

THEORY OF PRACTICE:
Toward Increased Health in Human Systems

Track Practitioner Theory Paper

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Introduction

In this paper, I will present my theory of practice, my approach to helping people work together in ways that promote healthy human systems. Supporting my beliefs by citing known theorists, I will limit the content to principles that I hold closely. Though not an exhaustive representation of my theoretical foundation, this paper presents many principles that I am likely to rely on in my consulting work.

This paper is divided into four sections, beginning with my views of health and wellness in individuals, groups, organizations and communities. I then discuss challenges in identifying the problems that I work on and ways that I believe dysfunctions originate in human systems. The third section addresses my theory of bringing about change in systems. In the final section, I will address how changes in my family of origin relationships and cultural context have influenced my theory development.

Health and Wellness

Individual

I think that an important aspect of individual health is the degree to which individuals are aware of their values and aspirations, and demonstrate ability and willingness to move toward a personal vision. Senge (1990) used the term “Personal mastery...” to describe “the discipline of personal growth and learning,” (p. 141). Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, and Smith (1994) wrote:

The central practice of personal mastery involves learning to keep both a personal vision and a clear picture of current reality before us. Doing this will generate a force within ourselves called “creative tension.” Tension, by its nature, seeks resolution, and the most natural resolution of *this* tension is for our

reality to move closer to what we want. It's as if we have set up a rubber band between the two poles of our vision and current reality. (p. 195)

As a consultant and coach, my role often includes confronting my clients with data that may contradict their self-image. Luft (1984) wrote, "Individuals, like the group of which they are a part, have limited awareness of the sources of their own behavior and of the effect of their behavior on others," (p. 58). In service of helping my clients achieve their goals, I have a responsibility to help my clients see themselves and their behaviors more clearly.

My clients have varying levels of skill in learning from experience; therefore I attempt to meet them where they are. I want my clients to see, hear and ingest events as they unfold in the context of the consulting engagement. One might say that I "provide the container" that Isaacs (1994) proposed:

To provide the container implies that one finds ways to lower transaction costs of interactions, shift the ground from one where the parties are seeking to make decisions or "fix" the system to explore new options about what is creating the current system, reduce the risk of all parties to interact, and legitimate inquiry into underlying images, norms and perceptions. Above all providing the container implies creating a setting where the quality of collective attention is focused and can be made increasingly vivid, so that habits of projection and reaction can be systematically observed and inquired into. The purpose of the container is to enable participants to, in effect, see the water in which they have been swimming, so that they may influence it consciously. (Action Dimensions of Dialogue section, ¶ 7)

Teams and Groups

Though I must continue to improve my skills in coaching individuals, I see improved team performance as a principal output of my work. Beckhard (1969) supported my thinking: “The basic building blocks of an organization are groups (teams). Therefore, the basic units of change are groups, not individuals,” (p. 26). When assessing team health, I look for the team’s ability to articulate and work toward common goals. Katzenbach and Smith (1993) extended this idea to include the relationship between team purpose and performance goals:

A team’s purpose and specific performance goals have a symbiotic relationship; each depends on the other to stay relevant and vital. The specific performance goals help a team track progress and hold itself accountable; the broader, even nobler aspirations in a team’s purpose supply both meaning and emotional energy. (p. 55)

While a healthy team or group can articulate and achieve technical goals, I believe that a more advanced team can undertake adaptive work. Heifetz (1994) wrote:

Adapting to human challenges requires that we go beyond the requirements of simply surviving. In human societies, adaptive work consists of efforts to close the gap between reality and a host of values not restricted to survival. We perceive problems whenever circumstances do not conform to the way we think things ought to be. Thus, adaptive work involves not only the assessment of reality but also the clarification of values.

I think patterns at the group level are often significant. However, an individual’s behavior may be representative of the group’s state. For example, there may be one

highly emotional and reactive member while the rest of the group appears emotionally neutral. Wells (1985/1998) wrote about this phenomena of an individual “speaking for the group:”

The [group-as-a-whole] perspective assumes that when a person speaks, he/she does so not only for themselves, but in part, speaks via the unconscious for the group. Moreover, what may be understood as individual initiative and behavior in a social setting may well be the distribution and expression of the “group’s force” that has “canalized” individual action. (p. 10)

Therefore, I am interested in what individual behavior might mean for the group. When facilitating group dialogue, I “follow the heat,” move toward and explore emotional content in service of the group’s addressing of its adaptive challenge.

Organization

I believe that a definition of organizational health must address the three elements of structure, leadership and sustainability. The structure of an organization must complement its mission. By structure, I refer to reporting relationships and the way the work is organized. For example, an organization whose aim was to provide landscaping services to a mid-sized city would probably be structured differently than one whose mission was to lead the world in computing technology. The former would probably tend toward vertical reporting relationships, whereas the global and more complex software company would probably have a more lateral structure. As Beckhard (1969) wrote, “An effective organization is one in which...form follows function,” (p.10).

I worked for a transportation company whose structure was influenced by its communications and information technology (IT). The organization used a two-way radio

system to dispatch its vehicles, which set up a strong “command and control” relationship between driver and dispatcher. I found it interesting to think about ways in which IT might enable structural changes in the company. I imagined drivers having real-time information about assignment status and the ability to communicate across the network, which could decrease the need for top-down direction while reducing costs and improving service. Bolman and Deal (1997) supported this thinking about technology’s impact to structure: “Innovations and investments in information technology make flatter structures inevitable,” (p. 55).

However, in my opinion, in the case in point, the associated cultural change would be more difficult to implement than the technology change. Leadership would need to thoroughly understand and embrace the technological and structural change in order to successfully flatten the organization. It would be necessary for leadership to encourage different employee behavior. Employees would need to demonstrate more initiative and follow-up in order for the organization to reap the benefits of the technology. Daft (1983) wrote: “Culture should be congruent with strategy and the external environment. The chief executive can influence internal culture to be consistent with corporate strategy. Cultural values provide employees with a sense of what they ought to be doing, and how they should behave to be consistent with organization goals,” (p. 482). In my view, this changed individual behavior would be healthier than the more submissive behavior that traditional hierarchies elicit from employees. Leadership’s influence however, would be necessary to implement such a change.

Sustainability, my third element of organizational health, in my opinion, requires that activities that consume department, unit and individual resources promote individual,

environmental, and economic viability. Ehrenfeld (2000) wrote, “I would argue that sustainability is (ontologically) a mere possibility that human and other life will flourish on the earth forever” (p. 36). My experience of five years as a contractor and employee of a large forest products company left me troubled about corporate values around environmental sustainability. Ehrenfeld challenged us to care for future generations:

Sustainability is a possible way of living or being in which individuals, firms, governments, and other institutions act responsibly in taking care of the future as if it belonged to them today, in equitably sharing the ecological resources on which the survival of human and other species depends, and in assuring that all who live today and in the future will be able to satisfy their needs and human aspirations. (pp. 36-37)

I believe that sustainability requires optimal resource consumption, and alignment of organizational values, mission, vision, and goals down to the task level. For example, in my practice, I define my services fairly narrowly and market to specific types of companies. When I stray from my articulated goals, I risk exhausting my resources too rapidly which could lead to the failure of my company. Therefore, I see sustainability as an immediate issue, not just limited to a corporation’s impact on the environment.

Community

I believe that a healthy community is inclusive and surfaces and engages with difference and conflict. Inclusiveness in community, in my opinion, means that individuals are not shut out because of difference, for example in ethnicity, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, etc. Diversity contributes to healthy community, avoiding the

ignorance that could result from excessive homogeneity. Peck (1987) wrote:

“Community is and must be inclusive,” (p. 61).

I believe that a healthy community embraces difference and explores conflict. Though difficult, exploring the conflicts inherent in real community life benefits the community and the systems it touches. Mindell (1995) wrote about conflict in community as part of a healing process that results in liberation:

Many of us hate to open the door when trouble knocks; we are afraid and only let in peace. But if we remember that, when trouble knocks, process is an unpredictable spirit trying to manifest, new relationships could begin. When trouble knocks, the possibility for a new kind of community is at the door. The new community is not based only on understanding one another, but on the common decision to enter into the unknown, into trouble—into that fire that is the price of liberty. (p. 166)

Theory of Problem Formation

Setting the Problem

I offer services to clients that can appear to be straightforward technical solutions to business problems. For example, I recently engaged in a contract to create business process reengineering (BPR) outputs for a government organization. The assumed technical solution appeared similar to work that I have accomplished in other organizations. However, in my professional opinion, the work was poorly planned, was being implemented asynchronously with the larger change effort that was underway, sponsorship was ambiguous, and subject matter experts were unavailable. Initially I presented as a collaborative consultant, however became inducted into the system and

acquiesced to Block's (2000) "pair-of-hands" role, accepting the way the client had planned and organized the work (p. 24).

The work did not turn out well, evidenced by late and incomplete deliverables. I think that Schon's (1983) lens of "problem setting," in which one clarifies the boundaries of the work, is one way to review some of the more troubling aspects of this case:

...although problem setting is a necessary condition of technical problem solving, it is not itself a technical problem. When we set the problem, we select what we will treat as the "things" of the situation, we set the boundaries of our attention to it, and we impose upon it a coherence which allows us to say what is wrong and in what directions the situation needs to be changed. Problem setting is a process in which, interactively, we *name* the things to which we will attend and *frame* the context in which we will attend to them. (p. 40)

To my defense, in the case in point, I attempted to reframe the scope of work, however I failed to "impose" Schon's "coherence" upon the situation. As Block (2000) wrote, "the major problem [with the 'pair-of hands' role] emerges in the discovery phase." Indeed, I found significant oversights in the planning of the work; the manager refused to revise the plan; and I became "a convenient scapegoat," (p.25).

Exploring the Presenting Problem

In order to clarify my consulting role, I intend to use Schon's notion of "problem setting" as I contract with clients, followed by systematic exploration of the presenting problem. When a client presents me with a problem, it may appear technical to the client as in the BPR work, or adaptive, for example when a client told me that her team was not adequately engaged in cross-functional work. Regardless, it is essential that I view the

presenting problem as a starting point from which to proceed toward more salient issues. Block (2000) wrote: “The initial problem statement in a consulting project is usually a symptom of other underlying problems,” (p. 42).

For example in the BPR project, the fact that the deliverables were not produced earlier, in sequence with the larger change project, was, in my opinion, symptomatic of unresolved business issues. Focusing on incomplete business process outputs, and hiring a consultant in a “pair-of-hands” role, deflected from the fact that difficult interdepartmental work had not been addressed. This situation strikes me as similar to a 1999 newspaper write-up of a multi-million dollar computer system failure. The major metropolitan government entity blamed the failure on the technology applied. However, the same technology had been successfully deployed in other organizations. An associate of mine that consulted to the project had told me months earlier that the effort was headed for failure due to inadequate interdepartmental communication.

Dysfunction in Client Systems

I classify dysfunction in client systems as structural, inherited or imported. An example of structural dysfunction is when an organization attempts to maintain rigid vertical relationships in the face of laterally enabling technologies. New information technologies enable business units to rapidly make decisions and collaborate effectively across and outside the organization. Beckhard and Harris (1987) wrote: “These technologies, by giving access to information in seconds rather than weeks, have altered the actual shape and character of many organizations,” (p. 11). However when organizations cling to the old form, operating in “silos” when the technology enables a flatter structure, there is dysfunction. For example, as I have witnessed in technology

deployments, an employee might feel bound (and justifiably so, because of ambiguity in the system) to wait for supervisor approval to release information to a lateral business unit, defeating the business objective of streamlining operations.

Dysfunction can be inherited, or can “trickle down” from leadership. A leader’s style that was successful when the company was a startup may cause a schism in the matured organization. Schein (1996) wrote about the leader’s impact to organizational culture:

... if the organization is successful and the success is attributed to the leader, the leader’s entire personality becomes embedded in the culture of the organization. If the leader has conflicts, such as wanting a team-based consensus process of decision making and, at the same time, wanting to maintain complete control and reward subordinates for individual prowess in solving problems, we will see inconsistent policies regarding decision making, incentives, and rewards. Leaders, then, can actually create “neurotic” organizations, which live with various degrees of conflict and exhibit uneven patterns of strengths and weaknesses. ... once the conflicts become embedded in the culture of the organization, they cannot easily be changed, because they have also become associated with the organization’s prior history of success and are therefore taken for granted as the best way to do things. (pp. 61-62)

As well as it is inherited; I believe that dysfunction is *imported* into client systems. For example, project team “A” might have a pattern of excluding the support function during design activities while labeling support as lacking in collaborative

abilities. I think it is likely that project teams “B” and “C” will pick up similar dynamics. Smith, Simmons, and Thames (1998) refer to this phenomenon as “parallel processing:”

When two or more systems-whether they consist of individuals, groups, or organizations-have significant relationships with one another, they tend to develop similar affects, cognition, and behaviors, which are defined as parallel processes (Alderfer, Brown, Kaplan & Smith, in press). Parallel processes have been reported for many types of situations. With respect to those working with organizations, the internal dynamics of action research teams have sometimes become a parallel enactment of the system dynamics the researchers are seeking to understand (Alderfer et al., in press; Smith & Crandell, 1984; Steele, 1975).

Theory of Change

Overall Approach

When facilitating change in organizations, I identify current behavior before attempting to articulate new and desired behavior. I view individual behavior in relation to the organization’s technological systems. For example, when planning a new computer system for an IT consulting firm, I documented that in the existing hiring process, recruiters in the recruiting department entered the applicant’s social security number into the computer system during the hiring process. I presented an alternative design, that, with business and technological justification, called for human resources personnel in the human resources department to input new hires’ social security numbers. This seemingly minor detail had the potential to ripple across the human system, raising significant interdepartmental conflict, and, in fact, was a major factor in the choice of computer systems this organization made. My point is that although this was a technology

initiative, identification of current human behavior was an essential step in the change process.

I think healthy growth in client systems requires integrating social and technological systems. Trist (1959) referred to the “*socio-technical system*: Study of a productive system therefore as an operating entity requires detailed attention to both the technological and the social components themselves both treated as systems,” (p 272). In the case of the new computer system, leadership chose a design that would leave intact the existing business process wherein recruiters, not human resources personnel, input new hires’ social security numbers. I have a hunch that from both technological and human systems perspective, the chosen alternative was not the better one.

However leadership was not prepared to examine goals and roles in order to reach the optimal solution. Therefore, the organization implemented technology-focused change, keeping to a minimum change in the social system. As a change agent, I strive to promote change that is balanced across both the social and technological systems. In the case in point, I believe that turf battles were at play and the powerful project sponsor dictated the choice that would assure minimal loss of his control. In future cases, I want to help the executive see dynamics that may not be visible to him, giving him more options. This means that as a change agent, I would need to be in an interactive conversation with my client that included confrontation.

To responsibly serve my client, at times I must expose my values in order to help my client examine his own values at play. For example, my views about sharing information and optimizing workflow suggested that leaders in the consulting firm would openly consider modifying business processes. I believe my values would be in

opposition to those of the leader who wanted to suppress discussion while maintaining his turf. This approach would follow Chin and Benne's (1967) "normative-re-educative approaches to effecting change . . .

These approaches center in the notion the people technology is just as necessary as thing technology in working out desirable changes in human affairs. Put in this bold fashion, it is obvious that for the normative-re-educative change agent, clarification and reconstruction of values is of pivotal importance in changing. By getting the values of various parts of the client system along with his own, openly in the arena of change and by working through value conflicts responsibly, the change agent seeks to avoid manipulation and indoctrination of the client, in the morally reprehensible meanings of the these terms. (pp. 44-45)

I think the authors suggest that the normative-re-educative change agent has a responsibility to bring truth into the open, including truths that are uncomfortable for client and consultant. I believe that only when relevant truths are examined can one claim to be rationally approaching change.

Critical Success Factors

From the change agent perspective, I believe that the two most critical success factors in effecting change are sponsorship and client readiness. Insufficient sponsorship likely results in unsatisfactory outcomes despite the consultant's best efforts. For example, in the BPR case, the client/manager with whom I worked, my "sponsor," was at a lower level than the executive ultimately responsible for the work. Discoveries that I made early in the project were germane to the higher-level executive's operation, and

although I had developed a relationship with the higher-level executive at a social level, my sponsor denied me access to him in the project context.

This was a case where I recognized my lack of sponsorship, identified my real sponsor, and, regardless, was unable to be effective. Perhaps, by providing a scapegoat, I satisfied the needs of the client system, however, I do not choose to repeat that outcome. In future contracts, I will strive for more clarity in these relationships, as Block (2000) proposes in his description of “triangular and rectangular contracting:”

You have to know how many clients you have. Your client has a boss and you may have a boss. Your client’s boss and your boss may have had a heavy hand in setting up this project. If so, they need to be part of the contract. At least, their roles need to be acknowledged between you and your client. If it is you, the client, and the client’s boss, you have a triangular contract. Throw in your own boss and the triangle becomes a rectangle. Clarifying who is involved and getting them into the contract is a requirement of the contracting phase. (p. 42)

I would add that the triangles and rectangles might not be as easy to identify as Block infers. For example, my “client’s boss” may not be on a solid line on the organization chart vertically above my client. The executive controlling my project may head a different department than the one in which my client resides.

Though a client may appear eager to do a project, she or he may not actually be ready and willing to implement the change. The client may have initiated the project to appease her boss or may discover along the way that implementation is increasing her anxiety and, therefore, her resistance increases. Beckhard and Harris (1987) developed a formula for addressing the resistance process:

$$C = [ABD] > X$$

C = Change

A= Level of dissatisfaction with the status quo

B = Desirability of the proposed change or end state

D = Practicality of the change (minimal risk and disruption)

X = “Cost” of changing

Factors A, B, And D must outweigh the perceived costs (X) for change to occur.

If any person or group whose commitment is needed is not sufficiently dissatisfied with the present state affairs (S), eager to achieve the proposed end state (B), and convinced of the feasibility of the change (D), then the cost (X) of changing is too high, and that person or group will resist the change. (pp. 98-99)

Theory From Natural Systems

I find consulting a difficult endeavor with sponsorship rarely as well defined and strong as I wish, and resistance constantly present in some form. Therefore I strive to develop theory that makes sense to me, theory from which I can derive tactics for the “here-and-now.” I want theory that resonates with my self-as-instrument. I want to be in tune with the *organism* of client system. Heider (1985) proposed that leaders and change agents tune in to natural process:

Natural events are potent because they act in accordance with how things work.

Study natural processes: the light in the sky, the gravity of earth, the unfolding of your own ideas and insights, the emptiness of space, the fullness of life, and the behavior of saints. (p. 77)

Early in life, I was attracted to rhythm. I found refuge in the cadence of the march and the pulse of rock ‘n’ roll. I believe that rhythm is ubiquitous in the natural world and in our client systems. Capra (1982) wrote of rhythm as an essential component in a new scientific model of the natural world:

In the future elaboration of the new holistic world view, the notion of rhythm is likely to play a very fundamental role. The systems approach has shown that living organisms are intrinsically dynamic, their visible forms being stable manifestations of underlying processes. Process and stability, however, are compatible only if the processes form rhythmic patterns—fluctuations, oscillations, vibrations, waves. The new systems biology shows that fluctuations are crucial in the dynamics of self-organization. They are the basis of order in the living world: ordered structures arise from rhythmic patterns.

A systems thinker might agree that individuals, groups, organizations and communities have underlying rhythms. Capra continued: Rhythmic patterns, then are a universal phenomenon, but at the same time they allow individuals to express their distinctive personalities,” (p. 300).

How can I identify and tap into the unique rhythm of my client system? I can begin by identifying the existing patterns in the client system. I believe that there are benign, dysfunctional, and healthy patterns in systems. I think that even the most dysfunctional system has healthy underlying patterns. Smith and Berg (1987) wrote about patterns in groups:

From the very beginning of a group’s life, there are activities focused on establishing patterns that have some order to them that are consistent across time,

and that provide a basis for the interactions among members. To make changes, it will be necessary to modify these patterns or to destroy them so that new constructions can be built. Were it not for the development of patterns (traditions, rules, conventions) that give coherence and wholeness, there would be no form to set the stage for the transformation that is the heart of growth. The very shaping that restricts is the shaping that makes change possible. Before change can occur, the patterns to be changed must be established. (p. 144-145)

The practitioner can identify existent patterns in the group by observation. Schein (1988) described group observation methods to identify patterns in groups (p. 22- 23). My own methods include diagramming group interactions. In curriculum, I used this method to document and illustrate a recurring pattern in my cohort.

I plan to continue developing theory based upon rhythm and natural systems. For example, I think a promising research area is that of noise. In community drum circles and in teams, there are varying degrees of noise--the “slap” “bang” “thump” kind in drum circles, and the intra- inter-personal/group kind in teams. In the field of neurophysiological research, Volgushev and Eysel (2000) concluded that “noise” in the primary visual cortex could improve a neuron’s ability to detect weak signals. Are there parallels in the natural system of the body’s ability to see and the system of a client/group? Is a “noisy” group healthier than a “quiet” group?

Family and Cultural Influences

Family of Origin

During the last several months, I have made significant progress in maturing my relationships with my mother and father. Two years ago, my mother refused to do a

family of origin interview with me. In contrast, I spent several weeks of this year working near her home and visited her frequently. Similarly, my father and I have not been close. However, I recently felt privileged to spend four days helping him move out of the home in which I grew up and into his new, smaller house.

I have chosen to move into adult relationships with my parents. I note a reduction in my feelings of anxiousness in their presence. When my mother offers to prepare a meal for me, I feel free to accept or deny it based upon my own needs. I do not base my decision solely on how I imagine it will make her feel.

A short vignette about my changing relationship with my father: Recently, when I spent a few days with him, I noticed that he had an “aggressive” hair growing from his nostril. After about 3 days, I pointed it out to him and offered to trim it. My point is that confronting my father is new behavior for me.

Changing relationships with my family of origin translates to powerful improvements in my consulting skill. I now view the client/consultant conversation as dialectic, not acquiescence. My theory of practice places a higher value on my own thoughts, feelings, sensations and wants. I understand that while I do not want to manipulate the client system to my own ends, my views may often be essential to the conversation that contributes to my client’s forward movement.

I understand old patterns that led to my getting “killed off” in my client systems. Historically, I would set up passive/aggressive or adversarial relationships with authority and my influence attempts would more resemble suicide than persuasion. In the guise of protecting my clients, or avoiding their unreasonableness, I would fly below the radar.

When I confronted my clients, it was typically in a last ditch effort—at the point where I could no longer suppress my opinion--and results were often not favorable.

Cultural Context

Eight years ago, frustrated professionally, I decided to pursue a master's degree at Leadership Institute of Seattle. At that time, I did not hold a bachelor's degree. Therefore, over several years I will complete my BS/ABS, project management professional (PMP) certification, and MA/ABS. I am aware of new responsibilities associated with these credentials.

Historically, in my professional life, as in my family of origin, I found ways to keep a low profile. With clients, this meant taking less collaborative, more pair-of-hands and expert roles, (Block 2000, pp. 21-28). Moving forward in my professional life, I find it less acceptable to acquiesce into non-collaborative roles. I believe that speaking my truth is imperative. Arrien (1993) wrote: "To tell the truth without blame or judgment is the capacity to say what is so," (p82). For example, I am now more likely to make statements like: "In order to document this workflow, I need access to the people who do the work;" or, "I am concerned that the management team is not discussing this issue." In general, via more assertive observations, inquiry and interventions, I intend to invite the client into increased collaboration.

My professional transition is taking me from a primarily technical system orientation to include background in human systems. I struggled to manage the polarity of IT and OD, seeing myself moving away from one and toward the other. The saliency for me, however, is no longer dualistic. It is about a continuum of leadership. Whether I am managing IT, OD, or both, whether external or internal, I am transformed as a leader.

This is discomfoting. I no longer fit into the old box. However this is liberating because previous constraints are removed, enabling me to have a greater impact on the systems with which I work.

Conclusion

In this paper, I described my theory of practice. I began with my views on health in individuals, groups, organizations and communities. I then discussed my theory on problem formation and dysfunction in systems. In the third section, I addressed my theory of change. In the final section, I discussed how my changing family of origin relationships and cultural context have impacted my consulting theory.

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