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Business Optimization: Building a Performance Culture with a

Systems Thinking & Change Management Foundation

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Abstract

Business Optimization is an important business technique required in the ever-increasingly competitive global market. In order to optimize business performance and improve top-line and bottom-line results, a performance culture must be constructed. The Treaty Consulting Group, LLC (TCG) model for business optimization is a systematic process that enables organizations to build a cohesive leadership team with clarity of vision and to execute on that vision of performance excellence. The TCG model is an iterative 6-step process that creates and maintains a performance culture. Key foundational abilities of systems thinking and change management must be understood when implementing any change, especially large scale changes that transforms an organization into a performance driven culture. The foundations of systems thinking and change management are presented in this article to help in understanding the TCG model for business optimization.

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Business Optimization: Building a Performance Culture

Building a performance culture is a journey, and all journeys require knowledge of where we stand and where we want to go next; otherwise, we are just wandering around. When any organization decides to build a performance culture, they, by definition, are undertaking a significant change effort and this effort will have its enemies. As Robert F. Kennedy stated, "Progress is a nice word. But change is its motivator and change has its enemies"(Kennedy, 1964). In order to overcome the natural resistance to change, a systematic approach must be taken. This approach must deal with the whole system, which includes people, processes, and systems. It must begin with defining the vision and detailing the steps along the way. Figure 1 (TCG Business Optimization Cycle) depicts a systematic approach that begins with developing a robust understanding of the vision, while creating cohesion and clarity throughout the organization. This is followed by a participative engagement with the organization to understand the processes, systems, and people required to achieve the performance culture vision.
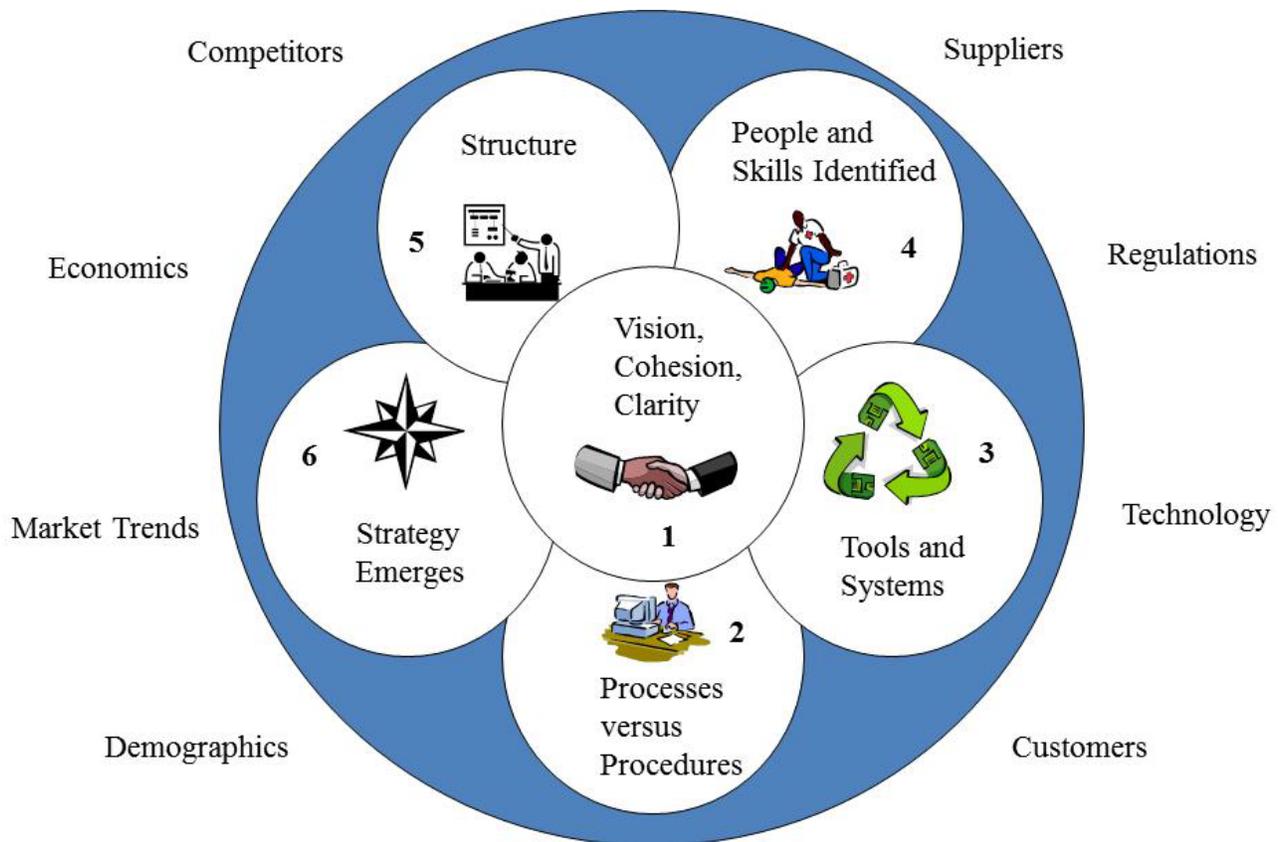

Figure 1. TCG Business Optimization Cycle

Based on these discoveries, an organization structure is developed and created to manage the many aspects of the organization. This ensures a strategy emerges that supports the vision and the performance culture is realized. Then the journey continues by continuously optimizing the performance through measurement and adjustment.

Discussion

I have discovered throughout my career of leading numerous change efforts that systems thinking and change management are the foundation to business optimization. In fact, I created the Treaty Consulting Group, LLC's Business Optimization Cycle model to be a change model that is founded on systems thinking. As is the nature of systems thinking, the TCG model is a holistic prototypical approach that ties many models together is a systematic way. To understand better the special nature of this model, I am presenting in this article information of systems thinking and change management as a building block to understanding the TCG approach to business optimization and sustained change.

Systems Thinking

Systems transfer information within the system, and between the system and the environment (von Bertalanffy, 1969). Similarly, people conduct self-talk and talk to each other; departments have intra-communication and inter-messaging; and companies have proprietary information and public discourse. When these systems are human activities systems, they are designed to meet some human purpose; thus, they are subject to human influence (Checkland, 2000). Human activity systems are ordered in wholes as a result of some underlying purpose (Checkland, 2000), and it is humans and their discourse that accomplishes this ordering. Information flow within a human activity system continuously constructs its social reality and by getting everyone telling the same stories, the vision is realized sooner, profounder, and with more certainty.

Jack Welch, who transformed GE and was named "Manager of the Century" in 1999 by Fortune Magazine, stated that during change efforts at GE he would talk and talk about the change until he couldn't stand to hear himself talk anymore about it; then he would talk some more (Welch & Welch, 2005). It is not possible to over-communicate. As indicated by Mr. Welch, the leader of the organization must communicate often, but the communication must also happen between everyone within the organization. We are the stories we tell; similarly, we can construct the vision by telling the stories of where we want to be. This is the nature of systems; especially, human activity systems.

Human activity systems are open systems, and open systems require the transfer of information within the system, and between the system and the environment (von Bertalanffy, 1969). Open systems differ from closed systems in that they are influenced by the environment in which they resided. A closed system is isolated from its environment, while an open system is not, and any system that has human activity involved is exposed to the unexplainable, but undeniable influence of "free-will." Von Bertalanffy (1969) indicates that open systems can only be accomplished by "soul-like vitalistic [sic] factors" (p. 40). When constructing the mental model of systems theory, it is important to understand

both open and closed systems. Additionally, it is equally important to view this from both the component and holistic perspectives. The mental models of "man" and machine or of the human heart and operational mechanics may best model this system's reality. Realizing that people have free-will, that human activities systems are influenced by the environment, and that individual, departmental, and the interactions between all the interfaces of an organizations will construct the social reality, we can begin to understand the nature and need for communication. Communication can and should be accomplished in a plethora of ways to create learning within an organization.

Generally speaking, there are two types of communication channels is an organization: Formal and Informal. Formal communication is through newsletters, all-hands and staff-meetings, workshops, organizations' website, company flyers etc. However, another powerful communication channel is the grapevine or informal channel. Informal communication channels exist in every organization, cannot be eliminated, and are beneficial if used by management to spread the official word. Specifically, it has been demonstrated that tacit knowledge can be better transferred through informal communication channels and structured mentoring (Swap, Leonard, Shields, & Abrams, 2001). Knowledge is the key to organizational learning, and hard and soft systems can and should be created to leverage that transfer of knowledge. A robust communication plan that uses all channels to spread and encourage disseminating knowledge up, down, and across the organization will significantly improve moral and facilitate acceptance of the coming change. A robust communication plan will literally construct the reality of the performance culture.

There is a great game to help better understand the nature of systems thinking, which I have used numerous times in workshops of all sizes. The name of this game is the Beer Game, and it always has an enlightening effect on the participants, but not the way that you may first envision! The Beer Game was developed by a group of professors at the MIT Sloan School of Management in the 1960s. I have used it to introduce students, managers, and executives to the concepts of system dynamics and systems thinking. It can be used with as many as 60 or as few as four people.

Figure 4 (The Beer Game) shows the "board" that is used in the Beer Game. The Beer Game simulates a beer distribution system that has four organizations (i.e., the Retailer, the Wholesaler, the Distributor, and the Brewery) that work together to deliver cases of beer to the customers. Each organization is managed by a person (or a pair), who is free to make any decision they choose with the goal of minimizing inventory carrying or stock-out costs.

The Beer Game cycles on a weekly basis with both delivery and orders occurring sequentially. A deck of 50 cards are used to represent the customer orders and poker like chips represent cases of beer.

The game begins with 12 cases of beer in the stores of each organization and 8 cases in transit or being brewed.
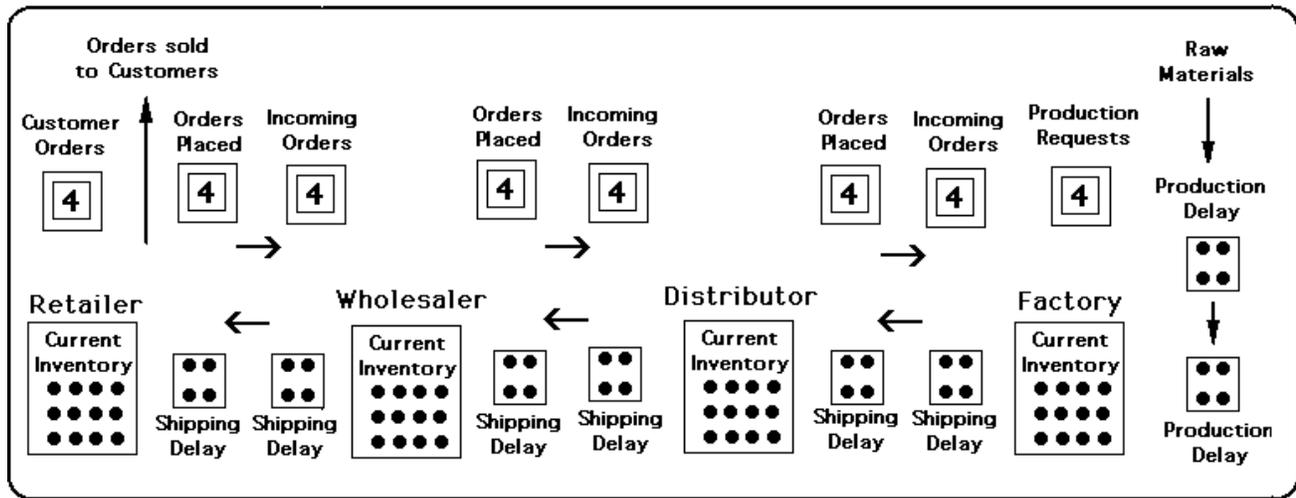

Figure 2. The Beer Game

Each week customers order beer from the retailer, who fulfills the order from inventory and then orders beer from the wholesaler who ships beer from inventory and then orders from the distributor. The distributor ships these orders from inventory and then orders beer from the factory. The factory ships the beer from its stores and then begins brewing another batch. In each stage, there are processing and shipping delays. Orders move down the game board from left to right and cases of beer move from right to left.

The participants representing the leadership of each organization have the authority to make any decision they choose in order to fill customer orders and to replenish supply in order to minimize inventory levels without stocking out. The objective is to minimize costs. The cost of carrying inventory is 50 cents per case and the cost of stock-outs is one dollar per case. Carrying inventory has a direct financial cost, but stock-outs have direct financial cost, revenues impacts, and customer satisfaction expenses, which is why they are valued more.

The individual organizations (i.e., Retailers, Wholesaler, Distributor, and Factory) can communicate with each other only through the order slips in order to simulate reality better. In realism, there would be a few factories, several dozen distributors, thousands of wholesalers, and tens of thousands of retailers; and it would be impossible to for them to understand what they all are doing. The leadership representing the Retailer is the only one who knows what the customer orders are, which are represented

by the cards. The Retailers cannot reveal this to anyone else until given express permission by the game's facilitators.

All incoming orders must be filled each week if inventory is sufficient, and if not, back-orders must be recorded. Back-orders must be filled before filling additional orders.

The facilitator begins the game by leading the team through 4 or 5 weeks while keeping the board in its initial state. The steps that the facilitator will call out for each week are:

1) Receive Inventory and Advance Shipping & Brewing Delays
2) Look at Incoming Orders and Fill the Orders
3) Record Inventory or Cumulative Backlog
4) Advance Orders Slips & Brewery Brews
5) Place and Record Your Orders.

Of these five steps, only step five requires a decision of the participants. That is, steps 1 – 4 are purely mechanical in nature and only in step five do the participants make a decision, which should be made to minimize inventory levels without stocking out.

During game play, the participants will record Inventory and Backlog levels, and the numbers of orders placed each week. The team that wins the game will be the team that has the lowest total inventory and backlog costs of all four positions of Retailer, Wholesaler, Distributor, and Factory combined.

During the game, each team will experience crises of extreme oscillation. Each team and each position in the team will first have too much inventory, then not enough inventory and then too much inventory. These fluctuations will vary in magnitude between the teams and the positions, with some teams having very mild variations and other teams having wild ones. Sterman (1984) confirms this inevitable result:

"In the last 20 years, the beer game has been played thousands of times in classes and management training seminars. It has been played on five continents, among people of all ages, nationalities, cultural origins, and vastly varied business backgrounds. Some had never heard of a production/distribution system before; others had spent a good portion of their lives working in such businesses. Yet every time the game is played the same crises ensue. (p.14)

At this point, you may be thinking the game is rigged to make this happen, and this is the same thought the participants have after experiencing the game. But on the contrary, the participants have it in their complete power to prevent the oscillations from occurring, but never do. When debriefing the

game, most of the participants will end-up blaming the fickle customers' large swings in demand for causing the large swings in inventory and backlogs. That is, they blame the facilitator for rigging the game by putting large swings on the cards that represents customer demand. However, and this is where the learning happens, after the initial 4 rounds, the customer demand rose from four to eight and stayed there for the duration of the game.

That is, every time the game is played, the participants have it completely in their power to prevent the oscillations, but do not. This is because they do not understand the dynamic nature of systems and have not learned the lessons of the beer game, which Senge (1990, 2006) aptly describes as follows:

1. *Structures Influences Behavior*

   Different people in the same structure tend to produce qualitatively similar results. When there are problems, or performance fails to live up to what is intended, it is easy to find someone or something to blame. *But, more often than we realize, systems cause their own crises, not external forces or individual mistakes.*

2. *Structure in Human Systems is Subtle*

   We tend to think of "structure" as external constraints on the individual. But, *structure* in complex living systems, such as the "structure" of the multiple "systems" in a human body (for example, the cardiovascular and neuromuscular) *means the basic interrelationships that control behavior.* In human systems, structure includes how people make decisions—the "operating policies" whereby we translate perceptions, goals, rules, and norms into action.

3. *Leverage Often Comes from New Ways of Thinking*

   In human systems, people often have potential leverage they do not exercise because they focus only on their own decisions and ignore how their decisions affect others. In the beer game, players have it in their power to eliminate the extreme instabilities that invariable occur, but they fail to do so because they do not understand how they are creating the instability in the first place. (p.40)

The lesson of the beer game is that human activity systems, not individual mistakes or external forces, cause their own problems because the subtle structure is not understood and the interfaces between the different organizations are ignored. After learning the lessons of the beer game, we have the foundation to apply systems thinking to our change management approach.

Change Management

Numerous models have been developed for managing change to include 1) The Change Curve, 2) Force-Field Analysis, 3) Action Research, 4) Appreciative Inquiry, 5) Parallel Learning, and the Treaty

Consulting Group (TCG) model. In the following paragraphs, models one through four will be discussed as a basis for understanding TCG model, which is being discussed in detailed in the Treaty Consulting Group Ezine at www.treatyconsulting.com/tcg_ezine.html.

The Change Curve model describes the natural phases that individuals go through when confronted with significant upheaval in their normal routines. It was originally developed by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in the 1960s to explain how people react when confronted with the news of terminal illness. Since then, change management scholars have adopted, expanded, and modified it to explain how individuals respond to change. It suggests that most all of us go through the stages of 1) being immobilized, 2) reacting by denying and bargaining, 3) expressing anger and depression, 4) letting go of old ways, 5) testing and trying new ways, 6) searching for meaning, and lastly 7) internalizing the change. Figure 2 (The Change Curve) depicts the natural process we go through when confronted with change.
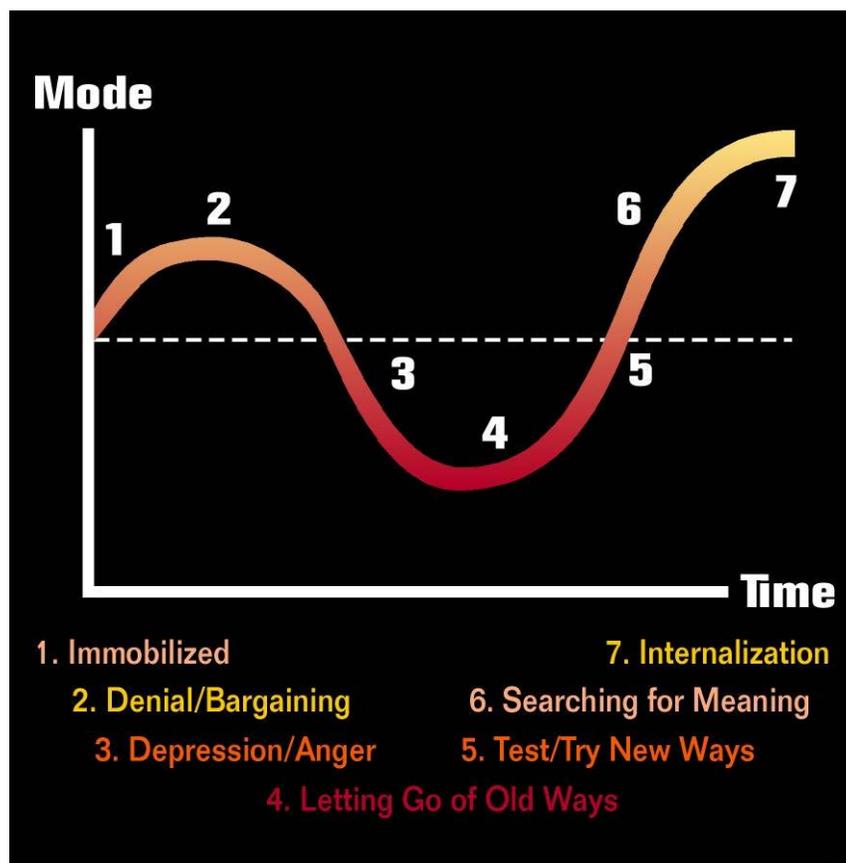

Figure 3. The Change Curve

The vertical axis of this curve represents either a high performing or low performing mode and the horizontal axis represents time. In understanding this curve, it is important to realize that:

1. This is the natural human reaction

2. All of us go through this in some form or another

3. We will move back and forth between positions one through seven throughout the change effort

4. Each of us have qualitatively the same, but quantitatively different reactions to change

5. Assistance and time must be provided to allow internalization of the change.

When we first become aware of significant change that is going to affect our lives, we naturally become immobilized. We are shocked. We are overwhelmed in many instances and just do *not* know how to react.

After some time, we begin denying the changing is happening or attempt to bargain out of the change. We do not want to accept that a major change has or is happening, and we attempt to minimize the personal effect of the change on ourselves. We might even make statements like, *this doesn't bother me; I've seen this before.* We may actually resort to making unrealistic attempts to change the situation.

As time passes, we may start showing signs of depression or anger. We become worried about what the change will mean to us and this unknown creates a sense of anxiety. We may also experience a sense of loss. Thus, we become frustrated, rebellious, and maybe even antagonistic. At this point, we have entered the low-performing phase in the Change Curve.

In the *letting go of old ways* phase, we have reached the bottom of performance and start climbing back toward a high-performance state. We recognize that change is happening, lessen our self-defeating behavior, and begin behaviors that support the change.

When we begin trying and testing new ways, we have entered phase five of the Change Curve. Our new behaviors will include new actions, and we will start doing old things differently and experimenting with new things. We begin testing what might be and are at the cusp of entering the high-performing mode.

In phase six, we begin the search for meaning. Friedrich Nietzsche stated "he who has a why can endure any how" (as cited in Frankl, 1984). We start asking what does all this the means to me. We start engaging in mind experiments. We begin looking at the future impact of the changes and determining how the future might feel. We merge thoughts of the past, present, and future in order to develop the why that will drive the internalization of the change.

In the final phase, we accept the new reality driven by the change and we internalize it. We have gone full circle in the performance dimension and we are now performing better than when we started the change.

It is important to reiterate, a person will go through each of these stages at their own pace, and each of us will shift from one to another and back again before completing all stages. This is perfectly natural, and as leaders, our responsibility is to help each other move along the Change Curve.

Force-Field Analysis was developed by Kurt Lewin, and it provides a model for evaluating the forces that influence change in an organization. Figure 3 (Force-Field Analysis) depicts the two forces (i.e., Driving and Restraining) that affect organizational change and the equilibrium that must be overcome before and reestablished after the change.
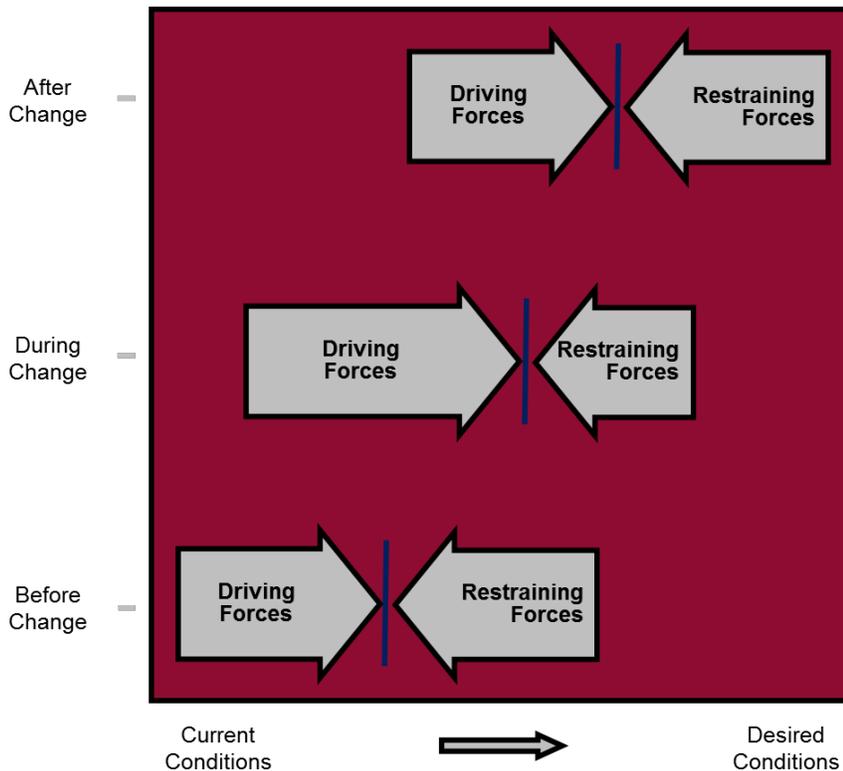

Figure 4. Force-Field Analysis

Before the change, the driving and restraining forces are equal to each other and organizational change is unlikely. During the change, the restraining forces need to be reduced and the driving forces need to be increase. After the change, the new condition must be frozen, which requires bringing the driving and restraining forces back into equilibrium.

The forces that resist change are 1) direct costs, 2) saving face, 3) fear of the unknown, 4) breaking routines, 5) incongruent systems, and 6) incongruent team dynamics. Forces that minimize the resistance to change and increase the driving forces are 1) communication, 2) training, 3) employee involvement, 4) negotiation, and 5) coercion.

Ray Davis, the CEO of Umpqua bank stated "even when we want to change, and do change, we tend to relax and the rubber band snaps us back into our comfort zones (as cited in McShane & Von Glinow, 2013). Thus, we cannot forget that overcoming resistance and implementing the change is only

half of the effort; the second half is re-freezing the change. Re-freezing the change requires creating organizational systems and team dynamics that reinforce the desired changes (e.g., alter rewards, create new information systems, re-calibrate, and introduce new feedback systems).

Action Research is the approach used in almost any change management approach. It begins by developing a relationship with a consultant (internal or external) to perform an analysis on the need for change. Once this need is established, the change is implemented. This is followed by evaluating and stabilizing the change before disengaging the consulting services.

Appreciative Inquiry appears very similar to action research, but has a subtle, yet significant difference. Action Research starts with the assumption that a problem exists. Appreciative Inquiry begins with a discovery process to determine *what is best* in the organization. That is, it reframes the change around what is positive in the organization versus being problem oriented. From this discovery phase, a dreaming phase is facilitated where ideas are generated on *what could be* accomplished. Phase 3, the designing phase, focuses on the outcomes that *should be* implemented. The final phase is where objectives are decided and what *will be* is determined. This final phase is very important, as it is the execution phase. "In its most fundamental sense, execution is a systematic way of exposing reality and acting on it" (Bossidy, Charan, & Burck, 2002, p. 39). This is where the discipline of getting things done must take place.

Parallel Learning is an approach for diffusing change throughout the organization. It uses pilot projects and "skunk works" type of efforts to implement the change in an evolutionary approach. It considers the MARS model (i.e., Motivation, Ability, Role Perceptions, and Situational Factors) for individual behavior and performance:

1) Motivation – Pilot project employees rewarded; motivate others to adopt pilot project
2) Ability – Train employees to adopt pilot project
3) Role perceptions – Translate pilot project to new situations
4) Situational factors – Provide resources to implement pilot project elsewhere

The Treaty Consulting Group (TCG) model for business optimization is a change model that uses a systems perspective to implement change. Just as the systems integrator focuses on the whole, and the systems engineer is mostly concerned with the interfaces; the TCG Model takes a holistic perspective and integrates the best of the best. The TCG Model provides the foundation to integrate all other models and is being presented in detail on the Treaty Consulting Group Ezine at www.treatyconsulting.com\tcg_ezine.html.

There will be resistance to change and this is normal; however, this does not relieve the organization's leadership from recognizing the resistance and executing strategies for minimizing it.

Some of the indicators to the resistance to change are 1) Generalizing, 2) Rigidity, 3) Redefining, 4) Self-Interrupting, 5) Minimizing, or 6) Over-Dramatizing.

In generalizing, an individual will suggest that everyone has that problem and nothing can be done about. When being rigid, he or she may express a need to do it the current way, or may state *we have always done it this way*. In the redefining approach to resisting the change, the person will not answers questions directly and will go to extraordinary measures to redefine the question or provide an unrelated answer. Self-interrupting is a resistance approach, which because of my demented sense of humor, I actually like observing. In this method, the person will jump from one point to another without any logic to their argument. Another resistance technique is minimizing, which indicates there is not a problem because *we have been fine for the past 10 years* or something similar. The opposite approach to the minimizing technique is over-dramatizing. This is the Chicken-Little approach that suggests the sky will fall if the change is implemented.

Ok, Dr. Greg, we understand the indicators of resistance to change, but what do we do now? Well guys and gals, I can tell you this for sure, without the cooperation and support from colleagues, the best plan will fail. That is why I, and the folks at Treaty Consulting Group, focus on building cohesion and clarity first. The advantages of building a team spirit before implementing is that teams enable individuals to transcend their limitations, generate a high level of energy and support for the plan, and can achieve large-scale goals.

When building team spirit, individual counseling, team-building events, and inter-team-building efforts should be used. Individual counseling is used to address issues with people resisting the change effort. As noted earlier, people have a natural resistance to change; however, when that resistance manifests itself in individual behavior that severely disrupts the performance and morale of the groups throughout the organization, the individual needs to be counseled and an appropriate expectation for improvement agreed upon.

Team building involves training exercises, social events, or facilitated group workshops. In many cases, the people may not have the skill necessary to adapt to the change or the experience to work together as a team. They may come from cultures that have high levels of individualism. In countries as the United States, Chile, Canada, and South Africa, individualism is particularly high and team building may need particular focus. Social events that permit team members to meet outside of work can be extremely helpful in breaking the barriers to team cohesiveness. I caution that outside of work and after work are not the same thing, and recommend that when using this technique to build team spirit that special care be taken to ensure everyone can participate. If possible, I recommend that these are conducted during normal business hours. This sends the message that the organization is serious about

building team spirit and provides for maximum participation. Facilitated group workshops can be a very effective method for fostering team spirit because training and social relationships can be built while creating work product. This is a very efficient and effective method for beginning a change effort.

Inter-team building is used to address problems that cross many groups and requires efforts from all groups to solve. This can be facilitated in the same way as team building, but by involving members from all the groups. A cross-functional team can be created to represent members for the respective groups, and then help diffuse the recommendations into their respective groups. Other approaches include using all-hands meetings, workshops, or social events.

These three approaches to foster team spirit (i.e., individual counseling, team-building events, and inter-team-building) should be conducted in sequence. People disrupting the change effort need to be managed before the group can become an effective team. Similarly, each group must work well together before you can tackle inter-group problems.

Implementing change, especially significant change in an organization, needs to be approached as a journey to deliver benefits. When implementing this program, we recommend you 1) prepare, 2) Involve, 3) Plan, 4) Communicate, 5) Praise, and 6) Show Success.

It is important to prepare the organization for the impending change. The change should never come as a shock and people should be well informed. Do not wait until everything is sorted out to inform the organization about the change. In contrast, as soon as you begin the planning effort, inform the organization that the change is coming. There will always be opponents to change; however, do not isolate them, and support and reinforce those who are positive about the change. When you announce the change, people will position themselves into one of four categories:

1) Those who think the change will be great
2) Those who take the wait and see position
3) Those who think the change is a bad idea and voice their concerns
4) Those who don't appreciate the change, do not voice their concern, but actively undermine the change effort.

Categories one through three are perfectly normal and should be expected. Category 4 type of individuals, luckily, is rare, but they cannot be tolerated. If someone is found to be deliberately and covertly undermining the change, they need to be removed from the organization swiftly. There is no reason to tell people why, they will know. Bottom-line, they need to go and go now!

Everyone affected by the change should be involved in planning the change. This especially includes those who may think the change is a bad idea. Involving people early reduces behavior resistance to the change.

The change program requires a plan like any program. This plan needs to be carefully constructed and to communicate your action plans clearly. It must help you keep firmly focused on the objective.

Communication is the first priority after announcing the change. Anything to reduce uncertainty will help the change program become successful; thus, communicating robustly during change efforts is required. Communicating down the organization is important, but receiving feedback up the organization is crucial to success. Communication between departments is equally crucial. Leaders must encourage and facilitate maximum use of established formal and inform communication routes, and create new ones to ensure information is flowing in all directions.

And don't forget about training. Training is an important communication technique. Before implementing any change, it is important to provide any necessary training. Training is the most important factor in keeping productivity high after implementing the change.

Praise is an important attribute for encouraging a successful change effort. The leaders in the organization, which are at all levels, should use every opportunity to praise and encourage those individuals and teams that learn new skills quickly. A performance culture requires being able to change rapidly to our changing environment, and an organizations that encourages change as a natural, continuing, and opportunity providing aspect of their evolution are much more likely to benefit from change and manage resistance effectively. It is important when giving praise that generational and personality differences are taken into account (Uterstaedt, 2008), so before giving the praise, ask the person and group what works best for them.

Lastly, as individual projects are completed during the change program and a positive impact has been effected, you will want to be sure to show the success in a public manner. That is, you need to communicate the advantage of the change and publicize the positive impacts. These approaches, and others, should be presented early in the change effort so a common language is developed and an understanding of the complexities ahead is solidified. Regardless of the models used for understanding change management, the keystone to change management success is involvement and communication: that is, early involvement by everyone, and candid, consistent, and frequent communication.

Conclusion

The Treaty Consulting Group (TCG) model for business optimization is a holistic model that uses systems thinking and change management fundamentals to construct a performance culture in a systematic and disciplined way. To understand the steps of the TCG model completely, it is best to understand the fundamentals of systems thinking and change management, which have been presented in the article. The TCG Model is being discussed in detail at www.treatyconsulting.com\tcg_ezine.html.

The TCG Ezine is published monthly, and it currently providing details on how to create a performance culture using the TCG Business Optimization Model. Please check back monthly as the TCG model is further explained.

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