



SECTION 1

Systems and Sustainability

“Achieving sustainable development is perhaps one of the most difficult and one of the most pressing goals we face. It requires on the part of all of us commitment, action, partnerships and, sometimes, sacrifices of our traditional life patterns and personal interests.”

-Mostofa Tolba,

Chairman of the Commission on Sustainable Development

It is critical that a facilitator/change agent assist organizations to achieve their desired results. But greater importance is to simultaneously build the capacity of the system to sustain and evolve into positive results over the long haul. To achieve this sustainability, the system must operate within a consistent framework of values, principles and processes, and be designed to continuously change and adapt.

This section is intended to develop the conceptual foundation, as well as to provide practical road maps for understanding how to guide and coach groups, teams and organizations to positive results and sustainability.

Many models could have been selected to be part of this development program. The selection I've included in this book is based on my experience in using models that translate into simple yet powerful practices. They all provide a foundation for understanding and working with individuals, small groups, large groups and entire organizational systems.

CHAPTER 1

Core Models

A ‘theory of practice’ is a useful set of principles, assumptions and past practices that allows a consultant to diagnose and design interventions with a high degree of predictability. The theory is continually revised and re-shaped based on feedback about what works and what doesn’t. Many of the principles and assumptions making up my ‘theory of practice’ are based on a few core models or frameworks. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a high-level overview of these key models.

“Below the Green Line” – The Six Circle Model

One of the most powerful and simple whole system models is the Six Circle Model. It was originally developed by Margaret Wheatley and has since been modified by Tim Dalmau and Richard Knowles. When Wheatley (1992) observed change processes within organizations she realized that most organizations approached change by addressing issues in one or more of the top three circles – structure, process and pattern. The “hallucination” was that if you changed the structure of the organization – assigned people to have the primary responsibility for a key initiative – the organization would then positively respond to the change. Additionally, the thinking was that if you designed explicit processes that detailed every step of a change process, people would

STORY: Maritime Union

Tim Dalmau and I had the opportunity to come together and work with a Maritime Union in Australia and a large manufacturing firm. The two organizations had just gone through a long-term strike that was settled by the government. The manufacturing firm (let’s call it Washburn Products) wanted to engage the union leadership in a conversation to find a way of operating differently than the one that was agreed upon in the negotiated settlement because the settlement threatened the continued operation of the company and the jobs of all the employees.

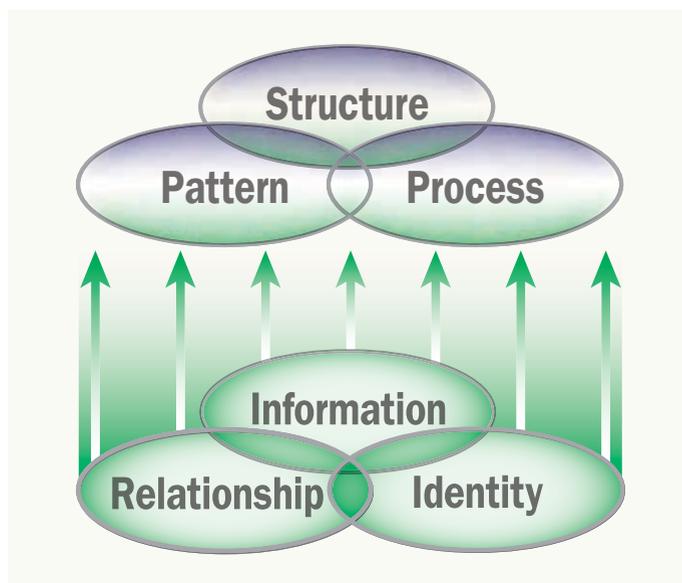
When the parties came together for a multi-day conversation, the 40 people were asked to randomly sit around a circle. The union sat on one side of the circle and management sat on the other side. The union leader

called the business leader “Mr. Washburn Products” rather than by his name, Dave. It was clear that the two groups were locked into their negotiating positions, rather than assembled with an attitude of listening or problem-solving.

Tim and I realized that vital information needed to be shared by the company with the union. Dave was fearful that if the information got out beyond the meeting he would lose his job. Regardless of this concern, “Dave” shared the information with the union. He immediately went from being called “Mr. Washburn Products” to “Dave.” This changed the whole paradigm of the meeting from adversity to collaboration. Out of that meeting a solution was found that reversed some of the negotiated settlement in a way that satisfied everyone’s shared long-term interests.

willingly respond and create the desired change. Or, if the organization developed a detailed long-term strategic plan that itemized every goal, objective and action the desired change would occur. Even though organizations were changing structures, processes and plans, positive change was not happening often enough.

In studying successful change initiatives, Wheatley and others observed that different processes were occurring underneath the top three circles that were critical to organizational success. These critical areas of focus had to do with information, relationship and identity.



The Six Circle Model

Sharing critical information can lead to more openness in an organization. This builds trust and a sense of commitment to create a piece of work together. The work generates positive results, which lead to more information being shared.

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Many organizations have been providing abundant information to their employees for years and receiving feedback that people are drowning in too much information. In this model, it is about creating access to information that is important, rather than providing the information itself. When people can access the information they need and the system creates processes between people where information is open and honest, significant change begins to happen. Access to information greatly minimizes the negative rumors that occur inside organizations and systems.

Information is like oxygen – when people don't have enough they fall asleep, panic, shut down, hallucinate and eventually die. When information is abundant, rumors decrease, people focus on what is important, have greater security in knowing what is actually going on in the organization, and get more creative in their ideas, strategies and solutions.

Relationship is the second critical area of focus "below the green line." People need to have open relationships with the people they work with; trusted rela-

tionships lead to commitment and powerful results. Relationship not only occurs between people, but between programs, departments and organizations (connections). So, relationships are equally important in terms of connecting the work of the system, as they are in connecting people to people.

The third interconnected area is identity. Human beings are meaning-seekers. Our actions are completely driven by our own set of values, beliefs and sense of identity. Therefore, finding meaning and value in our work motivates people to work together in organizations. Organizations that provide abundant opportunities for people to find meaning around their individual and collective work demonstrate significantly improved results. This was demonstrated in the work by Irv Yalom (1998) where he showed that a sense of caring and meaning in organizations was positively and directly correlated to organizational performance.

In the Six Circle Model, all six circles are important to creating organizational success. In the past, the greatest amount of explicit attention has been focused on the top three circles, structure, pattern, and process. Working within a whole systems framework allows us to see the critical and interdependent impact of people as reflected by the bottom three circles. When people first learn about the difference between the “above and below the green line” domains, they mistakenly believe that they must go back and work only on “below the green line issues”, such as trust.

The key is that we must learn to work both “above and below the green line” simultaneously. We don’t have time to work on “below green line issues,” in order to be more effective at “above the green line” work. In fact, “below the green line” work is most authentic when practiced and demonstrated in how we do the actual work. People generally want to come together to get things done. This is typically “above the green line”. How they work on these issues – the values, principles and processes they use – can be infused with “below the green line” approaches. This is working within all six domains simultaneously.

Groups of people who establish a culture that values the work “below the green line” can self-organize to identify and implement “above the green line” strategies and the infrastructure to achieve powerful and creative results.

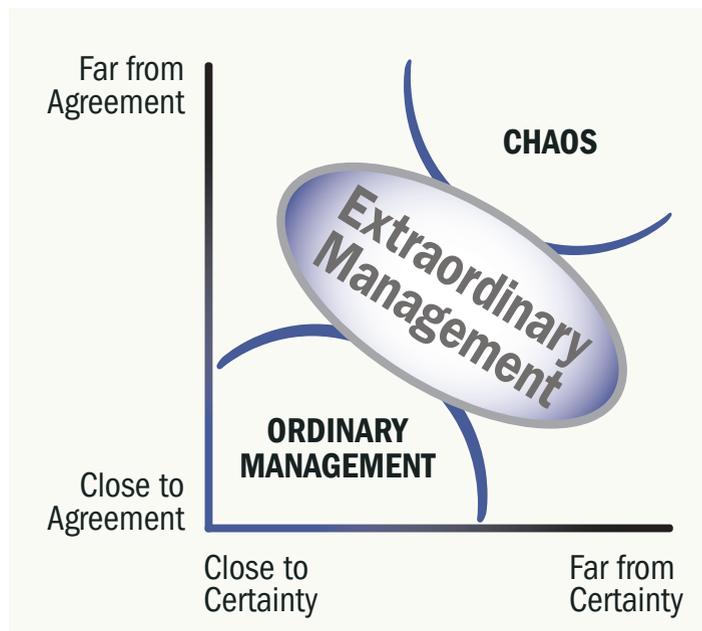
The Ralph Stacey Model

As you begin to apply understandings about complexity into the operations of organizations, significant tensions and paradoxes arise for most leaders and managers. What is the balance between control, planning and emergence?

Ralph Stacey (1992) provides us with a way out of this dilemma. Stacey talks of three different types of change: closed, contained, and open-ended change. He suggests that closed change involves those situations where everyone agrees upon what needs to happen and the likely consequences when it happens (bottom left hand corner in the diagram).

Contained change covers those situations where we are able to say only what will probably happen and what the probable consequences will be. Open-ended change covers those sequences of events for which no explanation has widespread acceptance by those involved.

In situations of closed or contained change, Stacey suggests the consequences of any change are predictable – there is a clear link between cause and effect. Control can be exerted through planning or direct management action. These forms of control by executives are appropriate for the short-term aspects of a business dominated by situations of contained or closed change. This is the domain of operational, top-down management. In these instances Stacey suggests that we identify very clearly those things that are routine, repetitive, known and agreed, and critical to short-term success. He argues that you can, and should, control these things.



Ralph Stacey Model

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For situations of open-ended change (in which organizations have to continually innovate, discern and respond to ambiguous and unclear forces), Stacey suggests complex learning systems and political interaction. These learning communities are the only forms of control capable of operating in this domain. In situations of open-ended change, executive management exerts its influence by setting context, defining meaning, convening conversations and determining how learning will occur (Extraordinary Management in the diagram).

Conventional thinking would say that management is a negative-feedback activity setting a strategic aim and moving the company toward it by correcting deviations. With complex learning systems, the picture is more complicated. The conventional theory is right for day-to-day activities - routine order processing or manufacture of standard parts. But for creative activities like long-term strategy setting, it is dangerously misguided. Indeed, one of the key messages from Ralph Stacey (1992) is not to confuse the requirements of top-down control and good management with day-to-day and immediate routine processes with the essentially unknowable characteristics of long-term change in complex systems.

Some consultants and writers suggest that strongly shared beliefs and values are essential to steer an organization or group into the future. Again, this is good for honing standard routines, stable process and short-term problems. Indeed, Stacey suggests that it is mandatory. But in dynamic conditions where the future consists of multiple shifting agendas, a top-down management system will likely fail to generate the creativity needed to give the company adequate options in the future.

STORY: A Small School District in California

Recently I had the pleasure of working with a small school district in California. I was working with all the principals, district leaders and teacher leaders from each of the school sites. One of the middle school teams wanted to discuss their special education inclusion model and get assistance from all the site teams about some breakthrough strategies.

What was most interesting is that the High School team immediately proclaimed that they had little to offer because they weren't anywhere near being able to talk about inclusion. On the other hand, one of the Elementary School teams had fully operationalized a very effective inclusion model that was fully appreciated and adopted by all the school's teachers.

When we discussed this apparent paradox within this very small community, it quickly became apparent that

the difference existed in the nature of the culture and relationships within each school site. On a clear continuum the "below the green line" culture was strongest at the elementary and moving to the weakest at the high school.



Because the environment of a complex system is made up of other complex sub-systems all competing for resources, the dynamic between them is constantly changing in a non-linear fashion. In fact, both competition and co-operation are at work simultaneously, leading not just to evolution but to co-evolution. This is as true for companies, industries and educational systems as it is for species in nature.

So how does this model help us as facilitative leaders in our organizations? It is a fundamental guide to understanding when we need to convene large numbers of stakeholders into conversation and when leaders should just make decisions in the absence of such conversations. Issues that have relatively high degrees of certainty and agreement within a team or organization do not need to have lengthy conversations with large numbers of stakeholders. These are basically “no brainers” and leaders should just make the decisions, keep people informed, get periodic feedback and move on. Unfortunately in most organizations, these are the issues in which people spend most of their meeting time. Thus, meetings get a bad reputation and people feel manipulated.

On the other side of the diagram, there are many issues in which there is very little or no agreement and there is no certainty about the results given implementation of any proposed strategy. These are issues in which teams and organizations just spin. There are as many strategies and positions as there are people in the discussion. When the issues are urgent and important, a leader or leadership team just needs to make the decision and not confound the whole organization with endless circular conversations, debates and conflict. In the interest of the many, the leaders need to make the tough calls. In these instances, like the bottom left hand corner issues on the preceding page, the leaders need to consult, inform, provide updates and take the flack for making the decisions.

What is most instructive about this model is the deeper learning at its core. As teams and organizations learn how to operate “below the green line”, issues that were once in the top right hand corner of the Stacy Model migrate to the middle domain and middle domain issues migrate to the bottom left hand corner.

Model for Deeper Learning

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The Adizes Model of Leadership

Ichak Adizes provided many fine contributions to the field of management consultation and systems change. One very simple model that is worth presenting is his model of Quality Leadership. He simply stated that Quality Leadership is supported by two primary functions – Quality Decision-Making and Quality Implementation.

Quality Decision-Making is a “democratic” and at times messy process that involves large numbers of people across all key stakeholder groups. In Adizes’ perspective, this type of decision-making should focus on the “what and why” issues of teams, organizations and whole communities. These are the juicy issues in which people find meaning and purpose. These would typically include decisions around mission, vision, values, goals and principles. In the parlance of the Stacey Model, these would be the issues in the area of Extraordinary Management.

Adizes Model

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Involving representation across all stakeholder groups in the “what and why” issues creates deep ownership of the work. If Quality Decision-Making is done in this way then smaller groups of focused teams can work on Quality Implementation. Most people are not interested in being intimately involved in implementation work when they are certain that they have had full input and ownership into the design and direction of the work through Quality Decision Making. In this way, implementation can be focused, swift and effective.

In many organizations, this system is completely turned around. A small leadership team decides the “what and why” and then goes out to large numbers of people seeking their input on implementation. Leadership normally meets with apathy and lack of engagement in the work that, in their minds, reinforces the reason why they need to do most of the decision-making in the organization. They don’t realize that their actions as a leadership team actually created the apathy. Confusing Quality Decision-Making and Quality Implementation is a major contributing factor to the “Us and Them” syndrome. This is typically experienced between operational units and corporate office (school sites and the district office), for example.