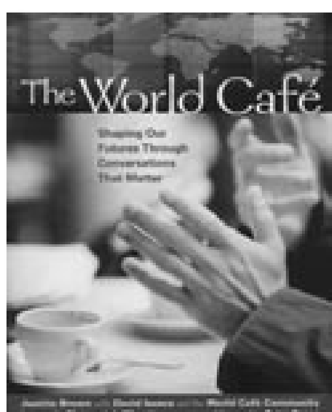
Juanita Brown

David Issacs

The World Café process is based on a simple premise: conversation matters. Juanita Brown and David Isaacs began using this conversational practice in 1995, after a serendipitous series of events at a meeting they hosted in their home. It has since developed and spread around the world. A mainstay of the learning organization community, World Cafés are also now routinely used in groups that are too large for traditional dialogue formats. Café conversations are designed so that everyone in a given setting can participate in several continuous rounds of small group dialogue while still remaining connected to a larger, single conversation. What emerges from these sessions is often a new sense of shared purpose, knowledge, and opportunities for action.

Perspectives and Observations

When Tom Johnson first walked in the door of our home, I must admit I stereotyped him. I assumed he'd be focused only on the numbers. After all, he was a famous professor of accounting history and had written a seminal book on management accounting, *Relevance Lost*, which had an impact on measurement systems around the world (1991). However, when he actually began to speak as part of the opening circle at the intellectual capital dialogue where the World Café was born, I was dumbfounded. He was searching, he said, for a new way to think about performance, measurement, value creation, and results. Tom was concerned that leaders were using his writings on activity-based costing as one more management tool to drive short-term financial targets rather than to nurture sustainable business and social value.



Tom challenged the group with the following set of questions: *Is it the financial and performance targets or the relationships among people and their patterns of working and thinking together*

Conversation Matters!

Learning Organizations

True learning organizations are a space for generative conversations and concerted action which creates a field of alignment that produces tremendous power to invent new realities in conversation and to bring about these new realities in action.

Fred Kofman and Peter Senge
"Communities of Commitment"
Organizational Dynamics

Politics

Democracy begins in human conversation. The simplest, least threatening investment any citizen can make in democratic renewal is to begin talking with other people, asking the questions and knowing that theirs answers matter.

William Greider
Who Will Tell the People?

Strategy

Strategizing depends on creating a rich and complex web of conversations that cuts across previously isolated knowledge sets and creates new and unexpected combinations of insight.

Gary Hamel
"The Search for Strategy," *Fortune*

Information Technology

Technology is putting a sharper, more urgent point on the importance of conversations. Conversations are moving faster, touching more people, and bridging greater distances. These networked conversations are enabling powerful new forms of social organization and knowledge exchange to occur.

Rick Levine and others
The Cluetrain Manifesto

Education

Within communities that foster human growth and development, change seems to be a natural result of constructing meaning and knowledge together – an outgrowth of our conversations about what matters. Leaders need to pose the questions and convene the conversations that invite others to become involved….In social systems such as schools and districts, one good conversation can shift the direction of change forever.

Linda Lambert and others
The Constructivist Leader

The Knowledge Economy

Conversations are the way workers discover what they know, share it with their colleagues, and in the process create new knowledge for the organization. In the new economy, conversations are the most important form of work…so much so that the conversation is the organization.

Alan Weber
"What's So New About the New Economy?," *Harvard Business Review*

Family Therapy

Our capacity for change lies in "the circle of the unexpressed," in the capacity we have to be "in language" with each other and, in language to develop new themes, new narratives, and new stories. Through this process we co-create and co-develop our systemic realities.

Harlene Anderson and
Harold Goolishian
"Human Systems as Linguistic Systems," *Family Process*

Leadership

Talk is key to the executive's work…the use of language to shape new possibilities, reframe old perspectives, and excite new commitments…the active process of dialogue, and the caring for relationships as the core foundation of any social system.

Suresh Srivastva and David Cooperrider
Appreciative Management and Leadership

Collective Intelligence

Dialogue is the central aspect of co-intelligence. We can only generate higher levels of intelligence among us if we are doing some high quality talking with one another.

Tom Atlee, Co-Intellgence Institute
The Tao of Democracy

Conflict Resolution, Global Affairs

The reality today is that we are all interdependent and have to coexist on this small planet. Therefore, the only sensible and intelligent way of resolving differences and clashes of interests, whether between individuals or nations, is through dialogue.

His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama
"Forum 200" Conference, Prague

Executive Development

As the new business landscape continues to emerge, and new forms of organization take shape, our ability to lead will be dependent upon our ability to host and convene quality conversations.

Robert Lengel, Ph.D., Director
Center for Professional Excellence
University of Texas at San Antonio
Executive MBA Program

Futures Research

Conversation is the heart of the new inquiry. It is perhaps the core human skill for dealing with the tremendous challenges we face. The culture of conversation is a different culture, one that can make a difference to the future of the world. If we combine conversations that really matter…with the interactive reach of the Internet, we have a powerful force for change from the ground up.

Institute for the Future
In Good Company: Innovation and the Intersection of Technology and Sustainability

Consciousness Studies

I'm suggesting that there is the possibility for a transformation of the nature of consciousness, both individually and collectively, and that whether this can be solved culturally and socially depends on dialogue. That's what we're exploring.

David Bohm
On Dialogue

Evolutionary Biology

Our human existence is one in which we can live whatever world we bring about in our conversations, even it if is a world that finally destroys us as the kind of being that we are. Indeed, this has been our history since our origins as languaging beings – namely, a history or creation of new domains of existence as different networks of conversation.

Humberto Maturana and Gerda Verden-Zöller
The Origin of Humanness in the Biology of Love

that produce the outcomes we value? If organizations are living systems, then what core processes can an organization utilize that mirror nature's patterns? Where do you as a leader place intention and attention in a living system? These powerful questions struck a chord with the other participants at that initial World Café and have continued to resonate in our thinking and research into the role of conversation as a core process.

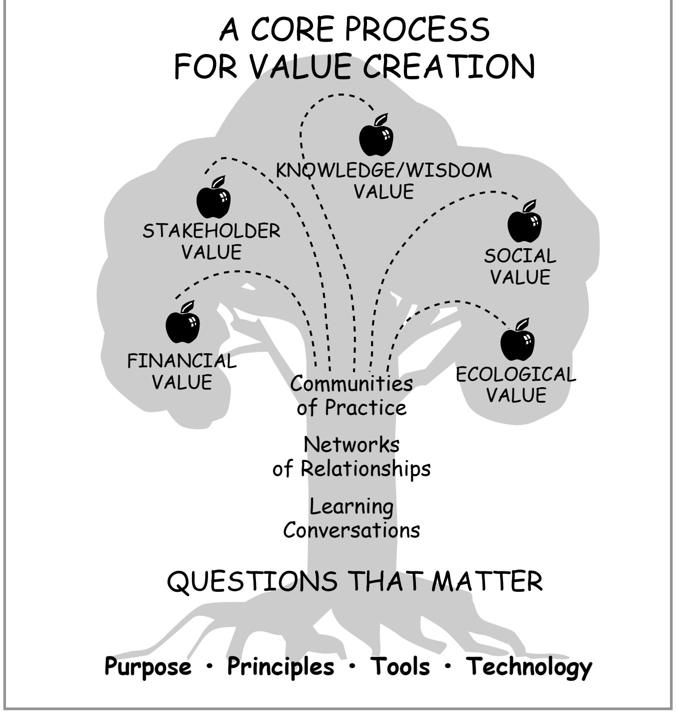
On Means and Ends

With his colleague Anders Bröms of Sweden, Tom later wrote another seminal book, *Profit Beyond Measure*, focused on these questions (2000). Based on extensive research, it encouraged leaders to shift their attention from a focus on management exclusively by results (MBR) toward "management by means" (MBM) – the relationships and processes that shape the organization's capacity to learn, adapt to changing circumstances, and create the knowledge necessary for its long-term performance. Tom and Anders point out that because we've separated the ends (financial targets and performance objectives) from the means (the processes and practices used to create them), ends have come to seem more concrete, more "real," and therefore, more valuable than means. In contrast, Tom and Anders show how means and ends co-evolve simultaneously. "The task of managers," they argue, "is to stop treating results as a target one reaches by aiming better. Instead, results are an outcome that emerges spontaneously from mastering practices that harmonize with the patterns inherent in the system itself. In other words, manage the means, not the results. *Means are ends in the making*" (2000, p. 50, italics mine).

Tom Johnson's work has greatly informed our thinking about the role of conversation as a core process, a fundamental "means" by which relationships are built, knowledge is shared, and value is created. As we explored this thinking with Tom and his wife, prominent educator Elaine Johnson, we began to see how the World Café can help make this natural process more tangible and real, and therefore more actionable. In Elaine's words, "What we're saying is that conversation is the essential, fundamental, and indispensable means. But *how* these conversations are viewed and structured will lead to different outcomes." Tom adds, "If conversation is seen as a core means for creating organizational performance, then how leadership works with conversation will be a key factor in determining how well the organization does. If people say 'Conversation means shut up and don't speak until you're spoken to, or don't talk until the boss authorizes you to,' that will lead to one set of results, and if the conversations occur more along the lines of the World Café principles, that will lead to a different set of results."

We've developed a simple picture to depict one way of visualizing

Figure 1: A Core Process for Value Creation



this core process of value creation at work.

As our living tree, A Core Process for Value Creation, illustrates, questions that matter stimulate learning conversations. These conversations, in turn, strengthen the networks of relationships and communities of practice through which an organization creates the fruits of its labors. The main challenge is that this core process is generally invisible, unfocused, and rarely used intentionally by leaders as a means to create sustainable business and social value.

Start Talking and Get to Work

For most leaders, accepting the centrality of human conversation as a key organizational means for achieving desired results entails a profound shift of mind – from seeing conversation as a peripheral activity to seeing conversation as one of the organization's most valued assets. Experiencing a World Café conversation makes it easier to visualize your whole organization or community as a dynamic, naturally occurring "Café," so you can work more intentionally with the often invisible conversational and social networks underlying organizational performance.

Stop for a moment. Pause, as Peter Senge of MIT and I have in Café gatherings with key executives, to consider the practical implications of the following question: *If critical organizational knowledge really does get created through networks of conversation and personal relationships, what does that mean in practical terms for strategy evolution, for training and development, for technology infrastructures, for the physical design of workplaces and spaces, and for your own action choices as an organizational member or leader?*

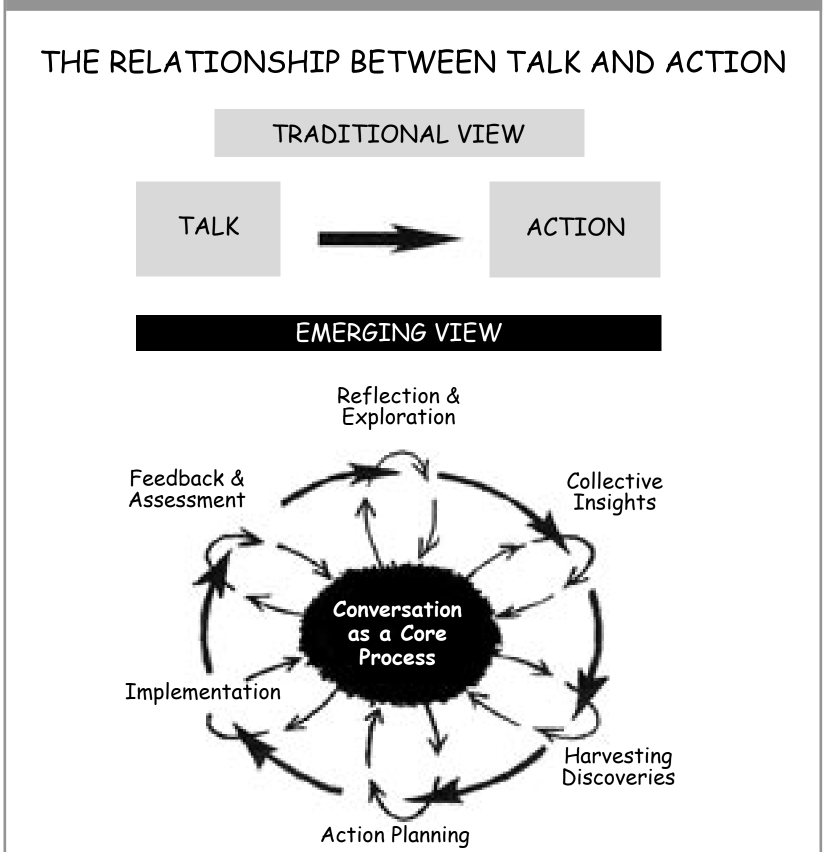
I'll never forget the booming voice of a six-foot-four Texan, the head of global operations for a major multinational auto manufacturer who was responsible for more than fifty thousand employees. As he contemplated the implications of this shift in point of view, his voice rang out, "Damn! Do you know what I've gone and done?" All eyes turned in his direction. I held my breath. "I've just gone and reorganized my entire global operation. I've broken up the learning communities and ongoing conversations that have gotten built up over the years. It's going to take us a *long time* to recover from this!" His heartfelt comment stimulated a lively conversation about what leaders could do to work more effectively with conversation as a core process in their own organizations.

The Relationship Between Talk and Action

One of the most important shifts required in this new way of viewing conversation is to re-evaluate our traditional view that talk and action are separate activities. We had a fascinating conversation with Café hosts in Denmark that explored this question. One participant suggested that we consider revising our traditional views of talk and action, seeing them as a single integrated whole rather than as separate activities. *What if, when conversations are highly energized and relevant, you are already* in *the action phase? What if it's* not *talking and discovery followed by action planning and implementation in the linear way we in the West think about it?*

As he suggested, perhaps the whole process is part of a single action cycle – reflection/insight/harvesting/action planning/implementation/feedback – in which conversation is a lively core process every step of the way. We're discovering that when people care about the questions they are working on and when their conversations are truly alive, participants naturally want to organize themselves to do whatever has to be done, discovering who cares about what and who will take accountability for next steps. Perhaps my eighty-four-year-old mom said it best when she shared a fundamental insight from her lifetime of organizational work. "You see," she mused, "conversation *is* action. You can think things and you can feel things but it doesn't become 'real' until you express it. Then it begins to germinate. Other people hear it, other people begin to feel it, you share ideas together – and if it's important enough, relevant action becomes just a natural thing that happens."

Figure 2: The Relationship Between Talk and Action



The World Café is designed primarily to generate collective knowledge-sharing, webs of personal relationships, and new possibilities for action. A Café dialogue sets the stage for more traditional forms of action planning, which often occur during the same session but at a later point in time. Yvon Bastien, of Sanofi Synthelabo, Canada, raises an important question for leaders who are reconceiving the dichotomy between talk and action and are harnessing conversation as a core process: "How can we invent conversational processes for on-going action planning and implementation that generate the same energy and spirit as the World Café generates for strategic thinking and collective insight?" This is a question that those who believe we need to "*start* talking and get to work" can profitably explore as we consider how to develop innovative conversational processes that are alive throughout the whole action cycle – from initial exploration through implementation.

Doorways to Dialogue: Entering a Common Courtyard

The World Café is not the only doorway to the type of dialogue that enables us to tap into the power of conversation as a core process for generating innovative possibilities and bringing forth new futures. The image I hold of this rich territory comes from my experience as a teenager living with my adopted grandmother in a colonial town in Chiapas, Mexico. When you entered the home through the large carved wooden door, the first thing you saw was a large central courtyard with vivid bougainvillea, lush flowers, and verdant trees in big clay pots with a large fountain in the center. You could enter the central courtyard by going through any of the multiple arched entryways that surrounded this open, flower-filled space in the middle of the house.

For me, entering the space of authentic dialogue is like entering this central courtyard in the spacious home of our common humanity. The World Café is only one valuable doorway into this central courtyard of collective possibility. Strategic dialogues, indigenous councils, salons, wisdom circles, citizens' deliberative councils, women's circles, study circle, Bohmian dialogue groups, Appreciative Inquiry, Open Space, Future Search, public deliberation models, and other conversational modalities from many cultures and historical periods have contributed to and draw on this life-affirming experience. Information on many of theses is listed in "Resources and Connections," which you'll find at the back of this book. I encourage you to seek out a variety of dialogue approaches. Find the doorways to dialogue that best connect to your personal life experiences, your needs, and your own unique path of contribution. Then use your creativity and imagination to become a conversation host in your own life and work.

For the rest of our time together, we'll be focusing on the theory and practice behind the World Café. The seven World Café design principles, which we introduce on the following page and explore in the chapters that follow, provide one easy-to-use approach to engaging the power of conversations that matter, whether or not you ever decide to host a formal World Café event.

Cultivating Conversation as a Core Process

The following set of seven integrated World Café design principles has been developed over the years as a means of intentionally harnessing the power of conversation for business and social value. Here's a quick overview of each principle:

Set the context: Clarify the purpose and broad parameters within which the dialogue will unfold.

Create hospitable space: Ensure the welcoming environment and psychological safety that nurtures personal comfort and mutual respect.

Explore questions that matter: Focus collective attention on powerful questions that attract collaborative engagement.

Encourage everyone's contribution: Enliven the relationship between the "me" and the "we" by inviting full participation and mutual giving.

Cross-pollinate and connect diverse perspectives: Use the living-system dynamics of emergence through intentionally increasing the diversity and density of connections among perspectives while retaining a common focus on core questions.

Listen together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions: Focus shared attention in ways that nurture coherence of thought without losing individual contributions.

Harvest and share collective discoveries: Make collective knowledge and insight visible and actionable.

These simple principles, *when used in combination*, provide useful guidance for anyone seeking creative ways to foster authentic dialogue in which the goal is thinking together and creating actionable knowledge.

The World Café is designed primarily to generate collective knowledge-sharing, webs of personal relationships, and new possibilities for action.

Stories from the World Cafe

The following two stories offer real-life examples of how leaders in very different settings are using the World Café to create business and social value through fostering conversations that matter.

Story 1

Creating a Culture of Dialogue: Museum of Science and Industry, Tampa Bay

As Told By Wit Ostrenko and Fred Steier

Wit Ostrenko is the president of the Museum of Science and Industry (MOSI) of Tampa Bay, Florida. Fred Steier, Ph.D., is professor of communication at the University of South Florida and a research fellow at MOSI's Center for Learning. MOSI is a major regional science center that receives eight hundred thousand visitors per year. This is the story of how the museum has been using World Cave conversations and conversational leadership a cornerstones in its efforts to redefine the relationship between the institution and its internal and external communities.

We've designed MOSI to be a center for learning conversations. We don't want it to be a one-way, don't-touch-anything science center, so we've struggled with what hands-on learning really means, both for our visitors and for ourselves. How do we learn together as families and as communities? For us, our best learning has been embedded in conversations – with the board, staff, the larger community, and other science museums and associations.

The very nature of the museum is like a World Café, and each of our exhibits is like a Café table. Most people visit the exhibits in small groups, so there's already informal conversation and collective discovery happening right there on the spot. Then, as people go from one exhibit to another, talking to others they don't even know, they become part of a lively web of conversations and share ideas, just like in an actual World Café event. And because we have many seniors as well as children visiting the museum, the conversations become intergenerational – they naturally cross-pollinate ideas by learning with and from each other.

But our use of the World Café is not only metaphorical. We use the Café process to engage with many of our key issues. We find the Café approach so useful with our internal staff, our professional community, and the public that the Café principles have become an integral part of our thinking about who we are as a community institution.

The first Café we held was at a board retreat. People came with the expectation that it would be another boring board meeting. But at the end, several people said, almost apologetically, that *this was the first time they'd really talked with each other*. The World Café built relationships – not only between individual board members but also between the museum and the board as representatives of the community we serve.

So often boards are given the assignment simply to raise money. Bu the best fundraising comes from talking together and understanding the reason for doing it. For example, it came out during our Board Café that there were no scholarships available to enable the community's blue collar families to visit our museum. They're not poor, but spending $14.95 for adults and another $10.00 for kids is really cost-prohibitive, so they're not coming as often as we would like. It became a fundraising priority to help blue collar and other low-income families. As a result of ideas generated in that Board Café, we're halfway to raising a million-dollar endowment to provide full access to our museum to anyone who doesn't have the ability to pay.

As a result of ideas generated in that Board Café, we're halfway to raising a million-dollar endowment

We use our Café conversations to generate what we call "actionable knowledge." For us, this means that we intend for whatever emerges from a Café to be something that can be put into practice. For example, in the middle of 2003 we realized we weren't going to make our budget. We couldn't afford the staff we had, and we were going to have to make several cuts. So, we brought a group of about thirty staff people together and held a World Café to figure out what to do.

The objective of the Café was to generate new revenue-producing programs, with the goal of raising $175,000. We had no preconceived ideas of how to do this. During the Café, we came up with roughly $188,000 worth of new net revenue ideas. One of the wilder ideas was a Yu-Gi-Oh tournament. Nobody had ever heard of Yu-Gi-Oh except for a couple of the parents on our staff who knew how popular the game is because their kids watch it on television. They were the ones who encouraged the rest of the group to say yes to it. We put the stamp of approval on it, along with the other key ideas, right then and there. Do you know what? By putting our key ideas into practice, we ended fiscal year 2003 in the black by $267,000!

So where is the leadership in that kind of situation? The leaders at that Café weren't those with formal management titles, but rather anyone with great ideas for how to produce the most net revenue in a manner that is consistent with our mission and values. There were some real heroes that day! The Café conversations allowed people to contribute whom others don't normally see because they work nights and weekends or lead trips. All of a sudden one of these "invisible" people would put forth a great idea that everyone rallied around. It was very gratifying, and has helped build the feeling of MOSI as a collaborative community that includes our board and staff.

It's starting to become a habit with us to recognize when there is an issue that we need to work through together in a more dialogic manner. We've also noticed that our people get better and better results as they get more experience in using the Café process. We've discovered that we can learn to be better Café contributors. As we get more practice, we generate more actionable knowledge and collective wisdom. For example, our Cafes are helping us generate creative program ideas that we anticipate will bring us $750,000 in net income this fiscal year. That's unheard of for a public institution in an uncertain economy.

The Café is also enabling us to explore the relationship between play and learning that is at the core of MOSI's mission. That kind of creativity and playing with ideas is now happening in other settings, so even when we are not in a Café setting, people still behave in "Café fashion." For example, in a particularly innovative use of the World Café, we've held a number of Café conversations to engage visitors or potential visitors – including senior citizens, members of our minority communities, and children – in codesigning exhibit experiences. This use of the World Care really builds community, and the groups that help in the design process have a greater sense of ownership – the exhibits are truly "theirs." Thus, instead of MOSI being a kind of dictator of community values around science, it is becoming more of a partner with community members in discovering the collective knowledge and interests in science that people didn't even realize counted as knowledge.

We're now reaching out to the associations we belong to beyond our local area. For example, Wit hosted a large four-hundred-person Café with members of the Giant Screen Theater Association, and another with the international board of the Association of Science and Technology Centers. In both cases, World Café conversations helped us identify and prioritize key issues and what actionable steps we're going to take to address those issues. Café conversations are like a positive virus spreading out way beyond where we began!

Story 2

It's Win-Win All the Way: Sanofi-Synthelabo

As Told By Yvon Bastien

Yvon Bastien has served as the president and general manager of Sanofi-Synthelabo, Canada, a Paris-based global pharmaceutical company focused on the research, discovery, and development of innovative medicines to treat many diseases. Sanofi-Synthelabo affiliates operate in over one hundred countries worldwide. This is the story of how Café conversations have helped Sanofi-Synthelabo, Canada, create sustainable business value.

I was looking for a way to engage all of our people in thinking about the future of our business. I'd tried several different approaches, but they just weren't bringing out our people's best thinking. I was searching for something that connected the heart, the mind, and the bottom line. It seemed to me that Café conversations combined those three elements, and I decided to experiment with them.

We were in the midst of planning a celebration of our first $100 million in sales, a big achievement! I asked David Isaacs to come to Toronto to host a Café conversation with our sixteen-person design team in order to plan for our January strategy event. We wanted to create both a celebration of our success and a strategic conversation about the future of our business with all of our Canadian employees. At the end of the Design Team Café, David asked the group, "Well, what do you think?" And they replied, "Oh, it's great. Café conversations are powerful for a small group of 10 or 20, but they will never work with 250 people." David assured them that a Café dialogue could work even better with a lot of people, so we decided to try it, although there were some who were still skeptical.

As it turned out, the January Strategy Café Conversation and Celebration was extremely successful in generating key ideas for moving the business ahead. Something about the World Café approach helped people drill through the formal layers of their professional titles and bring more of their whole person to the conversation. I could see it in people's eyes and body language at the small tables. Afterwards, many people were excited by what had occurred at the January Café, and they began to go out and host Café conversations themselves on all kinds of business questions. We counted seventeen Café dialogues in the months following that first experience! It was a bit clumsy at first, since we were learning as we went – it was a real challenge to craft the questions, use reflection in a more disciplined way, and give space for real dialogue. But several of us sensed that we were on to something, and I used my "executive privilege" as the president to encourage it to continue.

Then I decided to push the envelope a little bit further and ask, "What if we were to do our long-range plan using Café conversations?" David was instrumental at that point in encouraging us to explore this possibility. We invited twenty or thirty people – the whole senior team, as well as younger leaders who had not been asked to contribute in this way before – and convened a number of Café conversations focused on the long-range plan. We took our time, but we did it. And it was a success! Our Café work generated innovative but realistic action ideas for the strategic plan, as well as the collective commitment to make them happen.

Next I said, "We did a three-year plan using Café conversations – what if we used it for next year's budget?" At that point, some people thought I was taking this Café idea too far! But others, including the director of finance, said, "Well, let's try it." And so we based the following year's budget on the selection of priority action ideas from our Café conversations, which we then grounded in our projected return on in-vestment and return on effort. To our surprise, we discovered that the Café conversation process was quite well-suited to this purpose. You see, in a way, the structure of the World Café obliges you to create a clean slate – a zero-based mentality – that's not encumbered by preconceived ideas. You can then select the ideas that have the most promise and link them to the hard-nosed accounting requirements.

To me, it was critical that our Café conversations be directly focused on business needs and results. But the business is linked to the other worlds we live in – not just the organization but also our families and our communities. I saw our Café conversations as the glue that could hold these aspects together. So we began to experiment with Café Conversations in areas where we had important stakeholder relationships. For example, our VP of sales and marketing hosted Café conversations with our business partners. And we did another long-range plan using Café dialogues where

We wanted to create both a celebration of our success and a strategic conversation about the future of our business.

we pushed the envelope even further by inviting other external stakeholders – physicians, pharmacists, representatives from the Stroke Recovery Association, and even patients.

These Café conversations have helped us recognize that we don't work for ourselves alone. A special moment occurred during the whole-group conversation at the end of one of our Strategy Cafes when a person from the Stroke Recovery Association said, "You have a great product that prevents strokes. Why can't a part of your larger mission be to stand for *no more strokes* in all of Canada?" The room just lit up. It was like a volcano. All of a sudden, there was a feeling of "Oh, yes, that's it!" Now we're seeing patients, physicians, and hospitals as directly linked to our contribution to society. So, beginning to engage corporate social responsibility in a more focused way is an important outcome from this work.

For the last several years, we've been in hypergrowth mode, with double-digit increases. We're consistently surpassing the expectations of the corporation. I can't say if that is the direct result of our Café conversations or the result of other things we've also been doing, many of which have come from our Café work. But here's what I can say: the World Café has been very essential, very unique, because it's the only process I've found that consistently connects intellect and emotion to a business frame of reference. That's a key strategic business advantage.

For a businessperson, the numbers are the measure of success. If we don't have the numbers, that's the end of the conversations. But if we don't have the conversations, that's the end of the numbers. It's a paradox. The numbers are only the outcome of actions that you've taken upstream, where the pulse of the organization lives. You need to look at how alive the organization is, how people interact and talk with each other – their relationships. That is a key part of the value-producing capacity of the organization. It's very difficult for people to measure that, since the only tool they have to measure is the numbers.

But here's what I can say: the World Café has been very essential, very unique, because it's the only process I've found that consistently connects intellect and emotion to a business frame of reference.

But there are other indicators. I know we're succeeding when I see people more engaged in our business decisions, taking risks, getting the issues on the table, not being afraid to speak and to take action. For example, if you look at the first Café conversation versus the tenth one, you can see a huge evolution in confidence-a knowledge that whatever the issue is, we're going to solve it.

Of course, there are always challenges. I think there's great value in the kind of thinking and knowledge that Café conversations generate. But at the same time, we need better ways to move between the discovery part of a Café conversation and the action-planning part. We need to make sure when moving into the implementation phase that we as leaders don't go back to our old control mode of doing things.

For me, Café conversations are an act of respect for our people and their capacity to contribute. A Café dialogue is like the on-ramp to a freeway – you enter into the flow of the traffic by contributing to the conversation and suddenly you're on the highway of the natural evolution of the business. Deep down, I believe that Café conversations are a carrier of life. I like to see people coming to life – and me coming to life at the same time – all around our business. It serves the individual, it serves the community, and it serves the shareholders. It's win-win all the way.

Questions for Reflection

Think about the conversations taking place in your organization or community. To what extent do members actively consider and work with conversation as a core process for creating business or social value?

If you began to consider conversation a fundamental means for co-creating value in your organization, what specific implications would it have for how you do your own work?

What are some practical ways you can imagine to raise people's awareness, in your family, your organization, or your community, about the power of conversation as a key means for creating valued outcomes – whether those be tangible outcomes, like new ideas, or intangible ones, like trust, respect, and a feeling of inclusion?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Juanita Brown, with her partner, **David Isaacs**, is a co-originator of the World Café. She collaborates as a thinking partner and design adviser with senior leaders, creating and hosting innovative forums for strategic dialogue on critical organizational and societal issues. A long-time SoL member, Juanita has also served as a Research Affiliate with the Institute for the Future and is a Fellow of the World Business Academy. David Isaacs is the president of Clearing Communications, an organizational and communications strategy company working with senior executives in the United States and abroad.
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Recent and Relevant Work

While great systems insights come most often through conversation and action, the right book or article can plant the seed that unlocks systems mysteries. Following are a few new references that may open up new possibilities and shed some light on persistent challenges. I invite you to share your own recommendations and summaries with us for inclusion in future issues.

— C. Sherry Immediato

Societal Learning and Change: How Governments, Business and Civil Society are Creating Solutions to Complex Multi-Stakeholder Problems
Steve Waddell

Beating the System: Using Creativity to Outsmart Bureaucracies
Russell L. Ackoff and Sheldon Rovin

Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature
Janine M. Benyus

"Learning in the Thick of It"
Charles Parry, Joseph Moore and Marilyn Darling

"Developing First Level Leaders"
Adreas Priestland and Robert Hanig

Societal Learning and Change: How Governments, Business and Civil Society are Creating Solutions to Complex Multi-Stakeholder Problems
Steve Waddell
Greenleaf Publishing, 2005

Many of you had the chance to hear Steve Waddell speak about societal learning at SoL's Annual Meeting in 2002 (*http://www.solonline.org/repository/item?item_id=360607*). During the forum he shared his model of cross-sector collaboration as a natural extension of organizational learning. Steve's passion for this work, and for building capacity for new forms of coordinated action, has resulted in *Societal Learning and Change: How Governments, Business and Civil Society are Creating Solutions to Complex Multi-Stakeholder Problems*. This book features a number of useful concepts that help explain how organizations with quite different interests recognize what they share in common, and how they go beyond their local culture to work together. All key points are illustrated through a variety of cases. While you might think that cross-sector collaboration is only for those who have mastered systems thinking locally, in fact the opposite may be true: by actively inquiring into issues well beyond your normal boundaries, you may also develop much greater capacity to appreciate and address local issues. When we last checked, contacting the publisher directly was the fastest way to get the book: *http://www.greenleaf-publishing.com/*

Beating the System: Using Creativity to Outsmart Bureaucracies
Russell L. Ackoff and Sheldon Rovin
Berrett-Koehler, 2005

Beating the System consists largely of many anecdotes reminiscent of Jack Nicholson's efforts to get an order of toast – which wasn't a menu item – in a diner in the movie *Five Easy Pieces* (*http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_Easy_Pieces*). The good news is that the system underdogs in these stories – all given the pseudonym "David" (as in "David and Goliath") almost always get their toast. But unfortunately, even as we identify with being victims of systems stupidity, if we are honest we must acknowledge that we are also the architects of exasperating bureaucracies. Like so many system phenomena, the consequences of our actions are so removed in time and space that we can hardly identify them as related to our own policies or actions. While I hoped for more guidance about how to make your system one that doesn't need to be beaten, I found this book sobering and provocative. You'll finish this quick read wondering how your organization can inspire the kind of generative creativity you want, rather than requiring initiative on the part of customers to redesign your policies and procedures.

Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature

Janine M Benyus
Perennial, 2002

Biomimicry: Learning from Nature

(2-part video program – total 90 minutes)
http://www.bullfrogfilms.com/catalog/bmic.html

The subject of biomimicry is not new, but it may have escaped your notice. The concept is a simple one: nature has fantastic examples of elegant systems "thinking" that we would do well to emulate. Systems thinkers appreciate the importance of design, and yet many of us associate complex and elegant design with our mechanical inventions. Author Janine Benyus was a keynote speaker at the SoL Sustainability Forum in 2004, accompanied by a designer from Interface Industries who demonstrated how the concepts of biomimicry had been brought to life in the design and production of carpet. I was humbled to find that my idea of what constituted "good design" was transformed in an instant. In recognizing the amazing feats performed by nature without extraordinary conditions, we must ask whether our notion of what's possible needs modification. Janine's basic text is still a good one, but you may also enjoy the video series that captures the key ideas beautifully.

"Learning in the Thick of It"

Charles Parry, Joseph Moore
and Marilyn Darling
Harvard Business Review
Reprint #R0507G, July 2005

Many of you will be familiar with the work Marilyn Darling and Charles Parry have already shared with the SoL community on the After Action Review principles and process. Repackaged for the *Harvard Business Review* audience, you may find this version hits home with your senior managers. Two previous pieces on this subject have been published in *Reflections*: "After-Action Reviews: Linking Reflection and Planning in a Learning Practice" (Vol. 3, No. 2) and "Cultivating a Learning Economy" (Vol. 5, No. 2).

"Developing First Level Leaders"

Adreas Priestland and Robert Hanig
Harvard Business Review
Reprint #R0506G, June 2005

SoL consultant member Robert Hanig has been co-designing leadership development processes within BP for many years. This article describes an unusual process of building grassroots leadership, and in the process, furthering leadership at all levels by actively building relationships between this group and more senior managers. Andreas and Robert will also share this work with the SoL community during a session at SoL's *Global Forum* in Vienna in September.

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