

Holistic Perspective, Communication, Deconstructionism, and Goodwill:

The Keystones of Systems Thinking

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Systems theory is a holistic mental model for ordering reality. It suggests that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and that the interfaces and the interactions must be understood in equity to the component parts. Von Bertalanffy (1969) puts it this way:

It is necessary to study not only parts and processes in isolation, but also to solve the decisive problems found in the organization and [the] order unifying them, resulting from dynamic interaction of parts, and making the behavior of parts different when studied in isolation or within the whole (p. 31).

Additionally, systems transfer information within the system, and between the system and the environment (von Bertalanffy, 1969). When these systems are created by people, 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.

Nevertheless, these realities are not perfect and continually require deconstruction. This requires viewing reality as infinite choices and paths within oneness. That is, instead of seeing unitary, dualistic, or pluralistic choices, the systems perspective leader always sees one more choice than is currently known. Many reasons exist for rejecting unitary, dualistic, and pluralistic forms of analysis, which include privileging the episteme of the physical sciences over the social sciences, privileging one side over the other, and fostering binary thinking, which pits what is present against what is absent (Knights, 1997). It is not that one should be favored over the other or that more than two dimensions should be analyzed, but that their divergence should be shown

as being false. “Deconstruction dismantles a dichotomy by showing it to be a false distinction” (Martin, 1990).

This open thinking requires empathy, and empathy requires a loving heart. In order to create a learning environment that promotes holistic thinking through dialog and deconstruction of mental models, a loving and caring environment must be constructed. Organizations must construct strong commitments and partnerships, and love alone is capable of uniting beings in a manner that completes and fulfills them (Bergquist, 1993). It is through genuine caring that empathy is built, and it is empathy that permits others to see systems from above, below, across, and within the standard parochial perspective.

Thus, the astute systems thinker will lead the construction of a social reality where goodwill is the organization’s foundation, and through the use of this caring perspective, this leader will encourage candid dialog, facilitate deconstruction of outdated mental models, promote empathy for others and other systems. The combination of these activities fosters the holistic system perspective; nevertheless, the foundation of any good system is genuine caring.

Goodwill

Caring environments must be constructed so organizations built upon networks and interrelationships can succeed, and communication is the key to this construction. Language is a social creation, and not just the transmission of information (Winograd & Flores, 1986), and to create caring organizations, language must transpire cognitively and emotionally on the solid foundation of love.

This begins by the leader demonstrating empathy for others while being true to his or her core beliefs, and by encouraging deconstructions of his or her mental models. Leader must demonstrate genuine care for others and the organizations that they create. Leaders can manifest

empathy in many regards and by many actions, but this empathy must originate in the demonstration of integrity. Leaders must be true to the “golden-rule,” and encourage others to effect similar traits, and in doing so, leaders will promote creative problem solving and caring relationships.

This promotion of the golden-rule can be effected by creating emotional connections that are based on relationships outside of the normal course of business. Specifically, leaders must provide a relaxed atmosphere where dialog can take place. This is best accomplished by providing time and incentives for developing emotional connections between all of the organization’s stakeholders. This can be accomplished by creating a network of social activities that promotes fun and relaxation without putting burdens on people’s personal time. The leader can provide funds and direction to create cross-functional social and business activities. Specifically, managers of the organization should be encouraged to take their reports to lunch, or to “end-of-the-day” social events. These events should be conducted on company’s time with employees being paid for attending these activities. The goal of these events is to create differing ways of communicating and building the foundation of trust that will be used to facilitate dialog around organizational goals. That is, the purpose of these social events should be the creation of open systems where information is shared willingly and freely.

Communication

Open systems require the transfer of information within the system, and between the system and the environment (von Bertalanffy, 1969), and this can be accomplished in several ways to create learning within an organization. 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 be created to leverage that transfer of knowledge.

Employees should be given the time and the resources to work across functional lines and to share information. Employee involvement teams should be created to empower changes within the organization's processes. Additionally, these teams should be provided training in cross-functional teamwork, and a professional facilitator should guide these teams in selecting their leader and determining their activities. Eight hours per week should be provided to work on process improvements, and recommendations and results should be presented to senior management by the involvement team.

It is important that the team be cross-functional to facilitate information flow across the functional divides. Additionally, the team should be given access to experts and other sources of information in order to increase their ability to make significant changes. The facilitator should provide guidance on attaining the desired information, and the facilitator should help the team members deconstruct their present mental models and accept that they may need to totally change their thinking in order to significantly improve their current approaches.

Deconstructionism

Knights (1997) states that four primary perspectives in thinking exist: unitary, dualist, pluralist, and deconstructionist. The unitary perspective elevates what is present and hides what is absent; the dualist approach acknowledges different thoughts, pits them against each other, and elevates one above the other; and the pluralistic viewpoint recognizes that the dualistic thinking is a form of determinism and seeks to reconcile the contest and antagonism between polarized dualisms (Knights, 1997).

On the other hand, deconstructionist thinking suggests that the task is not to reconcile the terms as pluralist suggest, because this is to simply replace one deterministic ordering with another. Deconstruction focuses on that which is disavowed in any representation of reality (Knights, 1997).

During the team meeting, the facilitator should encourage team members to question others and to find ways to challenge the thinking of everyone in non-threatening ways. This could be accomplished by asking members to deconstruct any suggestion with the same rigor that they constructed it. That is, once a suggestion has been agreed upon by the team, then the team should spend an equal amount of time in taking the position that the suggestion is wrong. The cross-functional nature of the team will facilitate this approach because they will naturally have different mental models. The purpose of this exercise is to reach outside the normal processes and find ways to deconstruct the team's beliefs, and to challenge current mental models. In doing so, the team members will be encouraged to see their system from differing perspectives, and create openness in their thinking. That is, the team should be encouraged to create an open system for developing their recommendations, and this open system must challenge the status quo.

Holistic Thinking

In creating this open system, von Bertalanffy's concept of "equifinality" must be accepted and promoted by the team's facilitator, leader, and its members. Equifinality is "the tendency towards a characteristic final state from different initial states and in different ways, based upon dynamic interaction in an open system attaining a steady state" (von Bertalanffy, 1969, p. 42). In open systems, the same final state can be reached from different starting points and in different

ways (von Bertalanffy, 1969); thus, if a leader is to create a learning organization, he or she must encourage dynamic interaction through dialog, and facilitate growth in new and differing ways.

This begins by assisting workers in finding meaning in their life. People find meaning in life by creating works or doing deeds (Frankl, 1984), and the astute system thinking leader will ensure a organization is constructed that facilitates workers in constructing their own personal vision. This is accomplished by promoting dialog, and dialog is promoted by creation trust. Additionally, dialog permits the deconstruction of sacred mental models. When these have been accomplished, then everyone in the organization can look across functional lines and beyond hierarchical orders, and see the system as a whole.

Conclusion

Systems theory is a mental model that helps people both understand and construct their reality. This model distinguishes itself from other models for understanding by concentrating on the interaction of component parts, and by focusing on the changes in the components created by these interactions. Human activities are by nature open systems because they are guided by the human search for purpose or meaning, and these systems are constructed with language. However, before dialog can be accomplished openly and candidly, a foundation of trust must exist. This can be accomplished by creating activities that are non-threatening to catalyze trust building. Then, based on this trust, new realities can be constructed, and old mental models discarded in the learning and subsequent change process. Trust provides the foundation of all learning organizations, and trust is catalyzed by leaders demonstrating care for others and the system in which they live.

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