Below the Green Line or the 6 Circle Model

Putting Theory into Practice

Chapter 1: Overview

Below the Green Line is much, much more than a model or theory – it is a way of being a leader in an organization. This is intended to be the first in a series of articles that will ultimately result in a “How to Book”. My hope is that the development of this document will be interactive – that is that all interested parties will comment on the document through Facebook (Steve Zuieback – Synectics) and share their personal stories that will become part of this overall “story”.

What is Below the Green Line?

Before jumping into my evolving understanding of “below the green line” let’s first explore what is generally meant by “Below the Green Line” or the 6 Circle Model. The model comes out of the initial work by Margaret Wheatley and then significantly evolved through the work of Tim Dalmau, Richard Knowles, myself and many, many others.

Simply put, the genesis of the original model was an attempt to describe the nature of work or the components of work involved in creating successful change in organizations that sticks (sustainable). As originally described the six areas of focus include three areas that are part of the system infrastructure and three areas that have more to do with the human infrastructure. These latter three areas can loosely be talked about as culture. The actual name – “below the green line” came from a participant in a workshop that Tim Dalmau was conducting in which he had drawn a picture of the six circles. A green line happened to be drawn separating the top three from the bottom three circles. A participant in the session made a comment to Tim something like, “So Tim, you are saying that the components of work below that green line as important, or more important, than the components above the green line.” As simple as it may sound, this expression – “below the green line” stuck.

Top 3 areas Above the Green Line

The top areas are Structure, Process (operations) and Patterns (strategy). Structure describes the ways in which a system organizes itself to conduct business. Operations describe the standard business processes that are used to build consistency and efficiency. Pattern describes the systematic ways in which a system focuses its key strategies to accomplish its mission and goals. These three areas are absolutely essential but not sufficient to bring about and sustain change.
Unfortunately many leaders believe and operate as if these are the only components of work to bring about and support organizations and change efforts.

**Below the Green Line**

The three areas “below the green line” are essential to organizational health and sustainability. The three areas are Information, Relationships and Identity. Information reflects the nature of how information is shared, how it is utilized in decision-making and how transparent the critical information is to all stakeholders in the system.

Relationships has a far more expansive meaning than is generally thought. It has to do with how a team or organization values its people – their emotional, physical and spiritual well-being; the level of connectivity among people across the system; the value place upon collaboration and high functioning teams; and the level of connectivity of and the type of relationship between key teams, programs and operational systems. It is not just the traditional understanding about a focus on people getting along and liking each other.

Identity refers to the level of shared purpose, meaning, passion, beliefs, values and principles of people in teams and the organization as a whole.

All three areas are completely interconnected. In some ways information is like the vital nutrients for the living system, relationships are the conduits to infuse nutrition throughout the system and the identity is concept or framework (mind) that organizes the system into a unique entity. All three are essential to the well being of the whole.

**The relationship of the six circles as a whole system**

Just as the top circles are essential but not sufficient, the bottom three circles can’t stand by themselves in a healthy system. A system focus solely on the bottom three circles would be like a social club or a book group where the only purpose is about sharing time together around a common purpose.

“Below the green line” always exists in a team or organization. The question is not about forming “below the green line”, but shaping the below the green line to be most conducive and effective to realize the mission and vision of the organization. As an example, in a highly bureaucratic organization the “below the green line” might we described by the following statements:

- The sharing of information is related to the hierarchy of leadership. In a formal way, the amount of information you have is directly related to your position on the organizational chart. Higher formal power – more access to the critical information. In an informal sense information is widely distributed through informal leadership and informal connections and the information is often based on stories and rumors.
• In bureaucratic organizations relationships are king. The only way to get any work accomplished is based on whom you know or whom you can go to in order to get something done. In some countries of the world, whole industries are based upon such information relationship networks. Somebody who is not part of such a network or who is not willing to pay someone in the network can wait forever to get the most basic needs met through formal government.

• Identity also exists in bureaucratic organizations but is often completely detached from the stated mission or vision of the organization. People identify with small groups, their union affiliations, or cliques. The system is highly fragmented, disconnected and inefficient.

One Common Misunderstanding about “Below the Green Line”

When most people learn about “below the green line” they think that they need to develop these areas before they can work on the “above the green line” work. In my experience this is not only inefficient but it is not necessary.

My perspective is that you constantly build “below the green line” as you do the “above the green line” work of the organization. The “below the green line” components are the social infrastructure that enables work to get done and sustained. The more functional the “below the green line” infrastructure, the more complex the issue can be that is tackled by a team or organization.

The way in which work is tackled determines whether you are building or depleting the “below the green line” infrastructure – use the right processes with the right intentions/attitudes and the right people and you build the social infrastructure.

In addition, we don’t have time to work on the “above and below the green line” separately. Time is one of our most precious resources. In addition, people would generally rather work on what they perceive is the “real work” which is above the green line, rather than the “touchy feely” work of “below the green line”. This creates a false understanding of what is really meant by “below the green line” work. So the philosophy of “below the green line” is really the heart or inspiration behind the whole system, and modeling this is expressed by our approach and practice. Why work on one when we can get both at the same time in a much more elegant and efficient manner.

Heart, Head and Hand

The way I have been talking about my practice and “Below the Green Line” is that the largest level framework is composed of three essential elements:

Heart – Inspiration

Head – Approach

Hand – Practice
Heart – Inspiration

The Heart or Inspiration is often the most essential and missing element. At its core it consists of my most deeply held values and beliefs and it is the organizing “framework” and “filter” for my approach and practice.

I draw my greatest inspiration from my spiritual practice, from nature and from humanity when it is at its best – in service of other people.

I also know that as soon as we start talking about spirituality many people get uncomfortable. I find this paradoxical in that true spirituality should be the ground where we all are united – the pursuit for universal truth and humane practice that transcends and complements all religions. I actually believe that all religions are reflections of true spirituality. In this way everyone can practice their chosen religion and continuously seek the deeper truths that transcend all the great religions of the world.

“Sometimes our light goes out, but is blown again into instant flame by an encounter with another human being.”
— Albert Schweitzer

Even though I work with teams, organizations and whole communities on improving effectiveness and community conditions, I believe that our greatest work is in creating the conditions for people to grow, to connect and to rise beyond themselves in service to each other.

“The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread but there are many more dying for a little love. The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty -- it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality. There's a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God.”
— Mother Teresa, A Simple Path: Mother Teresa

I also believe that it is our own perspectives and points of view that create our realities – both positive and negative. From this belief there is no one to blame, judge or criticize. Neither are there problems but just different points of view or perspective to bring to each situation.

“Peace comes from within. Do not seek it without.”
— Siddhârtha Gautama
Head – Approach

I believe that the true artist is first guided by their heart and then has honed their craft to perfection. However, perfect craftsmanship can be lifeless and sterile and doesn’t move people. Both are essential – there is a hierarchy and relationship between the heart and the head – inspiration and approach.

For me the easiest way to understand or to distill your approach is to think about it as a theory of practice. A theory of practice is a set of beliefs and principles about what works based upon research and your applied research about what actually works in the world. The theory of practice allows a person to quickly look at a new situation and determine the highest probability about what will work in a new situation based on what has worked in similar scenarios in the past. It can be both efficient and perhaps limiting at the same time and that is why it is often useful to work with a team of people in building an approach to a complicated situation.

Hand – Practice

Once you have arrived at a determination about what might work in a given situation, you then apply some very specific techniques. For me these techniques include a series of conversation and planning processes together with specific skills related to individual and group dynamics. Ideally these practices reflect and model both your theory of practice and the underlying source of inspiration.

Concluding Remarks and Next Steps on the Journey

This short article is intended to get the conversation going about “Above and Below the Green Line”. I intend to continue the writing to take this broad overview into a very practical set of recommendations, practices and distinctions that will fully describe the overall philosophy from “soup to nuts”. Please let me know what you think so far. What makes sense, what is missing and what you would like to hear and see more about to deepen your practice. You can do this by going on my Facebook page Steve Zuieback-Synectics.