

I want teamwork and empowerment but I'm the only one who seems to care...

Let's talk about it, really talk about it

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I can't believe the receptionist was reading a magazine while the phones were ringing. Doesn't anybody but me care about this organization?

I wish the Director wouldn't always be second guessing and checking up on me, making 'improvements' in what I do. There's no way I'm going to work those long hours if I don't feel some sense of ownership in this place.

I'd love to feel like this place was mine — or at least part mine — but the way they treat me, never letting me do anything on my own, never asking me what I think or how things should be run — and I have some good ideas, too! — but no way am I going to work hard here.

What's wrong with these people? Don't they care about our customers or this organization? Why is she so lazy? I can't stand her attitude. If this happens again, I'm going to threaten to get rid of her. Maybe that will help...

Sound familiar? If you are like most people at work, you'd like to work with a team that gets the job done and makes you feel part of something meaningful. Yet you are trapped in a web that doesn't foster teamwork. Your job may be to motivate people to work as a team.

What follows describes in detail how I approached a very difficult work situation where teamwork had broken down and misunderstanding, bad feelings, low morale and inefficiency had taken over.

As a leader in an organization, you have likely read about total quality management, continuous improvement, teamwork, participative management, facilitative leadership, and other concepts. These are all fine goals. But how do you get there when no one is talking to each other, or no one seems to care?

The approach described here relied upon an analysis of dialogue to help participants say what they meant, so they could get the results they wanted. The approach also included a systemic analysis of the organization, to help people understand something about the organization as a whole.

The case:

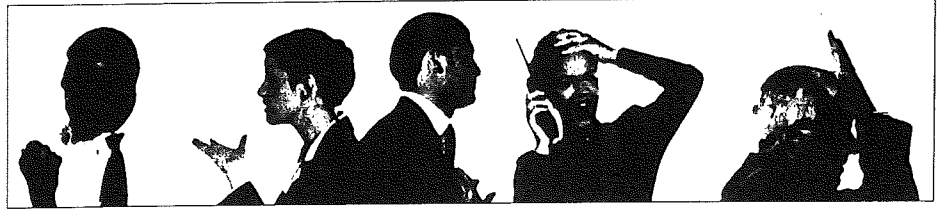
The executive director of the organization approached me to help them with what he described as internal difficulties between the staff and himself. After agreeing to work with them, I asked to interview key staff members. The staff were quick to describe their problems they were experiencing at work.

The staff's view: too much is un-discussable — Although they seemed very dedicated to their work, they were having trouble completing their tasks effectively because of internal difficulties. It was not that they could not agree on their goals, but rather that they had ideas about each other which they could not discuss with each other.

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In interviews, staff members reported that they were under severe stress. They reported that the executive director exhibited a "lack of respect" for them. They said he showed up late for meetings, and "talked down to me in front of other people." Staff meetings started late. The director controlled the agenda of staff meetings, asked for communications in writing for staff meetings, but then did not read the communications closely and did not have answers to their questions.

They said he "wants us to express our opinions, but also tells us not to open our mouths and doesn't trust us to say anything." He is good at the "political big picture, good at his job, but in three years each of us will be in little pieces." They reported a variety of other problems with their work life: lack of flex time, overwork, and no clear compensatory time guidelines. They were frustrated, and some reported they were close to quitting because of their treatment by the director.

The director's view: I'm all alone — In my interview with the director, he said, "I'd love to share more of the responsibility with the staff, but I know the buck stops with me." He also mentioned problems caused by the death, after a long illness, of a former staff member who often spent time listening to other staff members about their personal problems. He indicated that he thought that the loss of this staff member might have increased the stress level.

He also mentioned the recent loss of two important external allies of the organization. For a number of years these two allies had buffered and protected the organization from a variety of externally produced pressures.

"I have high expectations," he said. "I think we need to hang out more. We don't hang out because I work all the time."

"I play out that I'm the only one who knows about money. At the meetings, I structure the agenda. I'm looking for them to come back at me, to give me a challenge."

The dialogue

The organization met for one day to discuss the problems brought up in the interviews. I began by asking them to describe how they saw the organization as a whole, including its strengths and weaknesses. Then I focused on some of the specific issues that concerned them. My intention throughout was to begin to show the members of the organization how to communicate with one another more effectively.

One of the issues of concern to them was finance. I asked them if this was something they could talk about.

Money — is there a place to discuss money?

Director Louis: There is a place to discuss it in the initial budget. We do complete financial reports to the Board. We don't normally go through the board packets in staff meetings. But in supervision I am always on somebody's back about the cash flow.

(The director's statement that he is "always on somebody's back about the cash flow," implies his sense of urgency about the cash flow.)

Louis: There is no question the burden of money stops with me. I am not sure if we ran out of money there is anyone except me who would feel responsible for it — except maybe Dale.

About the presentation of the case:

The case here is real and I have the permission of the organization to describe their experience as long as it is not named. To facilitate your reading of the case, I have randomly assigned names and gender to the different people involved.

The staff are Amy, Bert, Carlos and Dale; the executive director is Louis.

When I am speaking in dialogue, the text will be in all italics.

(My analysis during the dialogue will be in lighter text, indented and in parentheses.)

Attributions are key indicators in dialogue...

Attributions are opinions about others based on some behavior, words or actions, we have observed, coupled with some interpretation we make of that behavior.

We all make attributions about others. However, we generally don't communicate our attributions about others to them, or test them with others to see if they are accurate. The director's attribution about others in this case is untested. He indicates how he would feel if the organization ran out of money and offers an untested assumption or attribution about how others would feel. He does not say on what he bases his attribution about the others. He also does not ask those about whom he makes the attribution if it is accurate.

If we are going to communicate with others in a way that allows us to build an effective team, we need to provide examples of specific behavior (words or deeds) on which we base any attribution about others. And we need to make clear, at least to ourselves, the attributions that shape our responses to others. We need to test our attributions, but can only do so when we ourselves are aware of them.

In this case here, the director needs to learn to be able to say why he thinks this way, on what he based his attribution. If he can point to specific words or deeds of others, then those others can see what behaviors he observed that led him to this conclusion. Otherwise, all they have is his opinion. Unfortunately, most of us speak this way.

The director also said he "needs more reassurance" from the group, but he does not indicate what behaviors he is actually requesting. Often our requests of others — such as for *reassurance* or *responsibility* — are abstractions. We fail to indicate the behaviors we want from them. *Reassurance* is an abstraction. My asking "How could you do that?" is intended to help the director examine what he means by *reassurance*, to get him to describe the specific behaviors he would like the staff to produce to *reassure* him.

Louis: I need more reassurance that people will take responsibility once money is budgeted — so I don't have to continually remind people.

How could you do that?

(Here, the director makes an "attribution" about the staff — "I am not sure if we ran out of money there is anyone except me who would feel responsible for it..." This is a key statement by the director. We will examine it in some detail.) [1]

Louis: Make it an agenda item on the staff meeting. Some time on the budget — so everyone is up to speed on the budget.

Amy: I know it's hard when one person carries that burden alone.

Louis: In the past the Board did not know about cash flow. When cash flow was down to almost nothing, the Board did not know it.

Bert: It gets back to my having tunnel vision, I don't pay attention to the larger issues, like cash flow. While your (to Louis) biggest thing may be cash flow, my biggest thing will be my own project.

Amy: I used to be responsible for each paycheck, it's nice not to carry that burden.

Bert: About sharing that burden, I don't have to think about it as much as the director, but it's something I am very aware of and feel a sense of personal responsibility about. If we have a big event where we have to raise a lot of money, if that doesn't happen I feel very personally responsible about it, and feel very bad if that doesn't happen and feel I have to compensate in some way to make up for that. I want to share the responsibility more.

Carlos: I am more concerned about when I go to the office supply store, am I getting bargains. That's the way I perceive my job.

Louis: I am hearing more willingness to communicate around money.

Dale: I'm hearing that even though people are willing to be more involved, the buck stops there. That's very real.

Louis: That's what I get paid for. Or part of what I get paid for. And I have to accept that responsibility. But what I am hearing is there is more willingness to share that responsibility, so I don't have to remind people, that it becomes second nature, that if the money does not come in there is a cash flow problem.

People seem to want to know how to get a sense of the larger picture that you have to carry. It seems that people are saying that if they felt a sense of ownership they would take on greater responsibility. It seems if they had a sense of the bigger picture, they might have a greater sense of ownership and responsibility. Is this the case? If so, what behaviors or words very specifically would help develop a sense of ownership?

Bert: My favorite word is *ownership*, Seeing the big picture, for some things, the buck can stop with us on the money and we can take some of that burden off.

Louis: I need more reassurance that people will take responsibility once money is budgeted so I don't have to continually remind people that this is their budget and they are responsible for it.

But reassurance is an abstraction, an abstract word, and responsibility is an abstraction. One thing I'd like you to do, and I try to do when I communicate, is to take abstractions like reassurance or responsibility and bring them down to something you can actually observe. My goal is to show you how to use these communication skills. So you can see me use them here, practice them yourself, and hopefully, use them in the future. Although we know that it is not simple or easy to change habits of communication.

So let's use the example of reassurance. It might be helpful for you to illustrate what you mean by "more reassurance that once the money is budgeted I don't have to continually remind people." What would that actually look like?

(My intention here is to get the director to stop requesting an abstraction — *reassurance* — and start making requests in terms of specific behaviors staff members can produce, using words that will indicate exactly what the director wants. Requests made in the abstract often occur in organizational communication. Lower level staff ask for *ownership*. Those at the top ask those at the bottom or middle to take on more *responsibility*. However, ownership and responsibility are abstractions. Neither party can effectively produce them. Bert says, if he saw the "bigger picture" he would take on more ownership and hence more responsibility. But he fails to say exactly what this *bigger picture* would entail. Exactly what information would he need to have the bigger picture? What would make it complete enough for him to feel ownership and exercise responsibility? He does not say.)

Louis: I think that would probably look like an agenda item on the staff meeting to talk about money, to talk about where we are with the budget. I think that's the level of reassurance I would need.

So it would be an agenda item at staff meeting?

(By repeating his statement, I hope to get him to be more specific.)

Louis: And I think that needs to be prefaced with "we need to spend some time on the budget so that everyone is up to speed on the budget."

I am not sure that I have communicated that to everyone on how the budget does fit together.

Now one thing that is important, when you are trying to accomplish something, when you want "more reassurance that people will take responsibility once the money is budgeted," move down from the abstract to the observable.

How would you actually do that? You mentioned an agenda item at the staff meeting, but that might be a number of different things. What would it actually look like in behavioral terms if someone "reassured you."

(Again, I am trying to bring him down from the abstraction of reassurance to something somebody can actually accomplish — some practical behavior a staff member can produce so there won't be any question about what it is and its effectiveness, that it is, in fact, the reassurance that the director wants.)

Louis: With Bert's case, in terms of her overall responsibility, if we had cash flow of \$2,000,000 in June and we knew the source of that money, and we were not able to get to that source of the money, then she would come up with plan B to replace that source of money, to reconfigure the cash flow to come up with that money.

So she would come up with a plan?

(By repeating what has been stated, I intend to move the director to think more about what he would include in a plan. My role as facilitator is to point out abstract words to help others develop new habits of speaking in specific, observable terms.)

Louis: As best he could. I think it would be something we would have to do to a certain degree together, rather than pretending that it doesn't exist. And I am not saying you have done this.

You said you need more reassurance. Is that something you have told her in the past?

Louis: Usually when I talk about money it's because the money had not come in when I expected it to come in and I say to them: "The money has *GOT* to come in. We're behind the 8 ball. We included it as income in our cash flow. We don't have a lot of reserve. (with great emphasis) The money has *GOT* to come in!"

(To Bert) So, you would track the money. And send him (Louis) a note ahead of time to tell him the money has come in. So the reassurance would be to send the director a note to say that you are tracking the cash flow? What would you do in as specific terms as you can tell?

Bert: I would probably spit out the bills and cc (copy) you (to Louis) so you would see that the bills have been sent.

(To Louis) Would that be the reassurance you were looking for?

Louis: Yeah. Well the final reassurance is getting the money. (laughs)

Yes, but I am asking you, what is enough reassurance? You said you needed more reassurance. Would that be enough?

Louis: The bottom line is clearly getting the money. The next layer of reassurance is that people are taking responsibility to make sure the money comes in, and that if it doesn't come in, there is a plan in place to replace that money, or I have the knowledge there is a problem of that money coming and together we can work out Plan B.

What I am trying to show here is when we have a need, you have an opinion, that you need "more reassurance," what we fail to do is take that abstraction and use words that indicate specific action so someone else can produce what you need.

(Here I am trying to understand the meaning and measure of "enough reassurance.")

Louis: I don't think I failed to communicate it. I think it's out of frustration about money. Which is why the deeper the reassurance, the more observable the reassurance I have that in fact the money is coming in, that there is a Plan B in action, the level of frustration that I communicate to staff is reduced. I think I ask for the observable behavior, but I ask for it in a context of frustration.

(This statement is important. The director recognizes that "the more observable the reassurance... (the more) the level of... frustration is reduced." When communication is more effective, the level of negative emotions is lower. When communication is less abstract and more observable, it is less likely that emotions will destroy effective communication.)

And what happens when he asks for it in a context of frustration?

Bert: Well, my idea of reassurance may be far different than his idea of reassurance, so even though I think the bill was sent, don't worry about it, that's not enough to reassure him. So it comes back to what is it that I can do to make sure he is reassured about the cash flow? And I think when it's asked in frustration, he is not even sure that I can do anything at that point — without getting the check within the next four hours on his desk. (speaking now to Louis) You're at a point where you can't be reassured.

What I am trying to show here is when we are frustrated, we can still communicate effectively. It will not be effective to ask for things in the abstract, like "I need more reassurance." So when someone says "I need more reassurance that the money is coming in!" Your response would be what? ... If you say, "I gave you those reports." And he says, "Well that's not enough!" You need to ask, "Specifically what would be enough?" You need to ask him to show you in observable terms exactly what he is asking for.

It will often be difficult to say "OK, what specifically do you need?" — particularly when you are upset. If someone says, "I need a report!" what words do you say in reply? "A report" is abstract. You need to ask — calmly, if possible — "What does the report have to include?" You have to bring it down to the concrete level. For example, I can't "reassure" you. I don't know what reassure means to YOU.

(Here, to demonstrate how reassurance can mean several different behaviors, I put my hand on the shoulder of Carlos, and role playing said "Oh, Carlos, you are doing a great job." But that may be the worst thing in the world. You hate it when people touch you.)

Carlos: What are you doing in my personal space?!

Right! That can be terrible. Or for some people that can be the nicest thing in the world. What you may want to do is to say, "I need you to reassure me, and that means I need you to come over to me, put your hands on my shoulder and say, 'Everything will be OK.'" Or, "I need you to reassure me, and that means I need you to stand 20 feet away from me and say 'You are doing a great job.'" Those are different behaviors.

Carlos: Or a thank you note in the mail box, or whatever the reinforcer is.

If you don't illustrate, or say exactly, what you want in concrete, specific, observable terms, you can't get what you want. Because then you are dealing on this high abstract level, like "I need you to reassure me." What you were hoping for was a thank you note in the mailbox, but what I thought you wanted was a tap on the shoulder. And that's actually the worst thing for you, right?

Carlos: Right.

Analyzing the first dialogue — In the above dialogue, I was trying to show that appropriate reassurance consists of different behaviors in the eyes of different people. Reassurance can entail a note in the mailbox to one person, or a touch on the shoulder to another. But for someone who doesn't like to be touched, the hand on the shoulder is the opposite of reassurance. My demonstration of the touch on the shoulder, the "you are doing a great job" statement from 20 feet away, and the thank you note in the mail box was to show that all three could be reassurances. But only one is right for the colleague. The others may be counterproductive. To discover which behaviors would be the right ones, one needs to ask the person just what "reassurance" would entail.

Likewise with a report. The words *a report* do not indicate exactly what needs to be included in the report. Only by communicating the specifics of the report one is requesting, can the other person effectively comply with a request.

Effective communication... Effective communication, that is, producing requests that are specific and unambiguous, is particularly important in areas that are likely to evoke emotion — as cash flow does here. The director said he "gets on people's backs" in such situations and "asks out of frustration." In such cases it is especially important to communicate in non-abstract language to avoid misinterpretations of the meaning of a request.

Another dialogue

The importance of another aspect of communication is demonstrated during a second dialogue. This one involves responsibility for a task. Amy brought up his responsibility for a specific project she was assigned to complete. Here the failure of the director and Amy to negotiate a clear contract about the terms that would allow ownership and shared responsibility caused problems. The reasons surfaced for the first time in the dialogue.

Amy: In terms of responsibility, when I think about ownership, I think responsibility and ownership go hand in hand. In terms of the budget issues I feel that I haven't really had responsibility for the budget issues because I haven't really felt that I had full ownership of them. There is kind of a bigger picture that I don't have access to, and so that has been my difficulty. I don't really feel the responsibility.

With one project, you (to Louis) came in and purchased items for the project, but we really did not discuss it much, so I didn't feel responsible, because I didn't really feel like I owned the project... I couldn't really control the budget so much because I didn't necessarily have full responsibility for it.

(Here Amy is trying to show what he means by lack of ownership. Louis bought something for her project without consulting her. She says this led her to feel like she did not own it. Since Amy shares the observable behavior, (Louis buying something for her project without consulting her), she allows Louis and others to better understand what it means to her to own something. She says if the director had discussed the purchase for her project with her before he bought it, she could have retained her sense of ownership of this project.)

Louis: We don't have a shared vision of control. It's a power struggle that goes on and has gone on and that's what it was. The issue is responsibility and control.

Amy: I don't see it as a power struggle, but as a struggle to share that vision and more as a struggle to communicate.

Louis: It's not just that I see it, I feel it.

This is good you bring this up. Can you try to be specific about what you just said?

Louis: I think it involves power, control, responsibility and trust. The issue between Amy and I has always been an issue of responsibility.

You don't have a shared vision of control at least partly because you have not taken the time to specify exactly what that would mean. Amy had a different vision of control. She wanted you to discuss with her any spending on his project. To paraphrase what you said, you (to Amy) did not feel ownership because Louis did not discuss with you what he bought for your project, that you were not aware of the spending on your project.



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If we can learn to how to illustrate abstractions like taking responsibility, we can be more effective as a team. It is often our failure to communicate in a mode that helps people understand what we mean by abstractions like responsibility that disables the team from completing the task. Shared vision grows from communication that is behavioral, not abstract.

Analysis of the second dialogue — In this project, the intention of the director, Louis, was to transfer to Amy increased responsibility. However, both failed to communicate the behaviors Louis and Amy would need to engage in to lead Amy to feel ownership. In the above dialogue, for the first time, Amy shares one barrier to her sense of ownership. (“You came in and bought things and we really did not discuss it much...”) She indicated that a discussion about potential spending on the project would have created in her a sense of ownership and responsibility.

For example, Louis and Amy might have agreed to discuss any spending she may do independently over \$10,000. But because no such agreement took place, Amy ended up not taking on the responsibility and ownership that both she and Louis wished her to take. Alternatively, Louis could have requested of Amy that the project come in under a budget of *X dollars* and agree to discuss with Louis any specific spending she does above *Y dollars*. The point is not to problem solve in retrospect, but to demonstrate the need for each person to specify the behaviors he/she expect of the other to facilitate a sense of “ownership” and shared responsibility.

The systemic analysis

Besides trying to help the organization develop communication skills to improve team work, I did a systemic analysis of the organization which provided an organizational context for some of their seemingly *personal* problems.

In this case, a number of events impacted the system as a whole. These system-wide events in turn affected the participants' ability to communicate well and develop the team work they sought. A simplified systemic analysis illustrates how the system in which an individual works affects an individual's thoughts, feeling and effectiveness. ²

In this session, the participants *drew* their organization as a system, including the various parts and players in the organization.

They also identified external players that affected the organization. The exercise allowed members of the group to see how *their* situation was deeply affected by events and dynamics outside their immediate sphere.

Changes in the internal and external environments... In this case, the death of one particularly nurturing staff member (after a long illness) meant that the organization as a whole had lost its *relief valve*. Additionally, the organization had also recently lost two important allies outside the organization that had buffered the organization from external problems. These two events increased the stress upon the organization and its staff. However, without looking at the system, the staff would not be aware of these events' impact on the system's health, and, in turn, on them personally.

The safety valve — Regarding the deceased employee, Carlos said: Jane was also a nurturer. No matter what was going on, if you had a problem, Jane would spend however long you needed to talk about whatever it was, no matter what it was, Jane would be totally sympathetic, would try to understand. We never took the time to mourn her.

From their descriptions, we depicted the organization as a system with a drawing: ²

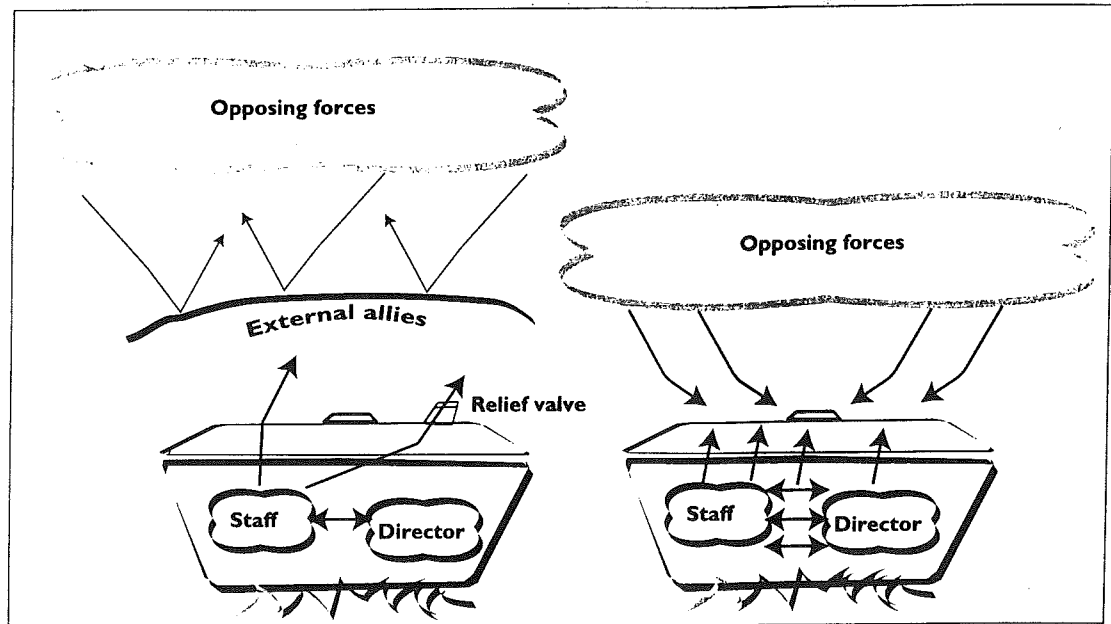
Jane was a pressure relief valve. When people were *steamed up*, her “totally sympathetic listening — no matter how long it took,” relieved pressure on the organization. After her death, with no replacement for this function, the pressure within the organization built up. The loss of the external allies and resulting increased pressure also caused increased stress.

This type of systemic analysis allows people to step outside the psychological or interpersonal frame they often make when they confront what seem to be personal or emotional problems. The systemic frame leads them to see how the entire system, including its history and external environment, affects them in a very direct and powerful way. It allows them to look at the organization from a more distant perspective — from the balcony as opposed to being on the dance floor.

Sometimes, this perspective allows participants not to be sucked into the whirlwind of daily organizational pressures. With this perspective, they can sometimes take steps to alleviate the pressure caused by the systemic changes.

Drawing the organizational system can help de-personalize overly-personalized discussions...

A graphic portrayal of the systems helps staff understanding and awareness of the organizational world in which they live. It shows that their problems are not entirely interpersonal, but part of a system. Pointing this out can help relieve some of the tension within the organization. When the whole system is drawn graphically, the team may sense, "Ah-hah! So maybe that's why we're at each others' throats lately."



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It often helps to have the organization's participants draw their own system, discuss their different drawings and come up with a common picture.

Final thoughts

Helping organizations help themselves will always retain elements of art — the mix of experience, intuition, reasoning and theory, but to develop the ability of the client organization to learn and continually improve on its own, it helps to make the reasoning and theory behind the approach taken explicit. This facilitates the organization's ability to reproduce what was learned during the session(s) — after the consultant is gone. It lessens the likelihood that the organization will use automatic or knee jerk responses to organizational difficulties at inappropriate times.

Showing organizations the reasoning behind a proposed approach also helps it to evaluate the usefulness and value of the approach working in their setting. For example, an organization can estimate the current losses from the lack of team work, judge whether a proposed method or process would work in their organization, and what likely improvements would be worth.

In this case, the process used resulted in better relationships between the parties involved. They began to develop clearer guidelines and expectations and use words that described specific

behaviors rather than abstractions. This has reduced the levels of stress and misunderstanding within the organization.

Although no single approach leads to eternal organizational harmony, describing the reasoning underlying it helps the organization to help itself. Examining the reasoning behind the practitioner's intervention also invites constructive criticism which, hopefully, will in turn lead to more effective practice. ♦

Note: The author gratefully acknowledges the work of Chris Argyris, Ronald Heifetz and Peter Martyriowych in the development of the ideas expressed in this article.

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