

## Article 5

### Creating a Culture of Shared Accountability: Promoting Ownership Throughout an Organization

Not so long ago, if you were to ask a typical management consultant to identify the keys to organizational success, chances are they would talk about structure, lines of authority, span of control, directing performance, and the like. Ask today's organizational development experts the same question, and they're more likely to focus on topics such as shared vision, stewardship, adaptiveness, relationships, and personal mastery. So – why the shift? Is this just new language for old ideas, or has something more fundamental changed. You can probably guess – it's really the latter.

Some years back, Russell Ackoff, one of the pioneers of the systems dynamics movement, began describing this fundamental shift as a movement from mechanistic to social systemic thinking. Ackoff was perhaps the first in a growing list of experts who believe that what is wrong with our organizations is that their design is based on a flawed model – the machine. Since the Industrial Revolution, organizational leaders have focused their attention on 'fine tuning' the machinery, trying to maximize productivity, and profit, by reducing unpredictability in the system. This emphasis has produced remarkable improvements in mechanization and physical output.

On the other hand, the same approach to organizational development has proven decidedly less successful. Somehow the human 'machine' just doesn't respond the way our obedient mechanical and electronic devices do – people are so much less cooperative when it comes to being engineered and fine-tuned for peak performance. After many decades of well-intentioned effort, there's still far too much unpredictability in our organizations. As a result, we've been forced to add more layers of management, more policies to guide behaviour, and more control mechanisms to spot and correct deviations from acceptable performance. And still, we're often dissatisfied with the outcomes we achieve – the harder we try to control performance, the less predictable it seems to become. Why is this?

The German sociologist, Max Weber, spent much of his career studying the dynamics of organizational structure and performance. Indeed, Weber is credited by many with coining the term bureaucracy, which he saw as an inevitable outcome of any effort to 'organize' workers through more efficient structures and processes. Our every attempt to become more 'organized' seemed certain to create more complicated and complex structures and processes which, in turn, seemed to demand the creation of further structures and control systems to operate – and more managers to run them. The result, in some cases, is a system which struggles, or may eventually collapse, under the weight of the bureaucracy that was supposed to improve its performance.

Let's look a bit more closely at the dynamics of such a collapse. We'll start with a simple question, 'How does an organization come into being?' The simplest answer to this question is, 'Because there's work to be done.' In the case of human services, the first step in the process involves the identification of an important human need, and a means of meeting that need. There may only be a few people who share this vision initially, but this is how 'movements' begin. By sharing the vision with likeminded others, a nucleus of interested – then committed – people begin to imagine how they might collaborate to achieve the vision. All the while, others find out about the emerging vision, and are attracted by the potential to make a difference in an area of need that they care about. Eventually there is a 'critical mass' of committed people to begin to take action which, in turn, serves to attract others to the work.

In time, the size and complexity of the movement requires that some attention be paid to 'getting organized'... and Weber's inevitable process begins. In some instances, the time between the energizing early days of shared visioning and frustrating later period of creeping bureaucracy is alarmingly short. In some instances, the structures and processes are implemented at the insistence of others – like funders – who are attracted to the vision, and the energy of the growing workforce of committed people, but uneasy with the seeming disorganization and unpredictability of the group. After all, they are making an investment and need to know that their resources will be wisely spent. Add a

control here, a manager there, a monthly report or two, perhaps even the benevolent 'supervision' of an established organization... You get the picture, I'm sure.

The result of this shift to a more bureaucratized organization is profound. Think of it this way. In the beginning, there was the 'work' – a vision for something that needed to be done, and a means of doing it. This attracted a 'workforce' of committed people who wanted to come together to do the work – they aren't just human resources, they ARE the organization. Eventually, for various reasons (and with all the best intentions, usually), there emerges a need (or just a requirement) to create the 'workings' of an organization – the structure, processes, policies, rules, and so on, that guide day-to-day practice.

At some point in the future, the maintenance of the machinery – the workings – begins to take more and more time and energy, yet our efforts seem to do little to improve the organization's ability to do the work that brought it into being in the first place. It feels like the workings have become more important than the work, and the workforce is caught right in the middle of the shift. Commitment and energy seems to wane, and the people who so clearly had 'the right stuff' earlier on come to be seen as something of a burden on an organization that is struggling increasingly to sustain its bloated self. The people have gone from being the organization's greatest asset to being an expensive – and sometimes uncooperative – liability. And what, often, is management's response? To add more structure, more controls, more policies – more 'workings' – but seemingly to no avail.

A recent Dilbert comic strip called this approach to organizational development 'The Death Spiral.' In an all-too-common real life example, a health unit department head commented that the policy manual seemed to be growing about an inch a year, and that there was a direct correlation between that and the rate at which staff were becoming discouraged. Everyone was spending more time trying to 'stay in bounds' with the proliferating rules than they were planning for the future of their work. And this was in a health unit that had just completed a major re-structuring and re-engineering project that senior management believed was very successful.

Why do our best intentions fail when it comes to creating organizations that are productive and satisfying places where committed people engage in work that matters deeply to them? As suggested above, it seems to have a lot to do with the mental model we have of organizations as machines – and the belief that these machines can be 'engineered' to run more efficiently. As for why this has failed, we get perhaps the clearest summary from Thomas Davenport, one of the pioneers of process re-engineering, who wrote a brief article a while back entitled, 'Re-engineering – the Fad that Forgot People.' In that article, and a book that followed, Davenport admitted that the majority of re-engineering initiatives fall far short of expectations for a simple reason – people don't like to re-engineered. As a corollary, he noted that better processes are irrelevant if you don't have people willing to perform them.

Looking closely at these failed re-engineering efforts, Davenport and other researchers found clear evidence that the addition of new structures, processes, policies, rules, sanctions – more workings – left employees feeling less trusted, less valued, and less fulfilled, and left managers feeling more harried, more frustrated, and less fulfilled. It's no wonder that such 'machines' fall apart – no-one really wants to make them work.

So, where do we look for alternatives? How do we begin the process of 'de-engineering' our organizations, of recovering their essential character as powerful 'movements' for meeting important human needs? Fortunately, there are a growing number of theorists, consultants and practitioners who are addressing this question. There isn't space in this brief article to summarize their emerging insights, but we would recommend investing some time in exploring what they are learning by taking a fresh look at organizations.

For example, Margaret Wheatley challenges us to create 'leaderful' organizations – where everyone is supported in developing and using their unique capabilities to lead in specific aspects of their work. We're beginning to understand leadership in very different ways as a result of recent studies by Wheatley and others. From a different perspective, Peter Block suggests that we abandon the 'patriarchal' governance principles that

underpin our traditional approaches to authority and decision-making. Instead, we need to create systems built on the assumption that everyone can be helped to assume a greater degree of accountability for managing their own work, and for sharing in the 'ownership' of the whole enterprise to which they are collectively committed.

The retired founding President of Visa International, Dee Hock, brings a unique perspective to his new career as the inspirational leader of the 'Chaordic Alliance', where he encourages organizations to understand how 'traditional command and control structures create slow, stupid and vulnerable organizations that cannot – and should not – be sustained.' Instead, we need organizations that can operate 'on the edge of chaos' – relying on the right people, working together in the right relationships, pursuing the right purposes, and following the right principles to create fast, smart and naturally self-sustaining organizations.

And of course, there's Peter Senge, whose landmark book, 'The Fifth Discipline' has sparked a global movement to create learning organizations – places where people work together to create the capacity to learn their way into the future together. Such organizations are not simply sustainable in the face of changing futures – they are capable of creating the future that their people collectively want. In short, they are more like movements than machines.

A clear shift in perspective? To be sure. A simple shift to accomplish? Not at all. Our understanding of organization is deeply ingrained in us, and subtly reinforced by a lifetime of experience of being in organizations that were designed and maintained like machines. There's lots about the past that we find hard to let go of. But perhaps the biggest challenge we face is the need to change our thinking about the people that make up our organizations. Remember – our organizations emerge from the hearts and minds and commitments of people who want to make a difference... and then develop in ways that seem to deny this fundamental truth. Our challenge is to recover our sense of the importance – and the infinite potential – of returning our organizations to the control of their people... and trusting that they still want to make a difference. If we have the courage to do this, the proof will be in the work we are able to do together.

In an earlier article in the series, Penny Paucha summed up this fundamental challenge this way...

*You either believe in your people or you don't...  
and they know it...  
and they behave accordingly.*

It's the most fundamental challenge that today's organizational leaders must face. Are you ready to believe? Are you ready to act? Are you ready to let go of the past? Are you ready to replace the machine with a movement of commitment 'fellow owners' of the enterprise?