



Collaborations

Volume IV, Issue I

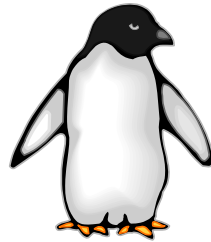
Winter 2002

David helps us see how organizations can be trapped by systems when they fail to understand them.



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Book Corner ~ *The Tip of the Iceberg* by David Hutchens

Trying to get others in your organization to understand Systems Thinking? If they will invest 45 minutes, give them a copy of David Hutchen's newest book, *The Tip of the Iceberg*.

David cleverly uses a story about penguins, walruses and clams to help us see how organizations can be trapped by systems when they fail to understand them. The story is followed by a discussion guide that truly makes a complex topic easy to get your arms around.



Common Problems at Work

Question:

As you travel from company to company, do you see common issues or problems? If so, what might they be and what could we learn?

Collaborations response:

In our work with many different companies, we do tend to see some common recurring issues. Let us hasten to say that each company and group is somewhat different and is faced with its own unique challenges and dynamics. However, we do tend to see some common problems which are frequently present.

Those issues tend to be in two general categories. One category consists of organizational issues. These are: poor communications, lack of trust, lack of clarity of direction, everyone not on the same page, and a large gap between management and line workers.

The second category consists of personal issues. These are: my life is out of balance; there's too much work to do; I have to attend too many unnecessary or very poorly run meetings; I'm under appreciated; it is very unclear what is expected of me; I get little or poor feedback on how I'm doing; job security does not exist.

In general, we find some subset of these issues in almost every group with which we work. This is usually true whether the group is very senior, very junior, management or labor.

Common Problems

(Continued from page 1)

Very often many of these issues turn out to be symptoms rather than the actual problem. In other words, deeper problems exist which give rise to the stated issue.

Frequently, that can lead to a discussion of “systems” thinking. Our next *Collaborations* will discuss “systems” approaches to these problems. In anticipation of that discussion let us again refer you to David Hutchen’s newest book, *The Tip of the Iceberg*, mentioned in the “Book Corner.” It is an excellent short course on systems thinking, and will prepare you for our future “systems” discussion.

For now, let’s consider these two categories of common problems. First they represent people’s perceptions. Of course, you are aware that “perception is reality.” It may not be your reality, but it is someone’s reality. It is easy for companies (read supervision and management) to get out of touch with the realities others face in the workplace. We would argue that if a group presents these issues they are most certainly based on something -- where there is smoke there’s fire. The issues should be addressed in meaningful ways.

Making a mountain out of a mole hill isn’t appropriate, nor is ignoring a mole hill, whatever its size. Mole hills do sometimes grow into mountains. We often see a tendency by supervisors, managers and senior managers to not give full credence to co-worker and employee issues. That’s rather normal. If you were working hard to improve the communications processes, you too, would probably be biased about how well you were doing and how well the communications process was working.

Second, as people move up in the organizational structure, there seems to be a predisposition that develops which goes like this: “people like to complain, it’s not as bad as they say, they really don’t know how good it is, etc.” It’s a tendency to minimize problems.

Of course, you are aware that “perception is reality.” It may not be your reality, but it is someone’s reality.

Third, managers, team leaders, or heads of a division need to have clear, explicit facts with which to work. “Communications are poor,” is too vague to do much about. If you are going to work on communications you need facts, real data. What communications are people not getting? Where is the disconnect? How frequently is this happening? As you ask these questions, and others similar to them, a picture will begin to develop which will allow you to do some meaningful work on the “communications” process.

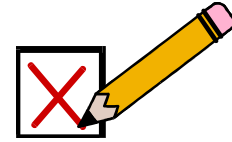
The same is true with the rest of the list. “Trust is poor.” Trust on whose part? Of whom? When? Examples, names and incidents need to be cited in order to determine how to put some effort into improving it.

It would be easy to use the above list of common problems to formulate some questions which you could ask in your group or organization. That way you could get a sense of whether they are also “common” problems with your people.

HANDLE WITH CARE

A word to the wise, openly gathering data creates an anticipation that you are going to do something with the data you are collecting. That could be as simple as sharing the results of your data gathering or as complex as working on problems which might surface. Good luck.

Leadership Assessment ~ Processes



We have defined leadership in 4 key areas:

- Relationship; Environment; Processes; Business Focus

In the last two issues of *Collaborations*, we shared the Relationship and Environment portions of our assessment with you. This issue has Processes. Business Focus will be in the Spring issue. If you would like printed copies of the entire assessment, send an e-mail to sgerke@att.net.

Here's the **Processes** portion of the assessment:

1 = I could use work in this area 2= I do OK in this area 3= I could help others in this area

As a Leader, I:

- 1 _____ Clarify what the boundaries are, who owns them, and the process to "push" them.
- 2 _____ Understand my role and have communicated my role to my followers.
- 3 _____ Run effective meetings.
- 4 _____ Use appropriate decision making processes and make effective decisions.
- 5 _____ Use effective conflict resolution techniques to resolve conflict.
- 6 _____ Effectively implement change.
- 7 _____ Use creative approaches to solving problems.

These items are about the processes you and the people you work with deal with daily. If you aren't doing these processes well, what are the odds that your people are? You are their model -- they are probably trying to mimic what they see you doing. Is there an opportunity here to do some clarification?

Performance Management

When you assess performance, you probably assess whether the person did what was in his written objectives. "Yes, he did it," or "No, he didn't do it," is useful information, but there is some analysis you may want to do to further understand why he may not have done it or why he may have done it poorly.

1. CAN he do it? In other words, does he have the skills? If not, you may want to invest in some training or mentoring for him.

2. WILL he do it? This is sometimes more difficult to assess. If he won't, why not? Is it because he can't? Is it because he thinks it's below him? Is it because he's too busy with other things? Or is it for some other reason? Have a conversation with him to understand. Ask questions like:

"What about this work appeals to you?"

"What about this work doesn't appeal to you?"

"How does this work connect to the organization's goals?"

"What do you need in order to do this work?"

"How can I help?"

Take the time to consider both "CAN" and "WILL" and you may find your performance management conversations will be more productive.



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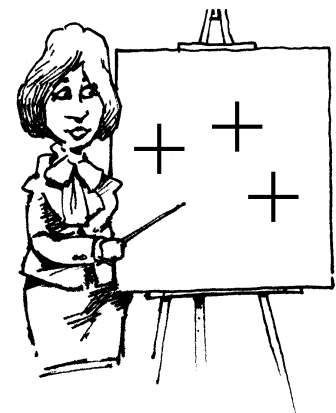


Meeting Closer

In the past three *Collaborations*, we have shared Meeting Openers. Closing your meetings well is just as important as having a good opening. Here is a closing that we have found useful.

Create 2 flip charts -- one for positives (+) and one for the negatives (-). Have people individually answer the following questions. Then, solicit their responses and post them on the appropriate chart.

1. What worked well? (+)
2. What energized you? (+)
3. What should we do more of? (+)
4. What did not work very well? (-)
5. What did you find boring? (-)
6. What should we discontinue? (-)
7. What should be changed? (+ or -)



Starting with the positive aspects of the meeting will get the group talking and will help them be more ready to voice their concerns. If you use this at the end of each meeting, and then act on the data, you will improve the quality of your meetings.

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We'd Like to Hear From You

Do you have a question for us or a topic you would like us to write about? We'd love to hear from you. Send an e-mail to sgerke@att.net with your question or ideas. We can't respond to each individually, however we will respond in *Collaborations* based on topics most requested.