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Reflections

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on Knowledge, Learning, and Change

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FEATURE ARTICLES

Peter Senge on the 25th Anniversary of *The Fifth Discipline*
Peter Senge with Frank Schneider and Deborah Wallace

Inside-Out Collaboration: An Integrated Approach to Working Beyond Silos
David Willcock

The Manager as Mediator: First Manage You
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BOOK EXCERPT

Systems Thinking for Social Change: Making an Explicit Choice
David Peter Stroh

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE 14.3

Frank Schneider

This issue of *Reflections* celebrates the 25th anniversary of the publication of Peter Senge's classic book, *The Fifth Discipline*: *The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. A global bestseller, *The Fifth Discipline* created a common language about change and raised awareness about the need for organizations—and the individuals in them—to develop the capacity to continually learn. By offering a set of guiding principles for meaningful collaboration, personal development, and systemic change, the book became and remains a key resource for organizations around the world.

We start the issue with an interview of Peter Senge by Frank Schneider and Deborah Wallace, in which they discuss the global impact of *The Fifth Discipline* and the evolution of Peter's thinking over the last 25 years. Peter identifies three key principles for success in applying this body of work and emphasizes the importance of seeing failure as an opportunity for learning. He also talks about next generation leaders and how they might contribute to the evolution of the field by moving it deeper into different cultural contexts.

In "Inside-Out Collaboration: An Integrated Approach to Working Beyond Silos," David Willcock looks at how, more than two decades after the publication of *The Fifth Discipline*, people in many organizations still struggle to partner effectively across boundaries. David offers what he calls an "inside-out" approach that starts with leaders, who act as catalysts for successful collaborations throughout the organization. His "Relationship Review Framework" details three behaviors that, once in place, can lead to productive working relationships.

In his interview in this issue, Peter Senge talks about the emergence of practices that complement those included in *The Fifth Discipline*. In "The Manager as Mediator: First Manage You," Judy Ringer looks at one example: the Japanese martial art Aikido. As Judy has discovered through years of on-the-ground experience, the costs associated with unaddressed conflict far outweigh those involved in resolving them. She shows how principles from Aikido can help people overcome differences by shifting their internal stance away from conflict and toward curiosity about their "opponent."

Finally, the book excerpt for this issue focuses on the application of systems thinking tools in tackling social issues. In this chapter from *Systems Thinking for Social Change: Making an Explicit Choice,* David Peter Stroh explains the importance of aligning short-terms actions with long-term goals. When people are aware of both their current reality and their true purpose, they are better equipped to deal with the dilemma of maintaining or changing the status quo and can make more conscious commitments to their highest aspirations.

While the focus of this issue was to share the evolution of ideas and practices spawned by *The Fifth Discipline*, it is also our intention to demonstrate the staying power of Peter's work. As shown in the articles we've included, the ideas that were timely 25 years ago—the importance of community and collaboration, the role of capacity-building in service of real learning, the necessity of taking into account the cultural context, and the obligation to solve the world's most serious issues systemically—have proven increasingly relevant today. As members of the SoL community, and more broadly, as members of society, it is our responsibility to continue to advance the practice of these important concepts and to stay committed to deep, collective, and systemic learning for high-leverage action. ■

Frank Schneider, *Publisher*

EXECUTIVE DIGEST 14.3

Peter Senge on the 25th Anniversary of *The Fifth Discipline*

Peter Senge with Frank Schneider and Deborah Wallace

Although it was published 25 years ago, *The Fifth Discipline* continues to have a profound influence on organizations around the world. What accounts for its lasting relevance, and how has the way people work and learn together changed in that time? In this interview with *Reflections*, Peter Senge talks about what he has learned since the initial publication of *The Fifth Discipline* and from the global response it has generated. He also discusses how his thinking has evolved over time and the impact the field of organizational learning continues to have in today's context. Peter highlights the importance of learning communities like SoL for helping groups of people translate good ideas into an enhanced capacity for effective action—the true definition of learning.

Inside-Out Collaboration: An Integrated Approach to Working Beyond Silos

David Willcock

People in separate divisions or teams of an organization often speak different "languages," which can make it difficult for them to understand and relate to each other. The costs of this kind of "silo working" can be high: lack of shared learning and innovation; unproductive conflict and stress; and significant financial costs due to program failures. In this article, David Willcock draws insights from psychology and organizational development theory and practice to provide a framework for building and maintaining productive relationships across organizational boundaries. Through an integrated approach to collaboration that includes the individual, team, and organization, managers and leaders can serve as catalysts for "partnership working," which can ultimately lead to high performance and competitive advantage.

The Manager as Mediator: First Manage You

Judy Ringer

In today's workplace, where time is a precious commodity, why should managers or leaders get involved in resolving conflict among members of their teams? One reason is that, in many cases, it takes more time *not* to help address conflict than to constructively intervene. But before managers can successfully guide others in managing disagreements, they first need to be able to manage themselves. According to research, a manager's attitude toward conflict is crucial in determining how an impasse is resolved. In this article, Judy Ringer describes five practices based on the martial art Aikido that managers can follow to set the stage for positive resolutions. Through this process, they also increase their leadership presence, power, and clarity of purpose.

BOOK EXCERPT

Systems Thinking for Social Change: Making an Explicit Choice

David Peter Stroh

One principle of complex systems is that they are perfectly designed to produce the results they are achieving. But all too often, these results are contrary to what we really want to accomplish. In this excerpt from his book *Systems Thinking for Social Change* (Chelsea Green, 2015), systems consultant David Peter Stroh points out that surfacing the discrepancy between what we want a system to achieve and the results it is currently achieving is a powerful force for constructive change. Acknowledging this difference prompts us to question not only our assumptions about how things are supposed to work, but also our intentions about what is most important to us and what we want to accomplish. The article identifies four steps for aligning people's espoused purpose with the purpose their current actions are designed to achieve.

FEATURE 14.3

Peter Senge on the 25th Anniversary of *The Fifth Discipline*

PETER SENGE WITH FRANK SCHNEIDER AND DEBORAH WALLACE

Although it was published 25 years ago, *The Fifth Discipline* continues to have a profound influence on organizations around the world. What accounts for its lasting relevance, and how has the way people work and learn together changed in that time? In this interview with *Reflections*, Peter Senge talks about what he has learned since the initial publication of *The Fifth Discipline* and from the global response it has generated. He also discusses how his thinking has evolved over time and the impact the field of organizational learning continues to have in today's context. Peter highlights the importance of learning communities like SoL for helping groups of people translate good ideas into an enhanced capacity for effective action—the true definition of learning.

Peter Senge

Frank Schneider

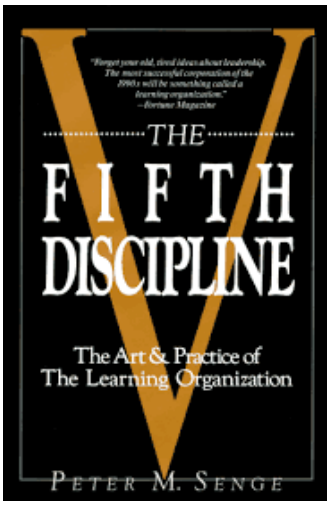
Deborah Wallace

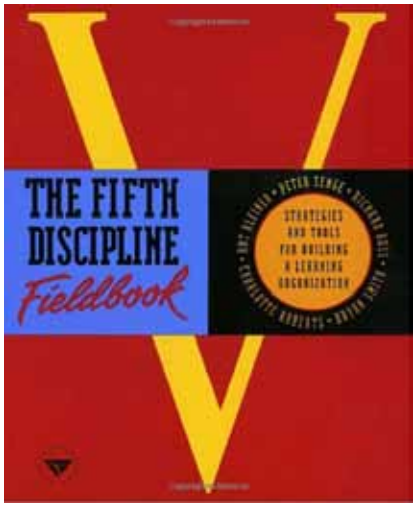
REFLECTIONS: What impact do you think *The Fifth Discipline* has had over the past 25 years?

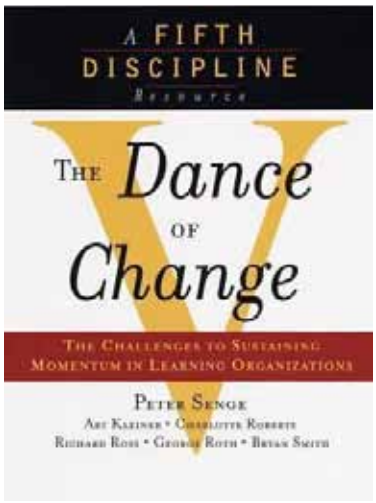
PETER SENGE: A lot has changed in the world in 25 years, but to me it always feels like we're doing more or less the same thing. Complementary tools and methods have evolved that didn't exist 25 years ago, like Theory U and the Presencing tools. Because of this evolution, we can now see the larger field of know-how that is emerging, what we have started to call "awareness-based systemic change." But nothing that we do has changed so terribly. The work has always been about how the systems that shape our lives function as they do because of how *we* function. Whether we use the language of mental models or "sensing" and "presencing," real change involves both the "inner" and the "outer," both how we see the world and what we truly care about as well as what we measure and how we organize. So the work has both evolved and stayed the same.

The work has always been about how the systems that shape our lives function as they do because of how *we* function.

In many ways, the main thing that has changed is the context for the work. Twenty-five years ago, all of the initial practical experiences were in the business world. Today, we work in a much broader variety of organizations. A lot of the most interesting projects for me have been cross-organizational and even cross-sectoral projects, involving business, civil society, and government. So in that sense, there has been a significant evolution in the application domains. Otherwise, a lot of the basics really haven't changed much.







A story might make this more concrete. *The Fifth Discipline* was originally translated and published in Taiwan in 1994–1995 and then found its way into Mainland China in 1996 or 1997, where it became popular. I remember seeing a list of nonfiction bestsellers in Shanghai in 1998, and *The Fifth Discipline* was number two, behind Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. I thought that was pretty good company.

If anything, *The Fifth Discipline* is more relevant today than it was in 1990.

In 2011, *The Fifth Discipline,* along with the rest of the books in the series—*The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, Schools That Learn, The Dance of Change,* and *Presence*—was retranslated and republished in China. The next year, it was the number one bestselling business book in China, and two years later it was the number two bestselling book in China. That says something about the relevance of the ideas, the tools, and the basic spirit of the book over a long period of time. So I don't think the relevance has changed at all. If anything, it's more relevant today than it was in 1990.

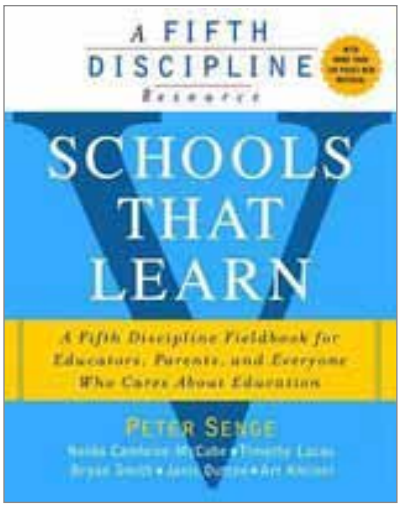
With this particular sort of success, people tend to over-attribute things to you. People tend to think the ideas are mine, because I was the sole author of the first book. One reason I like the subsequent fieldbooks is that they clearly demonstrate that the work has always arisen from a community of practitioners, consultants, and researchers. In fact, every book since the original *The Fifth Discipline* has been jointly authored.

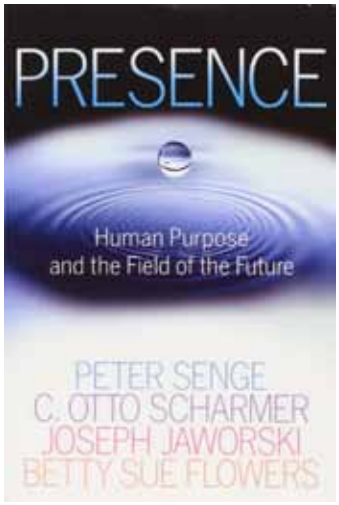
Real Learning

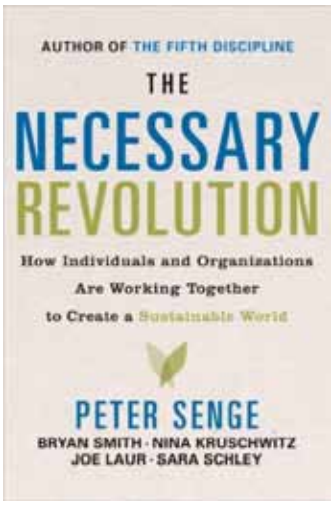
REFLECTIONS: How has your thinking and work evolved over time?

SENGE: Who can remember how they were thinking and feeling 25 years ago? We're all victims of retrospective sense-making, right? We look back at the past from where we are today. I was very confident about the relevance of the tools and ideas when the book came out, and the reason for that was simple. We had had 10 years of experience with these tools prior to the publication of the book, through lots of consulting and training and initial research projects. We even had a CEO group that met regularly at MIT throughout the 1980s.

So *The Fifth Discipline* was a reflection on and an attempt to organize 10 years of previous experience, which was really the reason for writing the book. There was no question that the basic tools and ideas were enormously useful for people. I remember sitting on an airplane one day, looking out the window and seeing a bunch of droplets







and thinking, *This book will sell a million copies*. It was just that clear to me, even though it was a crazy thing to say for an unknown body of work by an unknown writer. But it was because of the prior practical experience, not only on my part but on the part of a large number of people. I knew how useful the work had already been to many people.

As for the evolution of my thinking, it starts with understanding that books serve a function, but it's a narrow function. You can't learn to walk by reading a book about walking. In fact, you can't really learn anything by just reading about it. And that's because the modalities of awareness and thought involved in reading are different from those involved in real learning.

We take in a lot of important ideas by reading books that are well written and get us thinking. That's an important first stage for a lot of learning. But reading is basically passive, and to learn you have to do. There's no learning from reading if you define learning as processes that enhance your capacity for effective action over time. That has always been our definition of learning in the SoL community. Knowledge is a capacity for effective action, and learning is a process that enhances knowledge.

I never thought a book by itself would be very significant. The real question was, how does a book fit into something larger that could have more impact? It was no coincidence that the publication of the book and establishment of the Organizational Learning Center at MIT, which was the precursor to SoL, occurred at the same time. In fact, I consciously wrote the book to be able to launch the MIT Organizational Learning Center.

The idea was simple. Books may have a lot of interesting ideas, but the only way to support people in developing new capabilities over time is to build learning communities where people inspire each other and help each other become part of a larger network of collaboration. It's that collaboration that helps people sustain the efforts needed to learn something in a way that just reading a book will never do.

I never thought a book by itself would be very significant. The real question was, how does a book fit into something larger that could have more impact?

A couple of things became really evident in the ensuing years. One was that different people were having dramatically different results from working with the same tools. Some people produced amazing results, and others produced nothing.

This data that it made all the difference where people were coming from was what led to the book *Presence*. For example, someone who just picked up the tools of *The Fifth Discipline* and said, "Hey, we can make more money if we use these tools" generally accomplished very little. But someone who had a deep intent to transform the prevailing organizational culture or the nature of work itself or people's relationship to their work could have amazing results. So, where the practitioner is coming from in terms of intent, spirit, and openness is important.

Expanding Opportunities

REFLECTIONS: How did those revelations and experiences change your thinking?

SENGE: I don't know if my thinking changed much about any of the basic things. In the early days, we had a lot of chances to work with some wonderful business people. So, I always appreciated that there was something about the quality of the people doing the work that mattered. That is why so much of *The Fifth Discipline* stresses deep personal work, like the disciplines of mental models and personal mastery. In fact, we even had some intuition about the role of connecting to deeper sources of change, which was expressed in terms of David Bohm's "implicate order" in the lead essay I wrote for *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*. But Otto Scharmer has been able to take these intuitions much further in his development of Theory U, which *Presence* was meant to introduce in a non-technical way.

The big, global issues were always paramount in my mind, because they're paramount for our future as a society and ultimately as a species.

Moving beyond focusing on business alone and attempting to address the bigger issues we face in the world was always an intention, at least for me. Many of us always had the idea that businesses contribute to issues such as climate change and the destruction of species and the profound inequality that operates around the world, and that sooner or later, they would need to embrace these issues as part of their core strategies. If they didn't, they would destroy the environments needed for business to be successful. But the main learning was that you had to get different kinds of organizations working together, including but not limited to business.

I would not characterize that as a big shift in my thinking, but a natural evolution of simply continuing to inquire into larger systems. It was no surprise that this expansion of focus would be hard. It's evident that we are still at the beginning of businesses redefining their purpose to go beyond narrow self-interest. In my opinion, this is starting to happen in a few industries, like the food industry, where social and environmental breakdowns around the world are starting to be seen as genuine shifts in businesses' strategic context. But fostering the sorts of collaboration and learning processes needed over time is challenging. For me personally, this was always the direction I cared about. I had no inherent interest in business, but I was drawn to it as a great laboratory to develop practical know-how by virtue of the wonderful business leaders I had the opportunity to meet and learn from, like Bill O'Brien and Ray Stata, who are often mentioned in *The Fifth Discipline*.

I'm trained as a systems guy. I was an undergraduate student at Stanford when Paul Ehrlich wrote *The Population Bomb*, and I was at the MIT System Dynamics Group when the Limits to Growth study was done. I grew up with the big, global issues. They were always the ones paramount in my mind, because they're paramount for our future as a society and ultimately as a species.

REFLECTIONS: Did the response to the book take you in different directions than you had anticipated?

Educators at work with the Iceberg Model.

© 2009 Systems Thinking in Schools, Waters Foundation

SENGE: Not really. I knew it would be a long time before we could focus directly on larger issues because they simply were not on the radar screen of businesses in 1990. It felt appropriate to continue the focus on building a community of businesses deeply involved in the work. I always thought that business was the most powerful institution in modern society. That's basically true in all countries, even China, where government clearly plays a much bigger role than it does in a lot of other places.

Really, I've had one interest my whole life: how we can build the capacity to address the common systemic issues that are taking our society in directions no one really wants to go. At one point about 10 years ago, I had this shocking "aha" moment when I realized that my desk had not moved more than about 10 feet in 20 years. The building my office was in had been completely rebuilt, but when we moved back in after the reconstruction, my desk was right in the same place. That was kind of a symbol for me that my interests have always been exactly the same.

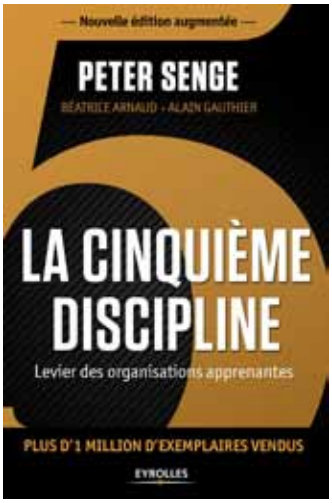
I've had one interest my whole life: how we can build the capacity to address the common systemic issues that are taking our society in directions no one really wants to go.

It's just that things unfold and get clearer and new opportunities open up over time.

Milestones

REFLECTIONS: What are some of the milestones from the last 25 years that have helped you determine what you would be doing next?

SENGE: The first was my visit in 1994 to the first public school using systems thinking and organizational learning and seeing that—wow—there was no reason that educators couldn't do all this stuff—shared vision, team learning, mental



models, personal mastery, and obviously systems thinking. It all worked.

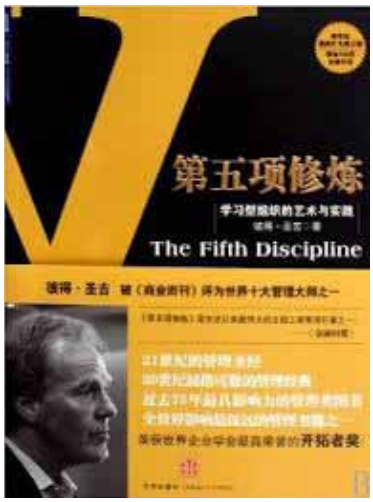
The next was the formation of the SoL Sustainability Consortium a few years later. We had several failed efforts in organizing it initially, but the idea was clear. We knew that gradually social and environmental conditions were becoming strategic, and we wanted to get together a small group of businesses that could learn together. We didn't want to waste time arguing about whether climate change was real or things like that. We only wanted to get a small number of businesses that already saw these issues as strategic and see how that affected the way they actually managed.

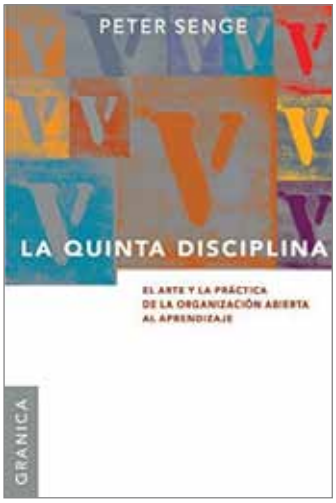
Today, many people see the global food industry as one of the most interesting industries in terms of deep change.

Then there was the series of fieldbooks, starting with *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* in 1994 through *The Necessary Revolution* in 2006, which actually grew out of the SoL Sustainability Consortium. *The Fifth Discipline* was really a book of theory and method, but the fieldbooks were all about stories and lots of practical examples. The fieldbook team, led by Art Kleiner and Nina Kruschwitz, developed a new genre that could help people in moving from theory to practice. The last was *Presence,* which moved back to theory as we tried to convey the experience of a group of four people as they were co-creating a way of understanding profound change.

The one other milestone that really stands out was the formation of the Sustainable Food Laboratory, founded by Oxfam and Unilever in 2003–2004. More than 10 years after its founding, it is still a vibrant global network of 70 of the world's biggest food companies and NGOs working together to make sustainable agriculture the mainstream system.

The initial intent of the Food Lab was simple. We wanted to build networks of collaboration that connected businesses and civil society organizations, specifically food companies and social justice and environmental NGOs, in about equal numbers. Watching it evolve and take root, I think it has had enormous impact on the world. Today, many people see the global food industry as one of the most interesting industries in terms of deep change. It's clearly been crucial to understanding the huge problems that people were previously unaware of, particularly in this country. Ten years ago, you talked about food and nobody really saw it as much of an issue. But for a long time, the global food system has been driving farmers around the world into poverty by connecting them to commodity markets that behave as com-





modity markets invariably do—with growing output and falling prices. We in the rich countries are the beneficiaries, because we have huge varieties of food that we can buy at prices far lower than they would have been 30 years ago. But those lower prices are farmers' incomes.

The global food system has also destroyed half the world's topsoil through practices that maximize short-term yields but do not rebuild soil nutrients. And, by the way, agriculture uses two-thirds of the world's water, and in many ways water is the most acute problem in the world today. People have begun to wake up to these problems, mainly through movements like fair trade and scares about the quality of and ingredients in the food we eat. But of course most only glimpse a bit of the scope of the problem. In my judgment, the industry as a whole, at least in the West, is really waking up. For example, the importance of sustainable sourcing has become evident to many retailers and food companies.

The Food Lab was a first-ever opportunity to move right into the middle of a key industry. You might also say it's the single most important industry we have, since it is the only thing we actually consume.

Radical Shifts

REFLECTIONS: What would you say has been the greatest impact resulting from the book and this field of work?

SENGE: Well, I think you have to start thinking about that question by distinguishing two levels. There's a top-of-the-mind acknowledgment and then there's the real transformation of capacity and the building of new capabilities.

> **These are all one wave after another of a larger sea swell of recognition that how we learn really matters.**

Top-of-the-mind acknowledgment includes things like organizational culture and organizational learning. Look at the learning field over the last 30 years. In the manufacturing world, for example, quality management, process improvement, just-in-time, and lean represented radical shifts toward embedded learning. Probably the most recent embodiment is the shift to what the software industry calls "agile."

But to me, these are all one wave after another of a larger sea swell of recognition that how we learn really matters. As Arie de Geus said almost 30 years ago in his famous 1987 *Harvard Business Review* article, "Planning as Learning," "the ultimate determinant of competitive advantage for a business is its relative ability to learn." At the top-of-the-mind level, everybody nods their head at that

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now in the same way they nod and say, "People really matter; you've got to create an environment for developing the talents of your people." These are big changes in espoused views of business.

The focus on teams is another related big change. Twenty-five years ago, people didn't spend that much time on teams. Now almost everyone in the business world works in a team.

For me, the phrase "fail fast and early" is encouraging, because it encourages a genuine learning attitude.

The second, deeper level concerns the real transformation of capacity and the building of new capabilities. On this level, the results are pretty uneven, and they vary by industry. I'll use the software industry as an example.

Most competitive, innovative software businesses today are into agile. Agile is a disciplined approach to continuous learning. A good friend of mine who's a serial entrepreneur in the software industry said that somewhere within the last few years, the industry crossed a threshold. And the threshold was that today *nobody* understands the impact of introducing a new element of software. The complexity of the software environments into which new elements are placed and will interact has become so great that nobody really knows what's going to happen.

Obviously, when you're designing new software, you have goals and intentions. Maybe you've even made promises to your customers about the benefits. But in fact the unintended side effects can swamp the intended effects. The consequence in that industry is a deep cultural change that is still gradually unfolding.

Think of it like walking in a dark room. You can't really see much. In such a situation, you naturally don't take big, long strides. You walk slowly; you take small steps and feel your way through. It's very much like that in the software industry today. It takes small steps to introduce increments of software, often with thousands of people online gathering data and reflecting on what's happening, what's working, what's not working, what sort of adjustments we have to make. That whole philosophy is bundled up in this idea of agile, the ability to continually keep shifting as you learn more.

Another example of transformation in the business culture of an industry is the phrase you hear again and again in the high tech world: "fail fast and early." It's not just a platitude. It's a philosophy and a discipline of "rapid-cycle prototyping." Don't

just sit around and talk about it. Don't make elaborate plans. Get a prototype product quickly, so you can learn what works and doesn't. For me, the phrase "fail fast and early" is encouraging, because it encourages a genuine learning attitude.

I would call things like agile and rapid-cycle prototyping pretty radical shifts in the way that many businesses operate. In the case of the food industry, I think you'd call what is unfolding more gradually a strategic shift in the perception of the business environment. But in other industries, like primary and secondary education, little has shifted yet. Most people are still trying to run schools and school systems the way they always have. The industry hasn't hit these kind of deep, disruptive contexts yet. But it's gradually happening, and I think when it does happens, all the underlying ideas of organizational learning can become extremely relevant there as well.

Prerequisites for Success

REFLECTIONS: Looking at the impact of culture and collaboration, what key principles or characteristics do you associate most often with success?

SENGE: Perhaps the most obvious is people doing something that really matters to them. In *The Fifth Discipline*, there was a lot of stuff about purpose. If you think the purpose of your business is to make money, you should forget all this stuff about learning and systems thinking, because at the most, you'll accomplish a little, but you will never accomplish a lot. The reason is simple: The depth of commitment, time, dedication, openness, and patience just won't be there. If people are only focused on making money, and there is no sense of larger purpose, little will be achieved with these ideas and tools.

Second, I would say is time horizon. If your organization operates on extremely short time horizons, that's fine, that's a realistic part of many businesses today. Some have very short product cycles and more or less continuous introductions of new products. That is not what I am referring to. I'm talking more about the cultural time horizon.

Again, the software industry is interesting, because a company like the one I was referring to before operates in rapidly moving businesses yet has disciplined learning cycles that can steadily move the culture over time. In their reflective practices, people at that company continually ask, "What is happening with new software?""Is this what we expected?""What kept us from seeing these changes?""What are our blind spots?" These are classic reflective questions. During some periods in the development cycle, they have spent up to half a day a week reflecting on these questions and analyzing the data they were gathering. This is a significant amount of time for any business to spend on reflection.

If people are only focused on making money, and there is no sense of larger purpose, little will be achieved with these ideas and tools.

Last, do you really care about people growing and developing? If you're going to foster an environment of deeper thinking and a sense of purpose, you can't do that if you're not focused on people really growing and developing—popular today with Bob Kegan's and Lisa Lahey's work on Deeply Developmental Organizations. These are all pre-requirements for tools like organizational learning taking root.

Personal Challenges

REFLECTIONS: What are some of the personal challenges you have experienced in realizing your own vision and aspirations, and how did you move through them?

SENGE: The first thing that comes to mind is all the failures. We worked for six months to organize the first meeting of the SoL Sustainability Consortium. We had this idea of building such a consortium, but the first meeting was a complete disaster. With a lot of time and effort, we managed to get a bunch

of CEOs together, and it was just a waste of time. Most of the time they complained about their investors, their boards, and the government—all that stuff. That was a rude awakening. We thought, "Hey, this is a big issue—social and environmental stewardship and responsibility—so it's got to be driven by CEOs." We had a bunch of people who said the right things, but when we got them together, we realized they actually were just talking. They had no real skill in moving an enterprise. And they spent a hell of a lot of time complaining.

I expect almost everything not to work. If it worked the first time out, it's probably because you're doing something you know way too much about.

So that was really an eye-opener. I remember talking with one of the CEOs who co-organized the meeting. It was about a day later. We both said, "That was really a horrible meeting. We don't know what we've learned, but we know that was not the way to do it." It was one of those moments where you could draw no conclusion, except to acknowledge the fact that it didn't work. We went back to the drawing board and restarted about six months later with a group of people who were already leading these changes in their organizations, mostly at local levels or focused on particular issues. The energy was completely different. It was a group of amazing innovators, and that reset became the beginning of the SoL Sustainability Consortium.

Lots of experiences like that have occurred, to the point where I always tell people, "Hey, I expect almost everything not to work." If it worked the first time out, it's probably because you're doing something you know way too much about. If you're doing something really new, the one thing you can be sure of is it's not going to work.

Someone who worked with Edwin Land, the founder of Polaroid, told me that Land used to have a plaque on his desk that said, "A mistake is an event that you have not yet turned fully to your benefit." Not getting too attached to the idea that everything is going to work fine has been a great life learning.

The other lesson would be the importance of relaxing and being patient. I have a predisposition to push a little too hard. But there are times when you just need to stop pushing. Certainly when something isn't going well, trying harder is often not the best strategy, because the problem you are having may not be about effort but about limited insight.

With regard to working with other people, I probably wasn't nearly as good at listening as I should have been. In fact, I'm sure of that. How do you collectively get better at understanding what's going on, as opposed to, "Hey, here's the idea and let's go for it." Getting better at listening has been a lifelong journey, which of course relates directly to collaborating.

Next Generation Leaders

REFLECTIONS: Can you give us a few examples of what some of the next generation leaders are doing in the field of systemic change?

SENGE: In the last three or four years, a small group of us has become involved with identifying and supporting next generation leaders in this emerging field of systemic change, people who are in their 30s, who have already accomplished a lot, and who could potentially evolve the whole field in the next 20 or 30 years. This is the Next Generation Leaders initiative of the Academy for Systemic Change.

We've only had this effort organized now for a little over nine months, so it's a little early to identify too many patterns in these leaders' thinking. But one I do see is moving much deeper into different cultural contexts. For example, one of the Fellows is doing marvelous work in the schools of Monterrey, Mexico. He's been doing programs on civic engagement with communities for 10

years and has now begun doing the same thing in schools. He's a tremendously warmhearted guy who also has plenty of drive. But what really strikes me is his connection and credibility with the people in Monterray.

There's also a young woman in China who has been moving forward with various collaborative initiatives. She's getting a big education initiative off the ground by being careful in building a group of collaborators. She is also strikingly attuned to the larger Chinese context she's operating in.

A woman who is the founder of one of the largest indigenous reconciliation movements in the world, Reconciliation Canada, is also one of the Fellows. The native population in Canada, like many native populations in the world, has been the victim of a century of genocide, organized efforts to eradicate its culture. This woman is building a wonderful movement based on dialogue and what she calls fostering a "relational economy." In contrast to a transactional economy, a relational economy goes back to the older ideas where services or products were bartered on a one-to-one basis. This kind of economy has totally vanished in the modern world, where you buy something but don't have any connection to who made it.

Cultural embeddedness allows more and more of the ideas and processes of learning to arise out of different cultures rather than being imposed on them.

If we can support people like the three I just referred to, people who know how to weave the tools and methods of systemic change deeply into different cultural contexts, in the next 20 to 50 years, we won't have to use terms like "systems thinking." We can just call it "thinking," because real thinking is about seeing the reality you're in the midst of, which naturally entails appreciating the interconnectedness of things.

Courtesy of Academy for Systemic Change

Although business is the most *powerful* institution today, I believe education is the most *important*.

The significance of cultural embeddedness is that it is allowing such young leaders to connect more and more to the systemic intelligence already present in older (pre-industrial) cultures—much like the educators are cultivating the innate systems intelligence of children. This may be the really big new idea: tapping and cultivating the genuine "naturalness" of all this work. The more experience you have with these sorts of tools and learning processes, the more you realize that we are doing nothing more or less than enabling people to do what is most natural, though rarely easy—opening head, heart, and will in very challenging settings.

The SoL Community

REFLECTIONS: SoL North America has often been a birthplace for new ideas and connections. What has the SoL North America community meant to you, personally and professionally, over the last 10 to 15 years?

SENGE: It all starts with community. If you look at the history of SoL, the core idea in its founding was to foster the communities of collaboration needed for real change processes.

The SoL Sustainability Consortium was a community of people from different businesses who saw social and environmental imbalances as a strategic issue. The Sustainable Food Lab brought together a community of people from business and NGOs who saw the need to really rethink global food systems. Most recently, the SoL Education Partnership has been developing into a collaboration of many school districts focused on organizational learning and systems thinking.

I'm focusing a lot of my time today in this last area. Although, as I said earlier, business is the most *powerful* institution today, I believe education is the most *important*. How we go about educating children shapes the next 50 to 70 years of our society. It is the only institution in modern society that has that long a time horizon.

The original SoL and its many partner SoL organizations around the world have always been about building intentional learning communities. That's where the action is, and I hope it will become the focus for many other organizations in the future. Community is the heart of the changes that really matter in the world. ■

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FEATURE 14.3

Inside-Out Collaboration

An Integrated Approach to Working Beyond Silos

DAVID WILLCOCK

People in separate divisions or teams of an organization often speak different "languages," which can make it difficult for them to understand and relate to each other. The costs of this kind of "silo working" can be high: lack of shared learning and innovation; unproductive conflict and stress; and significant financial costs due to program failures. In this article, David Willcock draws insights from psychology and organizational development theory and practice to provide a framework for building and maintaining productive relationships across organizational boundaries. Through an integrated approach to collaboration that includes the individual, team, and organization, managers and leaders can serve as catalysts for "partnership working," which can ultimately lead to high performance and competitive advantage.

David Willcock

With economic, social, and environmental challenges reaching crisis levels and new technology breaking down traditional boundaries, collaboration has moved up in importance on every organization's agenda. People in the commercial, public, and voluntary sectors have begun to see what we might call "partnership working" as playing a vital role within and between organizations. In Great Britain, for example, the need for collaboration is a key theme of reform in the National Health Service and the Civil Service. Multi-agency approaches are gaining traction in aid work and the criminal justice system, and an increasing number of strategic alliances have formed between commercial organizations.

More than two decades ago in *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge gave compelling evidence of the need for thinking beyond silos in organizations—and the implications of not adopting this approach.[1] But in 2015, despite the examples given above, the problems of silo working remain. If you look at any news source, you will find daily examples of breakdowns that occur within and between organizations because of the failure to partner effectively. The negative outcomes can include lack of shared learning and innovation, delays in getting work done, unproductive conflict, stress, and significant reputational and financial costs due to program failures. As one board director who contributed to my research said, "In many companies, silos haven't changed, yet everything else has. Why not this?"

My experience of "silo busting" over 25 years, alongside my recent book research, has led me to better understand why efforts to increase collaboration don't always work or become sustainable. In this article, I will illustrate:

- The challenges involved in collaboration among individuals, teams, and organizations
- Ways to increase collaboration

- Principles that, if applied as part of an integrated approach, can help people to collaborate for results

Most of the work I have done has been with managers and leaders, because they have a particular responsibility as role models for the organization. Unless change happens with leaders and in leadership teams, any efforts to increase collaboration elsewhere in the organization will fall on stony ground. I'm not advocating a top-down approach to change, which we all know can reduce engagement and commitment. Rather, I recommend an "inside-out" approach, one that starts with the leaders, who then act as catalysts for their teams and the rest of the organization. This approach is based on what I call the "Relationship Review Framework," which looks at collaboration from the individual, team, and organizational levels.

A key barrier to collaboration is that individuals naturally tend toward silo working.

The Individual Level

A key barrier to collaboration is that individuals naturally tend toward silo working. We get into comfort zones and prefer to retain control over our work. We also generally find navigating difference difficult, and the defensive behaviors we adopt can lead to rigidity and sometimes breakdown in relationships. The differences that exist in any team can be a source of creativity and learning, but in a difficult and ambiguous business environment, they hold the potential for misunderstanding and unproductive conflict.

Individual Styles and Preferences

There are a number of influences at work at the individual level, including:

- **Psychological Type:** The deep-seated disposition that influences people's preferences for extroversion and introversion, and the basic psychological functions of thinking, feeling, sensing, and intuition[2]
- **Personality Traits:** The core dimensions of personality, such as the degree to which people are trusting or skeptical, controlling or accommodating[3]
- **Environmental and Social Influences:** How people experience and respond to external factors, and the values and learned behavior they have developed in turn
- **Skills and Capabilities:** These characteristics include the social skills that people rely on to present themselves to and influence others

With so many variables in personality, styles, and preferences, it's no wonder people often prefer to work on their own:

> Tom, an innovative and creative marketing director, liked the start-up part of new projects. A key issue, however, was his lack of attention to planning, organization, and time management. This set of priorities was perhaps not surprising, given his strengths. Recently, though, his poor organization and time management skills had started to damage his relationships with others, including his management team peers and boss. Turning up late for meetings was being interpreted as a lack of respect for other people rather than just a part of how Tom was. Tom had also taken on more management responsibility and had difficulty ensuring that people were following through on and completing projects.

Leaders in this situation benefit from understanding their own underlying needs and motivations:

> Tom's personality questionnaire results revealed a high need for free thinking, no constraints, and an informal approach. From his perspective, other people, particularly his boss, were too detail conscious, gave him too much work to do, and hounded him too much about finishing things. We started to uncover some underlying attitudes that were proving unhelpful to Tom in his role. Tom's increasing

Relationship Review Framework

Over the last 60 years, human relations researchers have identified circumstances and behaviors that can lead to productive working relationships and, in turn, healthy collaborations. These focus on:

- **Task Clarity:** Are the goals and desired outcomes clear?
- **Supportive Processes:** Are the right methods and procedures in place to support task achievement?
- **Underpinning Relationships:** Are the core principles that underpin healthy and productive relationships valued and demonstrated (e.g., positive regard, responsibility, openness)?

Each of these elements can influence one another in positive and negative ways. For example, task uncertainty can lead to defensive reactions and dysfunctional relationships. Processes that don't align with and support task achievement can be a source of frustration and tension. Relationships based on anything other than mutual understanding and respect can undermine collective performance.

FIGURE 1 **Relationship Review Framework**

	Challenge	Support
TASK	• Stretch goals • High standards	• Shared vision • Shared responsibility
PROCESS	• Clear timescales • Regular review	• Supportive work processes
RELATIONSHIP	• Critical feedback • Accountability	• Listening • Trust

However, meeting these conditions is not necessarily enough to achieve the highest levels of performance. Nevitt Sanford, an American educational theorist, demonstrated that to expand their comfort zones, people need to be sufficiently challenged while at the same time have enough support to prevent feelings of threat and stress. The right balance of challenge and support creates "stretch"—the ideal condition for realizing one's potential.[4]

The "Relationship Review Framework" shows how to create stretch conditions for accomplishing tasks, improving processes, and building relationships. Individuals, teams, and organizations can use this tool to review the health of working relationships and improve planning, implementation, and learning:

> A corporate leader and a key supplier were experiencing stress in their relationship. Using the Relationship Review Framework, they realized that they did not share a clear vision for the program. As a result, they came up with the image of two courageous partners walking side by side into a forest to face a significant challenge together. Creating a picture of the future helped them understand how they needed to work together differently to get there.

awareness of the impact of his behavior and the implications it had on his image in the company—which was important to him—made him resolve to change.

In most cases, this kind of feedback can be useful for leaders and help them identify strategies for improving working relationships. However, there are often deeper obstacles to collaboration that need to be surfaced:

John, a manager in an international company, worked in his own area of the organization in splendid isolation. His work had been fairly self-contained until the growing size and complexity of the organization put pressure on him to be more visible and engage with colleagues in other functions. He struggled with this change, defaulting to working independently as much as he could. In a coaching conversation, John voiced a strong value of "being all right on my own." Further discussion revealed that this statement was rooted in John's distant relationship with his siblings.

These examples illustrate the influence that individuals' own systems, including their past relationships, can have on current performance and potentially on the wider organizational system. American psychologist Will Schutz considers the rigidity of these unconscious defensive behaviors to be the main cause of unproductive relationships at work.[5]

The Individual's Responsibility

The most widely practiced principle for supporting people in collaborating for results is *helping individuals to start with themselves.* In any relationship, we can influence our own beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors much more easily than we can those of someone else. By taking responsibility for the role we play in our working relationships—and increasing our adaptability and flexibility—we can change the context of and improve those relationships.

But despite the many opportunities people in organizations have to develop emotional intelligence, change perspectives, and increase behavioral choices, they don't always see results. Differences sometimes can't be easily reconciled, particularly where people lean toward opposite sides of personality dimensions or have different values. Also, people can have different perceptions of what makes a good working relationship, and despite increased self-awareness, they may find initiating and having new kinds of conversations difficult. When these issues involve senior leaders, whole departments can develop negative, polarized perceptions of each other, affecting the organization as a whole:

A former bank CEO told me about an operations director who was resistant to the change program the CEO had initiated. The operations director focused on controlling and protecting his own area, an attitude that pervaded his division, leading to a lack of empathy among his staff members for other departments and teams. This dynamic adversely affected decision making by the operations director's division and bank branches, so that too much money was held in each branch for too long. Millions of pounds sat there, not earning any interest.

Clearly, individual efforts aren't enough.

Food for Thought

The literature on team collaboration doesn't often address the topic of power differentials on teams. In our attempts to develop productive collaborations, do we take sufficient account of the role of power in preventing people from successfully working together?

The Team Level

As we explored above, in the team context, one of the main causes of silo working is that team members arrive with their own individual sense of purpose, identity, and personality. Each person then makes choices about how much difference to exhibit and influence to accept. The interplay of personal characteristics in the context of the team is constant and shapes the group's personality. The resulting team personality then determines the relationship of the team with the rest of the organization. It's ideally a dynamic, perpetually evolving process that both reinforces and changes the team's character and culture over time.

In a complex organization that is experiencing constant change, it can be difficult for team members to achieve a shared purpose and identity. In my research, I found that the lack of clarity around identity can lead to confusion and increased silo working. For example, this is a challenge in the UK public sector, where the government's privatization agenda has interfered with employees' ability to derive a sense of identity from the professional, social, and service aspects of their work. When employees don't identify with a team or the organization, their sense of loyalty defaults to the lowest level—the sub-group, clique, or individual. To combat this trend, leaders need to put effort into creating meaning through common purpose, vision, and values.

On the other hand, too much identification with the team can also get in the way of collaboration. Boundaries between units can become rigid and impervious, causing problems to occur. The strong professional identity and frames of reference that employees in different functional groups—such as human resources, finance, and marketing—hold can contribute to the creation of barriers between groups.

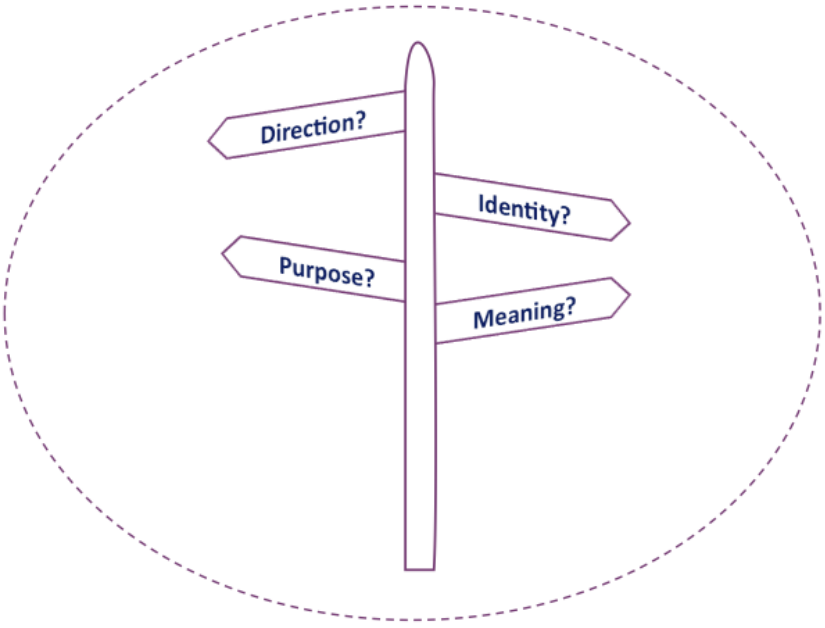
Following are key team archetypes I have experienced in my work and research. Do you recognize any of them from your own experience?

One of the main causes of silo working is that team members arrive with their own individual sense of purpose, identity, and personality.

The Uncertain Team

The Uncertain Team has no clear purpose, vision, or values and therefore no clear boundaries. It may lack a team leader, perhaps as a result of reorganization. In fact, the Uncertain Team may not be a team at all, but a collection of individuals doing complementary work. This lack of an organizing force results in poor relationships with other teams because of the lack of integration and defined team boundaries. The absence of a team presence and voice can lead to inconsistency, low ambition, lack of creativity, and poor quality of engagement across and outside the organization.

FIGURE 2 **The Uncertain Team**

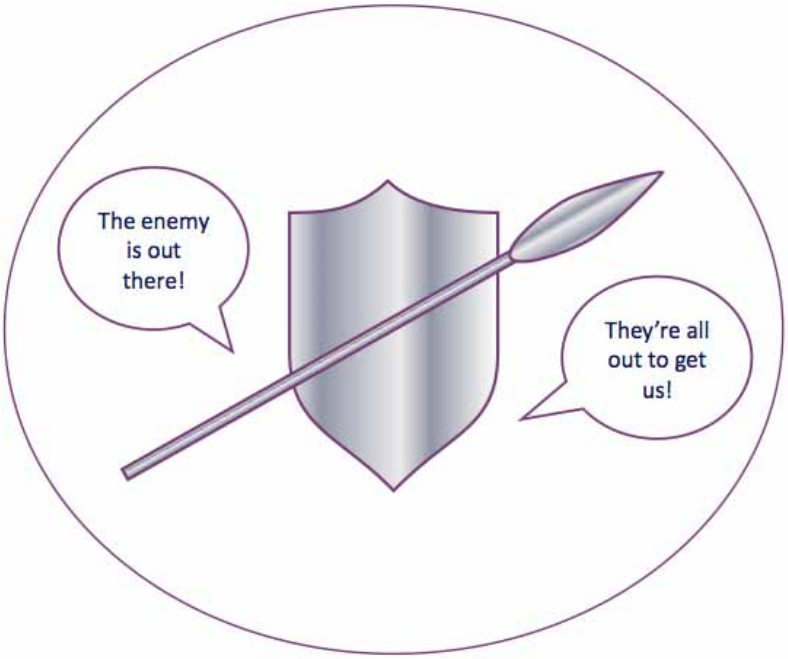


The Uncertain Team has no clear purpose, vision, or values and therefore no clear boundaries.

The Defensive Team

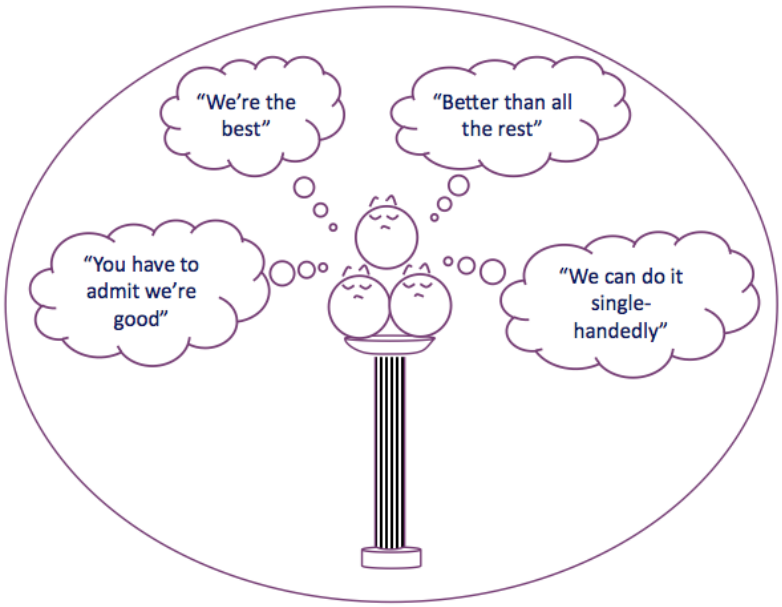
In the Defensive Team, members over-identify with the purpose and values. These characteristics are often anchored in the past and are not open to feedback and influence. Defensive Teams can result from old-style management based on a divide-and-rule mentality. Their mantra is "they are all out to get us." Team members feel under siege. What they don't do is ask "why?" Although the team can be unified against a common enemy in the face of perceived adversity, internally they are as fragmented as the Uncertain Team.

FIGURE 3 **The Defensive Team**



In the Defensive Team, members over-identify with the purpose and values.

FIGURE 4 **The Arrogant Team**



Members of the Arrogant Team are likely to be dissatisfied with the status quo and want to change things.

The Arrogant Team

Some of the characteristics of the Arrogant Team can be similar to those of the Defensive Team, although members of the Arrogant Team are likely to be dissatisfied with the status quo and want to change things. These teams are often led by ambitious action-oriented leaders. Team members don't want to hear disconfirming information, so they choose not to listen. Similar to members of a Defensive Team, they put a lot of time and energy into criticizing others, but mainly in an attempt to change things and possibly take charge. I have seen this team archetype in sales organizations focused on meeting their targets at the expense of learning from each other and from others in the organization.

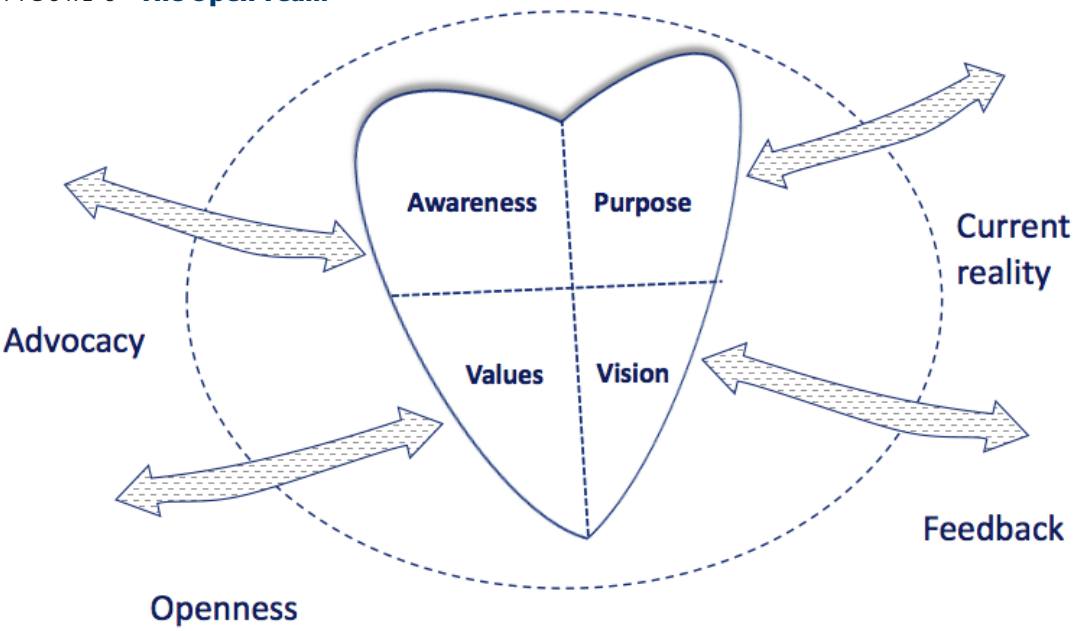
The Open Team

The healthy alternative to these archetypes is the Open Team. Clarifying a team identity through an agreed-upon operating framework is crucial, but teams also need to be flexible and responsive. Open Teams are proactive in relationship management, keep in touch with people and events outside of the team, listen to feedback, and respond appropriately. They regularly take a step back, review how things are working, make needed changes, and continually develop team members.

Working with a collaborative Open Team is not always comfortable, with clear and passionate differences often surfacing. However, as members of the group work through conflicts, fresh insights emerge:

> I worked with a senior leadership team over several months to develop an Open Team dynamic. This process included providing in-dividual and team feedback and coaching.

FIGURE 5 **The Open Team**



Open Teams are proactive in relationship management, keep in touch with people and events outside of the team, listen to feedback, and respond appropriately.

After several productive meetings, we had a highly charged, emotional session. Team members had developed sufficient confidence to challenge patterns of behavior and working that were holding the group back, including the team leader's relationships with colleagues elsewhere in the organization. This process was a sign of real maturity in the team and illustrates what can happen when team collusion around long-term patterns of behavior starts to break down. Reflecting on it afterward, team members still refer to "that awful day" but recognize that it also resulted in a breakthrough in their working relationships, both inside and outside of the team.

People are usually willing to join this kind of open team dialogue if they feel it is safe to do so. The Relationship Review Framework introduced earlier in the article can be helpful for teams to use to structure conversations and look at what works and doesn't work at the task, process, and relationship levels. It can also be part of a collective review and action-planning process.

Food for Thought

Developing Open Teams is demanding for facilitators and team leaders. How do you support yourself so you can help teams through the "deconstruction" of unproductive patterns of behavior and the development of new ones?

Influenced by people like Chris Argyris, Peter Senge, and Will Schutz, I have always worked with teams in a way that engages them with their context and stakeholders to develop open rather than closed systems. If you focus on developing strong team relationships without outside connections, you run the risk of creating silos and damaging the cohesion of the wider organization. For similar reasons, it is important to work with individuals in the context of the teams they are part of.

The Organizational Level

The barriers to collaboration at the organizational level mirror those found at the individual and team levels. Patterns of behavior repeat in fractal-like ways in organizations.[6] In the same way that the quality of relationships within teams influences the quality of relationships between teams, so the quality of relationships between teams, functions, or other organizational units influences the identity, boundaries, and behavior of the organization as a whole. To have effective partnerships inside the organization as well as with external stakeholders, an organization needs to be open, adaptable, and flexible. It needs to respond to influence and change as much as it needs to influence others. This ability will depend on the level of openness it develops in its teams and on internal team relationships.

Organizational culture has traditionally been defined as "the commonly held values, beliefs and attitudes that exist in the organization and shape behavior—the way we do things around here." I've used this definition for years. However, I'm now not sure it's helpful enough in terms of what we can do to change organizational culture. It has tended to support a top-down approach to organizational change, casting the leaders as the key architects. For this reason, a lot of change efforts fail.[7] Here's an example:

> In a large local authority, the central Organization Development (OD) Department designed a corporate initiative to break down silos. This involved inviting managers from the different directorates to hear the CEO and senior leaders outline corporate challenges and understand more about how different parts of the organization worked. The OD Department didn't consult with other groups across the organization to find out what was needed to develop more collaborative working. Instead, it took a paternalistic stance and decided what the organization needed. Not surprisingly, compliance with the change initiative ranged from only a few percent in one department to 100 percent in another, where the director imposed compliance. Members of the OD Department didn't know about the part-time and remote working arrangements in the department with the lowest take-up and used language that led to mis-

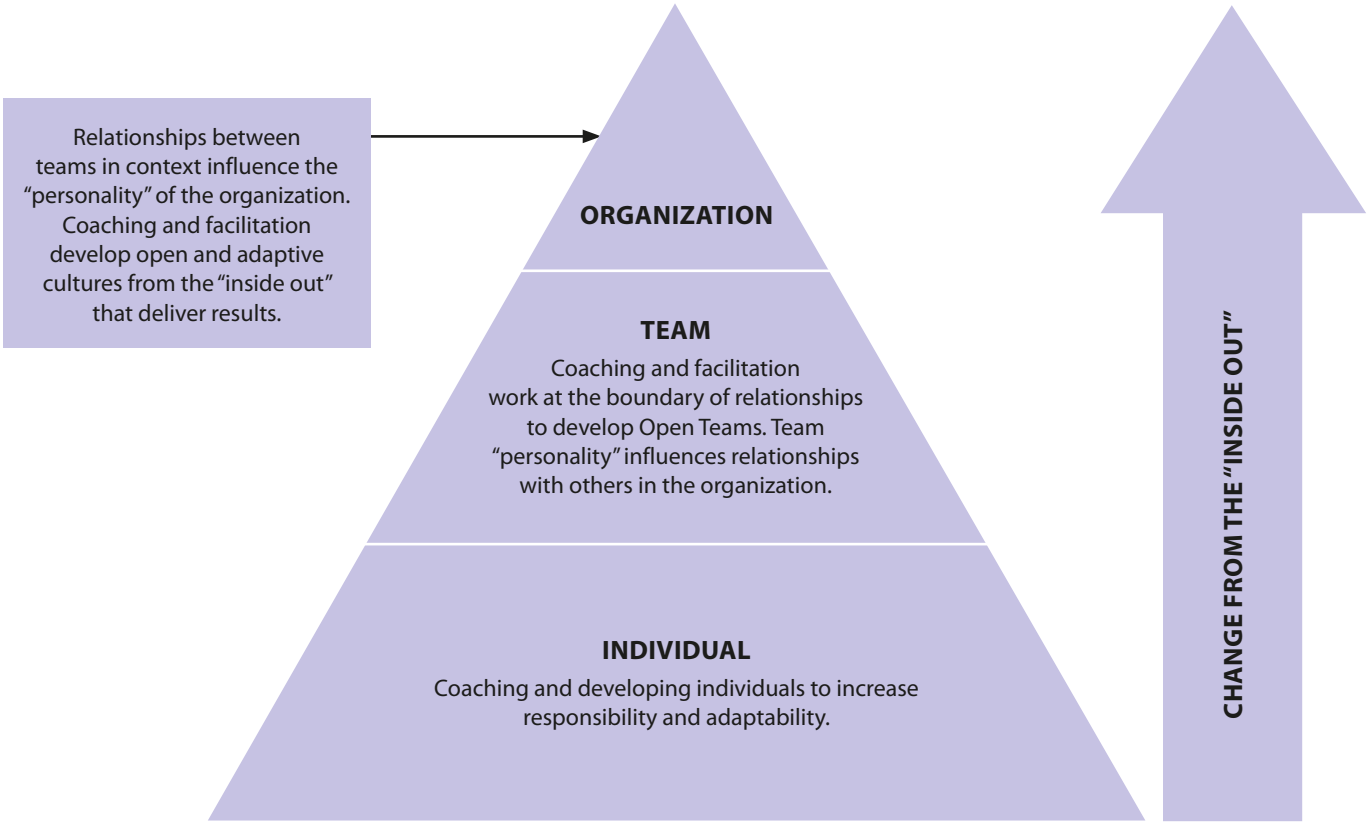
An Integrated Approach to Collaboration

I successfully used an integrated approach in a leadership and organization development program for senior managers in a national charity in the UK. The key elements that contributed to increased collaboration were:

1. Leaders received 360-degree feedback, completed personality questionnaires, and participated in individual coaching sessions throughout the program.
2. The program was run in operational teams to develop relationships as well as leadership capabilities. Leaders shared their feedback, strengths, weaknesses, and so on with each other and provided ongoing mutual support through action-learning conversations.
3. Each team started the program by participating in an operating framework workshop. In it, they:
   a. Mapped the team context and agreed on the important stakeholders to seek feedback from
   b. Reviewed the team's effectiveness at the task, process, and relationship levels, using the Relationship Review Framework
   c. Developed a draft core purpose, vision, and operating principles
4. The teams invited senior managers from other directorates to provide feedback to them using a goldfish bowl dialogue process.
5. Following this session, the team confirmed its own operating framework, decided on actions it needed to take to increase collaboration with outside groups, and used the data collected to tailor the remainder of the leadership program to their context and needs.

Each directorate team followed a similar process, receiving feedback from across the organization as well as from customers and clients. This process spawned a number of cross-functional initiatives to increase collaboration.

FIGURE 6 **An Inside-Out Approach**



An inside-out approach starts with the individual, continues with the team, and influences organizational culture.

understandings. The director of this department strongly resisted the initiative, and relationships deteriorated.

This is an example of a misconceived initiative to change an organization, with the OD Department attempting to take a "one-size-fits-all" approach to the problem rather than providing the context and the means for teams to find their own solutions. There is no one size that fits all. Problems of silo working and collaboration will be different, depending on the context, and approaches need to be adapted accordingly.

For this reason, I've reframed my definition of organization culture to be "the identity, characteristics, and behavior that result from the relationships between individuals in the context of the team and between teams in the context of the wider organization and environment." I believe this definition helps us better understand causality and therefore how best to influence organizational culture other than through a top-down approach (see "An Integrated Approach to Collaboration"). I'm not advocating a bottom-up theory of organization development; it's more of an "inside-out" effect—starting with the individual, continuing in the team, and influencing the organizational culture (see "An Inside-Out Approach").

Senior teams need to see relationship management as a senior management function and make it a visible agenda item.

A starting point for this integrated approach is the business planning process. Senior teams need to

see relationship management as a senior management function and make it a visible agenda item. The Relationship Review Framework is one way to facilitate this goal. I have found that providing a framework that the organization endorses can make initiating and having a conversation about relationships an organizational norm. It also allows people to identify and plan appropriate actions based on the specific barriers to collaboration and risks they face. The result is often an increase in what Peter Senge, Hal Hamilton, and John Kania call "systems leadership"—the ability to see the larger system, foster reflection and generative conversations, and shift the collective focus from reactive problem-solving to co-creating the future.[8] ■

Food for Thought

Is it sufficient for organizations to prioritize and target critical initiatives where collaboration is essential for results, or do they need to build these capabilities in all functional areas and at all levels? Also, human resource departments are uniquely placed to help facilitate collaborative working relationships, but they are not immune from silo working themselves. What new perspectives and capabilities are required in this functional area as well?

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David Ian Willcock is a director and leadership coach. His organization, Liberating Potential Ltd., specializes in organizational development, with an emphasis on organizational culture and high-performance working relationships. This article is based on David's book *Collaborating for Results: Silo Working and Relationships That Work*, Gower Publishing, 2013. Read a sample chapter here.

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FEATURE 14.3

The Manager as Mediator
First Manage You

JUDY RINGER

In today's workplace, where time is a precious commodity, why should managers or leaders get involved in resolving conflict among members of their teams? One reason is that, in many cases, it takes more time *not* to help address conflict than to constructively intervene. But before managers can successfully guide others in managing disagreements, they first need to be able to manage themselves. According to research, a manager's attitude toward conflict is crucial in determining how an impasse is resolved. In this article, Judy Ringer describes five practices based on the martial art Aikido that managers can follow to set the stage for positive resolutions. Through this process, they also increase their leadership presence, power, and clarity of purpose.

Judy Ringer

How do I manage employee conflict?
What should I do when coworkers don't get along?

In 20 years of training and coaching, I have seen many managers and leaders struggle with these questions. Usually, I'm invited in to solve a problem. A manager, board of directors, or chief executive asks me to mediate a situation between two employees who are both important to the company. Typically, these people don't get along, and their conflict is hurting the organization.

My approach to conflict stems from a background in the martial arts, specifically the Japanese art of Aikido (see "Aikido: The Art of Peace," p. 24). Many who are familiar with Aikido consider it a practical tool for managing physical combat as well as the everyday clashes of personalities, ideas, goals, roles, and worldviews we experience at work and at home. When I'm working to resolve a conflict, I invite the participants to partner in Aikido movements and techniques that simulate the stated problem. Through visual and kinesthetic experiences, they gain insight into their behavior patterns and, more important, how they might respond to their differences more intentionally and effectively.

By practicing hands-on exercises and developing an understanding of the basic Aikido intention of disarming without harm, individuals—and organizations—learn to regain composure and move from adversarial to partnering relationships. When conflict is normalized, relationships mend, and teams learn to discuss and resolve issues rather than avoid them.

The Costs of Unaddressed Conflict

Why is dealing with interpersonal conflict important for organizations? Unaddressed conflict is costly. A 2008 study commissioned by CPP, Inc.—creators of the MBTI personality assessment and the Thomas-Kilmann conflict instrument—found that 85% of employees at all levels of the surveyed organizations

Aikido: The Art of Peace

Morihei Ueshiba, a highly skilled and renowned Japanese swordsman and martial artist, developed Aikido in the early twentieth century. The word Aikido is often translated as "the way of blending or harmonizing with energy" or more simply "The Art of Peace." Aikido principles such as alignment—stepping out of the line of the attack and moving alongside the attacker—and non-resistant leading—joining and redirecting the incoming energy, or *ki*—are used and taught throughout the world as a system to de-escalate conflict and build stability, flexibility, and presence. In Aikido, the attack is reframed as power that can be developed and guided. The Aikidoist does not resist, block, or hinder the opponent. What would normally be understood as an act of violence is seen simply as energy to be utilized—which, of course, changes everything.

experienced conflict to varying degrees. The study also found that in the U.S. alone, an average employee spends nearly three hours a week dealing with workplace conflict. In 2008, that amounted to approximately $359 billion in hourly wages.

When conflict is normalized, relationships mend, and teams learn to discuss and resolve issues rather than avoid them.

Conflict among coworkers saps time and energy and limits people's creativity. It can literally keep managers up at night. I see otherwise skilled and technically savvy managers and executives struggling with what to do when faced with team members who aren't working together productively. *Should I intervene? Bring them together? Work with them individually? What do I say?*

It's not an easy decision. If you intervene unskillfully, you can make the problem worse. If you avoid the issue, it usually remains unresolved and negatively impacts the work environment. Good people leave. Jobs don't get done effectively because coworkers won't talk to each other. Relationships and output suffer, and entire organizations become polarized. According to the CPP study, 43% of employees think their bosses don't deal with conflict well.

The good news? While not always intuitive, the skills and competencies to resolve organizational conflict exist and can be learned. Learning to intervene intelligently in workplace conflict will save you and your team money and time, and will reduce people's stress levels. You'll also give the conflicting parties the opportunity to build their emotional intelligence and confidence. When managers and leaders increase their ability to address conflict, the workplace becomes a happier, more productive place. And we spend too much of our lives at work for it to be otherwise.

First Manage You

I have found that before managers can successfully guide others through conflict, they first need to be able to manage themselves. This article focuses on that process. It's an important aspect of any manager's job description and a step in the direction of increased leadership presence, power, and clarity of purpose.

Research shows that a manager's attitude toward a conflict is crucial in how the impasse is resolved. In the last part of the twentieth century, scientists discovered specific neurons—called mirror neurons—that mimic the actions and emotions of those around us. For example, when one person's face reflects frustration, the neurons identified with those facial movements also fire in an observer's brain, eliciting similar emotions. In the *Harvard Business Review* article "Social Intelligence and the Biology of Leadership," Daniel Goleman and Richard Boyatzis state: "When we consciously or unconsciously detect someone else's emotions through their actions, our mirror neurons reproduce those emotions. Collectively, these neurons create an instant sense of shared experience." This mirroring effect becomes a critical element in exercising leadership. In one of the studies referenced by Goleman and Boyatzis, employees received

Courtesy the Browne Center, University of New Hampshire

positive feedback from a leader who exhibited *negative* emotions (narrowed eyes, frowning) during the feedback session. These employees reported feeling worse about their performance than employees who received *negative* feedback given with a *positive* affect (head nodding, smiles). Clearly, the way in which the message is delivered has more impact than the message itself.

In your role as manager, parent, partner, or workmate, have you noticed how you can influence a conversation by the mindset you bring to it? As you coach your conflicted employees, use this awareness intentionally. Before each session, whether joint or individual, do a mental inventory. Are you thinking it will go badly, or are you thinking it will go well? Either way, you're right. If you enter the arena with fear, judgment, or tension, you are setting the stage for an unhappy outcome. More than likely, the employee is already nervous and worried. Don't add to their feelings of foreboding.

Conflict is actually potential energy that you and your employees can harness toward a positive result.

Alternatively, bringing an optimistic, hopeful mindset into the room will trigger more of the same. When you offer assurances that the individual will benefit from the process and be able to make the necessary changes, you foster trust and hope. Your primary job is to have confidence that the outcome is not predetermined and that the conflict is actually potential energy that you and your employees can harness toward a positive result.

Helpful Practices and Attitudes

Bringing a positive outlook to a conflict situation is easier said than done. Fortunately, over and over again, I've found that certain practices and attitudes keep me on track when things get difficult:

1. Reframing

In Aikido, it's often said that the opponent's attack is a gift of energy. While we would rather not have to deal with the problem, here it is. Shall I waste valuable life energy (*ki*) fighting it or wishing it away, or shall I see if I can turn it into a positive force?

Although you may be working with two people, a change in their relationship will create waves throughout the system.

After many years of practicing and teaching Aikido and applying its principles in the workplace, I've found that things change dramatically when you reframe an attack as incoming energy that can be guided toward a mutually supportive outcome. In dealing with employee conflict, for example, we might reframe the problem like this:

While it is a conflict, it is also an opportunity:

- For the relationship to change for the better
- To learn valuable work and life skills
- To see each other's positive aspects
- To step into a leadership role and model conflict competency in the organization

2. Possibility

When working with people in conflict, ask what possibilities exist for each of the participants and how the resolution will affect the larger team and organization. Although you may be working with two people, a change in their relationship will create waves throughout the system. Dialogue will flow more freely between team members, for example, when the logjam of this relationship is cleared. Time and energy previously claimed by the conflict will be released to the people and processes that need them. Wherever possible, document depleted resources, reduced momentum, and other hidden or indirect costs that are likely to improve when the conflict is resolved. Help everyone see how a positive outcome will liberate untapped potential—in them and in others.

For example, when Jamie joined Taylor's department, they somehow got off on the wrong foot. Their work stalled, productivity suffered, and their teammates first avoided but soon polarized around the conflict. I worked with Jamie and Taylor for three months, individually at first, building skills and helping them to see the other in a new light. Later, the three of us held several joint sessions dialoguing on topics that usually caused difficulty and working through how they would manage their relationship going forward. Lastly, we brought the rest of the team on board by being transparent about the process and inviting them to support Jamie and Taylor in their new relationship. Team interactions became more relaxed, easy, and open as the managers freed themselves from the conflict that had immobilized them.

3. Non-Judgment

If during the process of addressing a conflict you draw conclusions about who's right and who's wrong, you will find it difficult to do your job effectively. As human beings, we are practiced at forming judgments about everything. For example, I have a workshop to give and there's a blizzard raging. I judge this as bad. My body tenses, my mood deteriorates, and I become angry. This doesn't change the weather. It is what it is. I still have to decide what action to take. Do I cancel the workshop or continue as planned? Seeing the weather as a neutral event reduces my stress level, saves time, and improves my ability to make a wise decision.

When you coach, if you judge one of the parties as the problem, you will see only the problem and miss constructive signals or recast neutral behaviors in unhelpful ways. Non-judgment is a practice. The first step is noticing. Watch your judging mind,

and you'll gradually become more open and curious. Instead of judging, think in terms of what skills each party needs and how they can attain them.

The power of practicing non-judgment becomes clear when you see others changed by it. The individuals in a coaching and mediation process will become more open to each other and more willing to entertain each other's positive intent. People begin to see themselves and others as more generous, kind, and forgiving.

In one case, two women who were workplace adversaries found a new way to interact after engaging in a dialogue process with a colleague of mine who models non-judgment extremely well. She's also a great listener who seldom offers advice, instead preferring to ask useful questions that validate and promote reflection. A few weeks after the process ended, one of the women said to my colleague: "I don't know what you did to us, but I've hated her for 10 years, and I actually like her now." Don't underestimate the power of non-judgment.

4. Curiosity and Inquiry

More than anything else, a mindset of curiosity and inquiry will empower you and keep your conversations safe and on track. Ask honest and open-ended questions, such as:

- How did you feel when that happened?
- What were you hoping for?
- What do you think your coworker's intention was?
- What was your intention?

Even more than the questions themselves, the *attitude* of curiosity is one of the most effective tools you can bring to the process. For example, a technically outstanding leader in a Fortune 100 company was triggered by a colleague's email etiquette. The colleague's penchant for copying a long list of people on every email angered her, particularly when the email reflected poorly on the department. During one practice session, I asked the leader to create questions she could ask her colleague that would help her understand the intent behind all the copying. One question was, "Why did you copy everyone on that email?" As we role-played, the leader sounded confrontational and aggressive. I asked if she noticed the tone of her delivery—she did—and what would have to change for her to ask the question in an open, curious way. She answered, "I'd actually have to *be* curious." We both laughed, and she got the message. It's not the question, it's the mindset.

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As soon as you feel judgment, shift your mindset. Get curious. Ponder. Wonder. The more you practice this critically important skill, the more you'll learn about each person's perspective. And the more you model it, the more you'll encourage it in your people.

5. Appreciation

Since David Cooperrider introduced the concept of Appreciative Inquiry in 1987, organizations and individuals have been discovering the power of noticing what is already working in order to imagine what could be. As soon as you focus on the positive, you gain energy and move toward a compelling future. Appreciative Inquiry practitioners understand that we solve problems more easily and sustainably by looking at what works than by focusing on what is broken.

A concrete example of Appreciative Inquiry happens every time a beginner learns a new technique on the Aikido mat. Invariably, the technique is easier to do on one side of the body than the other. Instead of focusing on the "bad" side, the instructor tells the student to focus on the "good" side, the side that can do the technique effortlessly. Since that side knows how to do it, we say to "let the good side teach the other side." Coach your people to appreciate what's working and learn from it.

When you help your employees focus on the good, you reinforce their strengths, knowledge, and positive attributes. When they find the areas where they, in fact, do work well together, they can apply that awareness to areas where they have difficulty. When setbacks occur, remind everyone that this, too, is part of the process and that the setbacks can teach us what needs to happen next. Throughout the process, express appreciation for the commitment involved on all sides. You are building a new relationship and a foundation for solving future problems.

Attitudes Detrimental to the Process

Just as there are practices and mindsets that promote success in managing conflict, there are also attitudes that can derail the process, such as:

This is not my job.

This is exactly your job. As a supervisor, manager, owner, or CEO, you are a leader, and leaders lead. They show the way. They model. They put forth a vision and invite others to join them. This is why it's vital to manage *you* first. If you don't feel ready to lead in this way, you can always invite someone else you believe is right for the job to do so.

I don't have the skills to do this.

This may be true, in which case this is a great opportunity for you to learn the skills to become a more effective, respected, and responsible manager. You will increase trust and build influence with your team.

They should just rise above it.

They would if they could. I've heard this phrase too many times to count. I recently conducted a series of coaching and mediation sessions with two employees of a food manufacturing company. As I met with the employees individually, they each told me that when they asked their manager for help, he suggested they "just rise above it." They said they tried, but they didn't know how. Just being in each other's presence was enough to shut down conversation and workflow.

If your employees could make wiser choices, they would. It will help the process immeasurably if you believe they're doing the best they can with the skills they have and help them acquire the skills they need.

What's wrong with these people?!

Ask instead, *What do they need to help them through this?* What are they blind to, and how can you help them see what they're missing?

They're mean, disrespectful, hurtful.

They're unskilled. When you reframe what you see as negative intent to a need for skill building, you shift from judge to coach. You'll also see what the people in conflict really want (recognition, support, autonomy, inclusion) and how their attempts to achieve it have had an unexpected, negative impact. And you'll help them get where they want to go more effectively.

In the Aikido school I founded in 1995, a student I'll call Sam practiced with us for a number of years. In the beginning, no one liked seeing him

come to class. He usually came in late, during pre-class meditation time, when the rest of us were sitting quietly on the mat. Sam would come in, drop his large key ring noisily on a chair, sigh or make some other attention-grabbing sound, and after much ado, finally bow onto the mat and join us. Another of Sam's regrettable habits was to insinuate his way into private conversations. He was not well liked, and yet he came to every class and seemed committed to learning Aikido.

I let things go for a while, not knowing what to do ("This is not my job!") and harboring my own judgments about poor Sam ("What's wrong with this person?! He's so disrespectful!"). In time, I realized it *was* my job. I was the chief instructor and owner of the school. If I didn't address this difficult situation, the class environment would deteriorate. I also changed my story about Sam. I saw his positive intention: He wanted to fit in and he wanted attention. Unfortunately, he was going about it in all the wrong ways, and there was a wide gap between *intent* and *impact* (see "Intent Versus Impact").

This will take too much time.
Whatever time the process takes will be less than the time you, your customers, and your company lose in reduced productivity and goodwill. (See "Do You Have the Time to Address Conflict?," p. 30.)

Before You Engage

To give yourself the best chance at success as you begin to engage with your staff, answer these questions and continually hold them in your awareness:

What is the purpose of the intervention? What do I really want—for each individual, for the relationship, for the organization?
Imagine the ideal outcome and the ease and flow of the day once this difficulty has been resolved. How will the individuals interact and how will the team and organization reflect the shift?

Your actions may have unknowingly helped the situation develop. Once you determine your contribution to the conflict, you'll clearly see what you can do about it.

Am I contributing to the problem?
Your actions may have unknowingly helped the situation develop. For example, have you avoided talking with the parties? Have you fallen victim to one or more of the detrimental attitudes listed above? It's only human nature to hope people will "rise above it," to think that you "don't have the skills," or to worry that this course of action will take "too much time." Once you determine your contribution to the conflict, you'll clearly see what you can do about it.

What actions have I already taken that have helped or hindered?
Review the conversations you've had with each party. What went well? Looking forward, what will you do differently?

Intent Versus Impact

Intent versus *impact* is a key concept to master when addressing a difficult conversation. In *Difficult Conversations*, Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen note that we often make assumptions and create stories about another's intentions based on the impact their behavior has on us. For example: I felt intimidated, therefore, you are trying to intimidate me. We often assume the worst. When talking with a coworker about his or her behavior, try to imagine a positive intent. Is your colleague criticizing, for example, or trying to be helpful? By understanding that your coworker's intent may be very different from its impact, you can describe the impact without blaming or becoming defensive. The concept also helps you give your coworker the benefit of the doubt when you imagine other possible stories behind their action.

Do You Have the Time to Address Conflict?

Even understanding the importance of actively addressing workplace conflict, you may wonder how you'll find the time to make it a priority. Ask yourself:

- How much is the conflict costing you in wasted hours, lost or unhappy customers, and stifled creativity?
- Are you waking up nights wondering what to do?
- Do you avoid certain meetings because of the conflict?
- Is the tension affecting others?
- Does the conflict limit the team's ability to accomplish goals?

In my experience, it takes more time *not* to resolve conflict than to address it.

> **Your primary power and greatest asset is in the quality of your being.**

Am I truly objective or have I formed a conclusion? How can I stay open to possibility?
It's impossible not to judge—at least at first. The judgment won't necessarily be inaccurate, but it will hamper your ability to facilitate the process. A learning mindset, a sense of being in discovery, and a willingness to be honest with yourself are invaluable assets. As soon as you notice yourself judging, interrupt and open yourself to what's really going on.

What is the best alternative to a successful resolution of the conflict?
If the parties are unable to reach an amicable way to work together and take their relationship to the next level, what is Plan B? How will you implement it? Is this alternative something you will share with the participants or hold in reserve?

Understand It Is a Process

Understand that what you're about to undertake is a process of coaching, facilitation, and resolution. Your primary power and greatest asset is in the quality of your being. Everything else is secondary. Your quality of being is beyond skills. It resides in your attitude, thoughts, posture, breath, and the way you carry yourself. You have more power than you realize. When you shift from certainty to curiosity and from judgment to appreciation, the change in energy is palpable and profound. If you believe in the process and in your people, you will lead them to a satisfying conclusion. ■

RESOURCES

"Workplace Conflict and How Businesses Can Harness It to Survive," CPP, Inc. study
"Social Intelligence and the Biology of Leadership," *Harvard Business Review*
David Cooperrider/Appreciative Inquiry

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judy Ringer is the author of *Unlikely Teachers: Finding the Hidden Gifts in Daily Conflict*. Her company, Power & Presence Training, helps individuals and organizations normalize conflict, communicate purposefully, and maintain power and presence under pressure. She is a second-degree black belt in Aikido and founder of Portsmouth Aikido, Portsmouth, NH. Visit *www.judyringer.com* for additional articles and support. *judy@judyringer.com*

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Commentary

SHEILA HEEN AND DEBBIE GOLDSTEIN

Sheila Heen

Debbie Goldstein

"It's great that we are getting training on these new skills. But what about everyone else in my organization? The problem is [senior leadership or fill-in-the-blank function]. They are the ones who REALLY need it!"

You must hear this complaint as often as we do—which is to say 100% of the time. It gets a predictable laugh. Yes, if we could just fix everyone around us, voilá, our problems would be solved. Conflict settled. Life is good. Or at least *our* lives are better.

But of course, in her article, Judy Ringer hits the nail on the head—we can't "fix" anything, let alone any*one,* unless we start with the person in the mirror. Rather than complain about what's wrong with others, with the culture "around here" or the leadership "up there," we can spend our energy upgrading the one person we do have autonomy over: ourselves.

We can't "fix" anything, let alone anyone, unless we start with the person in the mirror.

Judy offers a set of practices for shifting one's internal stance from conflict to curiosity, problem to possibility, and judgment to appreciation. These shifts seem simple and are clearly powerful, which raises the questions:

Why don't people see these possibilities—let alone practice them—in the moment? And why don't we see or practice them ourselves sometimes?

To be clear, by "we," we mean *all of us.* Because while many of us stand at the front of the room to help others better understand their conflicts or themselves, when we are in *our own* conflicts, we are just as likely to be stuck—in our own story, in blame, in wishing "they" would just change.

It seems that for leaders—and even for enlightened, self-reflective practitioners who teach and advise leaders—*learning about ourselves and our role in our own problems is flat-out hard.*

Why?

The Difficulty in Receiving Feedback

We've spent the last few years trying to understand what is so difficult about *receiving feedback,* that is, taking in information and learning about ourselves—as leaders, managers, family members, and human beings. There is plenty of material out there on how to give feedback skillfully and thoughtfully, but actually little on the

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challenges of receiving feedback—direct or indirect, formal or informal. Why is it so hard to see our own role in a problem or our impact on a conflict playing out in a relationship or on a team?

Here are a few thoughts on what we have learned:

A Core Tension

Feedback sits at the tender junction of two conflicting human needs. On the one hand, we want to learn and grow. Research on happiness tells us that learning and growing is a big piece of what makes life satisfying. It's why people take up new hobbies in retirement. It's why people enjoy the rich experience of leadership development programs. Acquiring new insights and skills for tackling old problems is deeply satisfying, even exhilarating.

The problem is that we bump into a second human need: The desire to be accepted, respected, and loved the way we are *now*. Any suggestion that we may be part of the problem, particularly one voiced in front of our peers, can hit hard. Advice that maybe we should change in some way suggests that how we are now is not necessarily okay.

So we can feel conflicted about seeing our own shortfalls and getting coaching from others on how we might change. Sometimes it's exciting and welcome, and we're deeply grateful for it. Other times, it's enormously, cripplingly painful. It's so much easier to believe we are fantastic and *everyone else* is the real problem.

Three Triggered Reactions to Coaching

When someone else offers us feedback—even a perceptive observation or a well-intentioned suggestion—we often have a "triggered" reaction. More specifically, we have found that three triggered reactions to feedback are common:

- **Truth Triggers.** The feedback is "wrong," "not true," or "off" in some way. The person giving the advice doesn't understand our situation or the constraints we were under. It's bad advice. It wouldn't work.

- **Relationship Triggers.** Relationship triggers have to do with *who* is offering us the feedback, what we think about them, and how we feel treated by them. Are they credible? Do we trust them? Do we like them? Are they overstepping in telling us how to do our job? Our response is less about the content and more about our relationship with the giver.

- **Identity Triggers.** Identity triggers arise from the story we tell ourselves about who we are (does this mean I'm incompetent?) or how we are perceived by others (I am humiliated that you pointed this out in front of my peers). Our particular sensitivity to feedback—our emotional wiring—is also relevant here. How upset we get and how long it takes us to recover can vary widely in individuals. What's devastating to us is merely annoying to our teammate, or vice versa.

When in the midst of any of these triggered reactions, we can get argumentative, defensive, or just shut down. As Judy points out, saying things like "just rise above it" or "don't get defensive" doesn't help. If we want to support leaders in learning and growing, we have to help them recognize and navigate these triggered reactions in the learning process itself. And we have to get better at navigating those triggers *ourselves*.

Fixed versus Growth Mindset

Judy talks about the importance of doing a mindset inventory and recognizing that shifting to an optimistic, hopeful mindset produces better outcomes than remaining stuck in a pessimistic, discouraged one.

We'll add another dimension to the conversation: Carol Dweck's research on fixed versus growth mindsets. According to Dweck, a "fixed" mindset is characterized by the sense that this is how I am and how I'm going to be. Don't ask me to change, because people don't

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really change. So finding out that I am part of the problem means I'm stuck and maybe even that I *am* "the problem." If you have this mindset, it's hard to feel receptive to feedback.

On the other end of the spectrum is what Dweck calls a "growth" mindset. When we hold a growth mindset, we assume that we are always learning and growing. Bumping up against challenge is normal and an opportunity to learn. A growth mindset means we aren't as afraid to fail, aren't as afraid to be seen learning in front of our colleagues, aren't as risk averse if asked to try something new.

Sounds easy as you are curled up on your couch reading this article. Or when you are leading a group, sharing an anecdote about a past failure that you turned into a life-changing—and now teachable—moment. Of course we should have a growth mindset—look at how much we can benefit from it!

But conjuring a growth mindset is quite hard to do when you are in the depths of a soul-crushing conflict. And it can be particularly hard to hold onto when the "learning" is happening in front of peers you respect, particularly for high achievers who are not used to failure.

Shifting to a growth mindset requires a commitment to tell a much different story about how you take in information about yourself. It requires us as teachers to find ways to give people the space they need for honest self-reflection and to create group norms that value this kind of growth.

Insiders versus Outsiders

When watching someone else's conflict from the outside, it's easy to see how both parties are contributing to the problem, making things worse, and bringing out the worst in each other. Yet when we are in the middle of *our own conflicts*, it feels like a big mess. We're stuck. We're exasperated. We're at a loss. The shift from "problem" to "possibility" doesn't even occur to us.

Shifting to a growth mindset requires a commitment to tell a much different story about how you take in information about yourself.

Our own conflicts feel like exceptions to all that we teach and facilitate.

So there is something different about what we can see when we are outsiders versus what we can see while inside a conflict. That's an interesting phenomenon to notice that creates various possibilities for enabling leaders to learn. Stepping outside of a conflict to view it from the perspective of a neutral third party can be liberating and illuminating.

Judy's approach to Aikido as a leadership philosophy, stance, and metaphor is powerful in part because it tempers some of the triggered reactions that can get in the way of learning. Using Aikido:

- **Lowers the stakes.** Introducing leaders to Aikido—an art form and practice in which few are likely to be "masters"—creates a sense of shared exploration. We can look foolish or make mistakes because we're not expected to be "at the top of our game" at this strange art. In this context, Aikido creates a playfulness that emphasizes the fun of learning and growing. It lowers the stakes on feeling accepted or respected as we are now, since almost *everyone* in the room is trying something new.

- **Invites us to step outside our story.** The use of Aikido as a metaphor for the dynamics of conflict—and the possibilities for how we might respond—invites us to step outside of our own conflicts. It creates the distance we need to spot patterns and see things we often can't see from inside the locked boxes of our usual stories. We can suddenly understand why our usual responses result in ineffective

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outcomes. We can identify new possibilities for how to respond and know why these different approaches might be more effective than our standard way of operating.

- **Mixes the familiar with the unfamiliar.** Using metaphorical learning loosens up the limitations on people's thinking about what's possible. One reason Aikido works in this context is that it mixes familiar with unfamiliar. As human beings, we are always looking for patterns we recognize and things we understand or have seen before. So changing the mode of learning or the sense we are using helps us see things in new ways or in higher relief.

  Aikido is one way to mix the familiar and the unfamiliar to create space for self-reflection and learning. In our consulting practice, we do something similar when we teach soft skills, such as how to have difficult conversations, negotiate effectively, or handle feedback well. These skills can feel foreign to highly analytical types, so we teach them initially in a structured and intellectually rigorous way. Through analysis, we break the conflict into component parts. The worksheets we give participants are based on spreadsheets. Engineers, scientists, economists, and people in finance respond well to these familiar approaches, making it easier for them to learn the soft skills we're teaching. They find the idea that learning soft skills can be just as rigorous and analytical as anything else they do reassuring. That familiarity helps them feel willing to shift their story, engage in the conversation with curiosity rather than "solutions," be open to learning something they didn't already know, and step into and explore less familiar territory, including their own blind spots.

If we expect leaders to make these shifts in mindset, to be open to growth, we have to walk our own talk.

Walk Our Own Talk

Learning about ourselves—and helping leaders to learn about themselves—demands rigor, thoughtfulness, and reflection. Even as teachers and conflict professionals, it often feels that we don't have time or that it's not that important compared to the client demands on our "to-do" lists.

But if we expect leaders to make these shifts in mindset, to be open to growth, we have to walk our own talk. We have to be role models in practicing the skills and behaviors we are suggesting to clients and coaches. If they can see *us* struggling to do it, especially in how we interact with them on a project or in the room, they'll be more likely to take on the painful task of learning about themselves.

At the very least, tackling the challenges of learning about yourself will give you a great story to tell. ■

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Sheila Heen and Debbie Goldstein are partners at Triad Consulting Group and both teach negotiation at Harvard Law School. Sheila is the co-author of two *New York Times* bestselling books: *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* by Stone, Patton, and Heen and *Thanks for the Feedback: the Science and Art of Receiving Feedback (Even When it's Off-Base, Unfair, Poorly Delivered, and Frankly You're Not in the Mood)* by Stone and Heen.

BOOK EXCERPT 14.3

Systems Thinking for Social Change

Making an Explicit Choice

DAVID PETER STROH

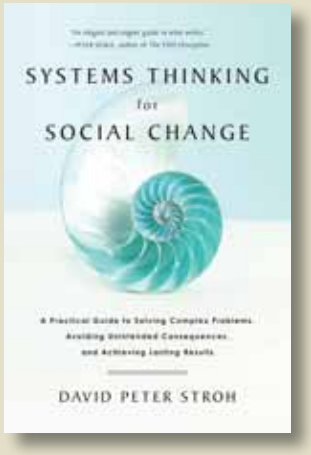
One principle of complex systems is that they are perfectly designed to produce the results they are achieving. But all too often, these results are contrary to what we really want to accomplish. In this excerpt from his book *Systems Thinking for Social Change* (Chelsea Green, 2015), systems consultant David Peter Stroh points out that surfacing the discrepancy between what we want a system to achieve and the results it is currently achieving is a powerful force for constructive change. Acknowledging this difference prompts us to question not only our assumptions about how things are supposed to work, but also our intentions about what is most important to us and what we want to accomplish. The article identifies four steps for aligning people's espoused purpose with the purpose their current actions are designed to achieve.

David Peter Stroh

The broad-based teamwork involved in solving complex social problems requires aligning diverse stakeholders with a common public purpose even when each may have different private agendas. In chapter 6, for instance, we saw the conflicts that almost always emerge in coalitions trying to end homelessness. Everyone has different primary concerns: Elected officials worry about containing costs to keep voter support; downtown businesspeople worry about keeping homeless people away from their storefronts; and shelter providers worry about filling beds to keep their funding. The approach recommended in chapter 6 to align these different interests is to establish common ground by clarifying people's shared aspiration and their initial picture of current reality. But the work doesn't stop there.

While developing common ground is vital, it can miss the even deeper challenge of aligning people with *themselves*. The diversity of concerns held by different stakeholders makes it difficult to not only align people with one another, but also to align each stakeholder's highest aspiration with their own immediate self-interests.

Many people are pulled between achieving what they most deeply care about and meeting short-term goals.[1] We want to realize our divine nature while



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also ensuring that we meet more basic needs such as economic security, belonging, and recognition. Even our desire to help others relieve their immediate suffering can conflict with helping these same people become independently secure and fulfilled over time. The subsequent question for those who want social change is how to support people to realize their highest aspirations, particularly when these diverge from their more immediate concerns. How do we help people make an explicit choice in favor of what they most profoundly want?

Most people are pulled between achieving what they most deeply care about and meeting short-term goals.

The answer is to connect people even more closely with both their aspirations and current reality by uncovering the bottom of the iceberg—the purpose that inspires them and, often by contrast, the purpose that shapes their everyday actions. By becoming more aware of both purposes, people can make a more conscious commitment to their highest aspirations with full awareness of the potential costs, not only the benefits, of realizing them. In order to align stakeholders most powerfully around their avowed purpose, it is important to help them make an informed choice to commit to this purpose in full light of what it might take to get there. Making this choice is pivotal to aligning people's energies in service of meaningful change.

You can learn to create this alignment by supporting people to take four steps:

- Understand that there are payoffs to the existing system—a case for the status quo.
- Compare the case for the status quo with the case for change.
- Create solutions that serve both their long-term and their short-term interests—or make a trade-off with the recognition that meaningful change often requires letting something go.
- Make an explicit choice in favor of their higher purpose by weakening the case for the status quo and strengthening the case for change.

1. Understand Payoffs to the Existing System

Systems are perfectly designed to achieve the results they are achieving right now.[2] At first glance, when we look at how dysfunctional existing systems can be, this premise seems absurd. For example, why would people design a system that perpetuates homelessness, increases starvation, or undermines children's abilities to learn? The answer that emerges from a systems analysis is that people are accomplishing something they want now, something other than what they say they want. They are receiving payoffs or benefits from the status quo, and they are avoiding costs of change.

Payoffs to an existing system include quick fixes that work in the short run to reduce problem symptoms and the immediate gratification that comes from implementing them. In systems that unwittingly perpetuate homelessness, some of the payoffs to the existing ways of working are reduced visibility of the problem due to temporary shelters that keep people off the streets or out of the public eye, reduced severity of the problem because some forms of shelter exist, good feelings on the part of both shelter providers and funders that they are helping people in need, and continued funding for the shelter system.

Costs of change that people prefer to avoid include financial investment, the discomfort of learning new skills and creating different work, having to act interdependently instead of independently, and being patient while waiting for investments to demonstrate returns over time. In the case of ending homelessness, some of the costs people avoid are investing in safe, permanent,

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affordable, and supportive housing; closing shelters or significantly shifting their mission and work; confronting fears on the part of citizens that they might have formerly homeless people as neighbors; and confronting fears on the part of homeless people that they might not be able to adjust to permanent housing.

The payoffs of the existing shelter system and the costs of changing it combine to yield a case for the status quo of helping people *cope with* homelessness.

The case for change includes the benefits of changing and the costs of not changing.

However, this case for the status quo actually undermines efforts to realize the avowed purpose of *ending* homelessness.

2. Compare the Case for Change with the Case for the Status Quo

The case for change includes the benefits of changing and the costs of not changing. These are often easier for people to clarify than the benefits of not changing and the costs of change. People have already been thinking about their vision for a desired future, and they can also imagine a negative future where the problems that concern them are not addressed.

In order to build the case for change, you can ask people what benefits would be derived from realizing their vision—benefits for their constituents and society as a

whole, for their partners and other stakeholders, and for themselves. Those involved in trying to end (versus cope with) homelessness might respond:

- Reduced costs for the emergency response and social services associated with chronic homelessness—including shelters, hospital bills, and substance abuse treatment.
- Reduced unemployment costs for people who experience episodic homelessness because they have lost their jobs and ability to pay for housing.
- Ability to receive state and federal funds for meeting best-practice requirements to reduce homelessness.
- Positive feelings associated with providing people with permanent housing.

Then, to help people understand the costs of not changing, you can ask them to paint their nightmare scenario—to describe the worst that could happen if they do nothing differently now. For those same people working to end homelessness, the costs of not changing include:

- All the above costs continue to increase.
- Lost funding caused by failing to meet government requirements for implementing best practices.
- Lower quality of street life leading to economic decline.

In order to help people compare the case for change with the case for the status quo, it helps to complete a cost–benefit matrix, as shown in the table "Cost-Benefit Matrix for Ending Homelessness."

The cost–benefit matrix helps people understand at an even deeper level why change is not occurring despite their best efforts. It depicts the often hidden case for the status quo—one that is currently strong enough to override the case for change and perpetuate the way things are.

3. Create Both/And Solutions—or Make a Trade-Off

People ideally want to have their cake and eat it, too: They would like to keep the benefits of the status quo

TABLE 1 **Cost-Benefit Matrix for Ending Homelessness**

Case for Change	Case for Status Quo
Benefits of change • Reduced costs of emergency response, shelters, health care, substance abuse treatment, unemployment • Increased ability to receive government funding • Positive feelings associated with providing people with permanent housing	**Benefits of not changing (payoffs of status quo)** • Reduced visibility of the problem • Reduced severity of the problem • Good feelings of helping people in need • Continued funding for shelter system
Costs of not changing • Above costs continue to increase • Lost funding from failing to meet government requirements • Lower quality of street life leading to economic decline	**Costs of change** • Investment in safe, permanent, affordable, and supportive housing • Closing shelters or shifting their mission and work • Confronting fears of ordinary citizens • Confronting fears on the part of homeless people

Source: Bridgeway Partners and Innovation Associates Organizational Learning.

People ideally want to have their cake and eat it, too: They would like to keep the benefits of the status quo while also realizing the benefits of change.

while also realizing the benefits of change. Indeed, both/and solutions are preferable where they can be found, and there are a number of methods such as Polarity Management for creating those solutions.[3] In the effort to end homelessness, there are hundreds of community-based continuums of care throughout the nation providing housing and services for homeless people. Components may include: street outreach, emergency shelters (least permanent), transitional housing (supporting chronically homeless people to prepare to live in permanent housing), rapid rehousing (helping homeless people quickly move into permanent housing, usually in the private market), permanent supportive housing (permanent, affordable, safe housing combined with supportive services for chronically homeless people), and services only. There can be a place for all these alternatives as long as the overall system is incentivized to provide people with permanent housing as quickly as possible.

However, more often than not, people have to make trade-offs. They have to decide if what they aspire to is worth giving up at least some of what they have. As much as we prefer not to let go of anything to have even more, we also understand "no pain, no gain," "there is no such thing as a free lunch," and "investing now for the future." Not only do systems exhibit a tendency for better-before-worse behavior (for example, through quick fixes that undermine long-term effectiveness), but the reverse is also true. Things often have to get worse (or more difficult) before they get better. We

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have to let go of something such as comfort, security, and independence to have what we want even more. By contrast, the unwillingness to let go of such benefits to the status quo is the greatest obstacle to change.

Lyndia Downie, the president and executive director of Boston's Pine Street Inn, one of the most respected shelters in the country, realized that the inn needed to totally transform its mission in order to truly tackle homelessness.[4] She discovered that 5 percent of the homeless people in her shelters took up more than half of the beds on any given night, and that these were the chronically homeless who most needed permanent housing. Committed to Housing First, which centers on providing homeless people with permanent housing quickly and then providing services as needed, she convinced her board to transform the inn's mission from emergency shelter provider to real estate developer and landlord. She describes the "hard-to-stomach" decision for both the board and staff that involved closing some shelters and shifting those resources to buy homes instead.

We have to let go of something such as comfort, security, and independence to have what we want even more.

The need to let go of current payoffs became compellingly clear to me when I spoke one evening with the president of a nonprofit providing health care for the homeless in a major city. He told me that his COO had participated in a systems mapping exercise I had led that morning with many stakeholders working to end homelessness. After reviewing the map and her organization's place in the larger system, she had returned to a meeting the same afternoon with the president and organization's board, and she had posed the following challenge: "What might we have to give up as an organization in order for the whole to succeed?" I had never heard the question before and realized how powerful it is in catalyzing change.

As in the case of the Pine Street Inn, sometimes the greatest challenge begins with letting go of one self-image and replacing it with another:

- The Area Education Agencies and local school districts in Iowa realized that they needed to give up their identities as being solely responsible for the students in their respective geographies. In order to improve education outcomes across the state, they needed to access the power of interdependence and let go of a measure of independence with respect to each other and the state Department of Education.
- The regulator of food safety in a major city learned that it was more effective when it shifted its role with restaurant owners from being an enforcer to being an information provider and educator.
- A county public health department increased its ability to improve the health of a poor community when it shifted its role from being an arm's-length expert to becoming the facilitator of a community-driven process.

4. Make an Explicit Choice

You can support people to let go more easily by first weakening the case for the status quo, and then strengthening the case for change.

A systems map naturally helps weaken the case for the status quo by showing how people's current thinking and actions tend to lead them away from achieving the purpose they aspire to. For example, the emergency response system to cope with homelessness unwittingly diverts attention and resources away from ending it. Separately optimizing parts of K–12 education in Iowa undermines the state's ability to improve education outcomes for all its children. Depending on enforcement as a way to motivate restaurant owners

A systems map helps weaken the case for the status quo by showing how people's current thinking and actions tend to lead them away from achieving the purpose they aspire to.

to increase food safety makes it more difficult to achieve the cooperation required to do so.

Strengthening the case for change involves two steps that deepen people's connections with their highest aspirations. The first is more *receptive* in nature and supports people to stop and listen to what calls to them most authentically. Otto Scharmer describes this as *presencing* in his pioneering book *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges.*[5] He states:

> Presencing—the blend of sensing and presence, means to connect with the Source of the highest future possibility and to bring it into the now. When moving into the state of presencing, perception begins to happen from a future possibility that depends on us to come into reality. In that state we step into our real being, who we really are, our authentic self.

Presencing evokes a deep connection described by different names in various wisdom traditions. Scharmer describes it as an eco-centered view, one captured by the famous philosopher Martin Buber when he encouraged people to "Listen to the course of being in the world . . . and bring it to reality as it desires." Asking, "What is being called of us?" can lead people in a significantly different direction than one based on the question "What do we want to create?"—which risks focusing them on a more ego-centered place.

The second step in deepening people's connection to the case for change is more *active* in nature. It supports people to envision the ideal future that profoundly calls to them. The following guidelines for visioning are based on principles developed by Robert Fritz, a master of the creative process:

- Separate what you want from what you think is possible.
- Focus on what you want versus don't want.
- Focus on the results instead of the process.
- Include the consequences you want.
- See/experience the vision in the present.

I then ask people several questions to describe an ideal time in the future when the vision has been accomplished:

- How are the people you want to serve being served? What are they doing, seeing, feeling, hearing, and saying?
- How does serving these people contribute to other stakeholders and society as a whole?
- What is your group doing differently? What are you seeing, feeling, thinking, and hearing?
- What am I personally doing differently? How does realizing this vision serve my highest self?

Weakening the case for the status quo and connecting people more closely to the case for change through both deep listening and visioning help people make an explicit choice in favor of their highest aspirations.

What Can You Do When People Are Still Not Aligned?

While the four steps above stimulate alignment among diverse stakeholders, they do not guarantee it. One possible outcome is that you still cannot find common ground on which people want to build something together. In this case it helps to remember the alternatives proposed in chapter 6:

- Collaborate indirectly by legitimizing and addressing others' concerns, and then seeking to influence them through mutually respected third parties and/or to engage them at critical phases in the process.

- Work around the people you cannot work with.
- Work against them through such channels as advocacy, legislative policy, and nonviolent resistance.

It is also important to recognize that not everyone needs to agree at once on a new course of action in order for change to occur. Everett Rogers's famous study on the diffusion of innovations concluded that attitudes shift progressively through a population, and that the 15 percent who comprise innovators and early adopters can build sufficient momentum for others to follow.[6]

Another possible scenario is that people look clearly at the case for the status quo and the case for change—and deliberately decide to maintain the status quo with full appreciation of the future they are giving up on. This is certainly a valid choice, and I only encourage people in these cases to make peace with what they have—since they are now consciously choosing it. This means accepting all of current reality including its undesirable aspects since none of it is likely to change if they do not change themselves.

Closing the Loop

- It is difficult to establish common ground when people's everyday actions are not aligned with their highest aspirations.
- Helping people make an explicit choice in favor of what they most profoundly want is a pivotal stage in the change process.
- You can enable people to align their current behavior with their avowed purpose by supporting them to take four steps:
  1. Understand that there are payoffs to the existing system.
  2. Compare the case for the status quo with the case for change.
  3. Create both/and solutions—or make a trade-off.
  4. Make an explicit choice in favor of their higher purpose.
- You still have alternatives available when stakeholders do not align around a higher aspiration even after taking these steps. ■

ENDNOTES

1 Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *How We Talk Can Change the Way We Work* (Jossey-Bass, 2001).

2. This insight has been attributed to many systems thinkers, including Dr. Paul Batalden, professor emeritus at the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth College; Don Berwick, past president and CEO of the Institute for Healthcare Improvement and the former administrator of the US Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services; and Edward Deming, founder of the quality movement.

3 Peter Stroh and Wynne Miller, "Learning to Thrive on Paradox," *Training and Development,* September 2014.

4 Shirley Leung, "Pine St. Inn's Bold Move to End Chronic Homelessness," *The Boston Globe,* July 16, 2014.

5 Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges* (Berrett-Koehler, 2009).

6 Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations,* 5th edition (Free Press, 2003).

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