Individual and Team Empowerment: Human Dynamics at Digital

by Chris Strutt

The meeting was in full swing. Key players from management, technical leadership, engineering, and marketing had assembled to discuss several critical strategic product decisions. But as the meeting progressed, a serious disagreement emerged between a technical leader and a business manager.

Both people were convinced that *their* perspective was right. The technical leader was focused on the longer term—what he knew could be done to delight the customer 12 months down the road. The business manager, on the other hand, was focused on the customers' present needs. She wanted the team to look at the problems that needed to be solved in the next product release, due out in three months. The argument escalated until the two were shouting at each other across the table.

Although it appeared that the two perspectives were in opposition, the truth was that both people were in violent *agreement* on the underlying value of meeting the customer's needs. Their conflict was due to fundamental distinctions in the way they thought about, processed, and perceived the world. The technical leader was focused on the longer-term vision, while the business manager was focused on the next practical step—both equally important and valuable perspectives that held the customer as the number one priority.

Fortunately, another team member noticed this distinction and explained what was happening. He pointed out how their different personality dynamics were leading to this disconnect, and that they really were on the same track in many ways. The two players both stopped in silence, suddenly realizing how they were caught up in their own perspectives. Meanwhile, another engineer, expressing his characteristic gift of empathy, admitted, "And I *feel* your pain!" Everyone in the room broke up with laughter, releasing the tension that they, too, felt. The group was then able to move on and develop some productive solutions that would serve the customers' long-term needs, while still addressing the immediate issues that needed to be resolved.

Human Dynamics

This incident, which took place earlier this year within Digital's Networks Software Group, is an example of how many people are beginning to apply a fundamental new understanding about how human beings function, called Human Dynamics™. This technology has been researched and developed by Dr. Sandra Seagal since 1979, and it offers a framework for understanding differences in the way people learn, communicate, relate, and develop as human beings. Human Dynamics presents a systemic approach to the complexities and wonders of human functioning that is clear, logical, and structured, yet broad and flexible enough to encompass the infinite nuances that make each of us

Human Dynamics: An Overview

The following is an excerpt from "Human Dynamics: A Foundation for the Learning Organization," by Sandra Seagal and David Horne, which originally appeared in the May, 1994, issue of The Systems Thinker™:

Human Dynamics explores the interaction of three universal principles: the mental, the emotional (or relational), and the physical (or practical). The mental principle is related to the mind—to thinking, values, structure, focus, objectivity, and perspective. The emotional principle is concerned with relationships—with communication, organization, feelings, and putting things together in new ways (creativity). The physical principle is pragmatic—it is the making, doing, and operationalizing part of ourselves.

These three principles combine in nine possible variations to form distinct ways of functioning, which are termed "personality dynamics." Each constitutes a whole way of functioning, characterized by distinct processes of learning, communicating, problem-solving, relating to others, contributing to teams, maintaining well-being, and responding to stress. The personality dynamics appear in every culture, characterize males and females equally, and can be observed at every age level.

It is essential to understand that Human Dynamics is a developmental paradigm. A person's dynamic remains consistent over time, but is expressed with increasing maturity. Maturation involves the integration and development of the mental, emotional, and physical aspects of each personality dynamic.

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unique human beings (see "Human Dynamics: An Overview").

Human Dynamics was introduced into Digital Equipment Corporation in 1993, and it has since become a central part of everyday functioning for people in many groups across the organization. Some say it has become as fundamental as knowing the alphabet—so much a part of the way they think and communicate that they take it for granted.

The Beginning

It all began in August 1992, when we in the Networks Group recognized that Human Dynamics was a critical technology that could enhance and leverage Digital's return to profitability. That was also the beginning of two years of restructuring, downsizing, and cost containment, which was the mandate if we were to survive as a viable company.

As the company launched itself into that difficult work, our concern was, "What are we doing for the survivors?" Research statistics on large corporations who downsize clearly show that only a fraction of them actually return to profitability—and an even smaller fraction return to previous levels of employee productivity and morale. From our prior work with systems thinking and learning skills, we knew that the most fundamental obstacle to improved product quality and customer satisfaction—and hence profitability—lay in the absence, avoidance, or breakdown of authentic communication between human beings (see "A Journey Through Organizational Change," April 1995).

Our work in Human Dynamics initially started as a "grass-roots" effort. Funds were "tin-cupped" from five concerned middle managers and used to train two people to become licensed Human Dynamics facilitators. When they returned from their training, the two facilitators could hardly stop talking about the power of Human Dynamics for helping build team synergy and productivity. Soon the first formal request for a workshop came in. In May 1993 this workshop was delivered, and it received an evaluation of 5.5 on a 6-point scale.

That same month, Sandra Seagal and David Horne came to Digital in Littleton, MA, and delivered a workshop for the Networks Group vice president and his newly forming leadership team. As a result of this experience, the team was able to recognize, understand, and appreciate the special gifts that each of them brought to their work—knowledge they used over the next several months as they established Digital's core Networking Business.

A Boost in the Middle

From initial experiences like these, word of the power and usefulness of Human Dynamics soon spread. For example, a program manager needed some critical decisions to be made by a technical leader. She knew her own personality dynamic and his, and she was aware of the distinctions and potential points of conflict in their communication processes: she would naturally approach the issue by building up from the details until the structure emerged, whereas he would identify the principles and structure first, and then fill in the details. Knowing this, she designed her communication to best suit his process, by starting with the structure first. As a result, they secured the required decision in one 15-minute conversation. Prior to her understanding of the significance of personality dynamics, the same issue would have been addressed through multiple two-hour arguments and discussions. While the result might have been the same, the cost—in terms of time, energy, and goodwill—would have been much greater.

Such anecdotes drew the attention of the late Peter Conklin, who was then serving as leader of the Engineering Excellence Program. He saw the importance of this work in engineering, where teams deal with increasingly complex issues that require the clearest possible communication to make rapid decisions that are also sustainable. So, in January 1994, Peter funded the training of four new facilitators—and Human Dynamics became an official educational program under the auspices of Digital's Engineering Excellence Program.

Over the next four months, we began offering four to five workshops per month, each one jointly facilitated by two of our Human Dynamics facilitators. Workshops were delivered to "intact" teams who focused on delivering a product, service, or specific set of results. These teams usually spanned organizational, functional, and hierarchical boundaries.

We were very encouraged by the ongoing requests for workshops. Our past experience showed that the best indicator for the value or usefulness of any new technology is the level of continued demand. Since the Human Dynamics work began as a bottom-up effort, and continued as a middle-across effort through the Engineering Excellence program, we knew that no one was seeking a workshop just because he or she was being pressured by upper management.

Naturally, there were people who were somewhat skeptical of what they saw as another "team-building" workshop. Engineers in particular (who made up about half of the participants) were very wary of what they called "touchy-feely" stuff. The vast majority of these skeptics, however, saw the practical value of Human Dynamics by the end of the first day of training. This was in large part due to the open, interactive process of the workshop, and the fact that it centers on self-identification. In addition, people seemed to appreciate the holistic nature of the Human Dynamics technology, along with its recognition

of each individual's intrinsic value and infinite developmental capacity.

A few people (about 3%) continued to be skeptical, even after the training, because of their fundamental objection to any form of categorization or "labeling," as they saw it. These negative reactions were rooted in past experiences with traditional typologies, where people were not only categorized by an "expert," but they often felt judged as being of lesser value than other types. There is no such value judgment inherent in the Human Dynamics work, but it clearly remains a concern for some people.

A Setback

While the groundwork in Human Dynamics was being laid, Digital was still struggling to get back on its feet financially. The quarter ending in December 1993 was a profitable one—the first in a very long while. It felt good, but many of us were afraid that it was only a "blip" on the screen due to short-term actions and symptomatic fixes. As it turned out, the company *was* seriously back in the red the following quarter. As a result, starting in May 1994, the company underwent the severest belt-tightening yet. Among many things, this included an immediate stop to most training expenses. Overnight, the Human Dynamics program came to a halt. Even worse, five of our six Human Dynamics facilitators left the company as a result of cutbacks in overhead functions.

Yet although no new people were being trained in Human Dynamics, those that had been trained continued to use their understandings to work more effectively. One group vice president faced a reporting structure above her that changed four times during this period. Fortunately, she knew her own personality dynamic and that of each new manager. From her Human Dynamics training, she understood what this meant in terms of differences in communication preferences, and the way they each approached problem solving and decision making. So she used her understanding to tailor her communication to each person, consciously using the most helpful language for that individual. As a result, she continued to get much of the support she needed for the success of her business, despite the many changes in the hierarchy above her.

Many of us using Human Dynamics at Digital continued to deepen our understanding of the methodology through tutorials and lunchtime, "brown-bag" seminars. The aim was to share our actual experiences with Human Dynamics and to coach people in its everyday application. By this time, we were using Human Dynamics as a kind of shorthand that alerted us to listen more effectively to each other by understanding the special gifts and perspectives that each of us brings.

By late 1994, the company was finishing the final stages of its restructuring, and it was settling down to about 60,000 employees world-wide—half its original size. The moratorium on training expenses began to lighten. After a seven-month hiatus, a Human Dynamics workshop was delivered in December 1994. As before, word quickly spread and more requests followed.

Margaret Ledger, the new manager of Digital's Technical Competency Development Group (TCDG), began to see Human Dynamics as a foundational technology for effective project team leadership and operation across the company. With support from key people in the newly formed business segments, including Peter Conklin and Jean Proulx, Margaret incorporated Human Dynamics into the TCDG's core curriculum, to be delivered on demand across the company. Once again, Human Dynamics is formally embedded in a "middle-across" program, this time alongside the delivery of technical training such as C++, Object Oriented Design, and Windows 95.

Sustainment

Today, Human Dynamics has reached almost 600 people across the company, and the demand for more workshops is steady. In April 1995, three new facilitators were trained.

A key challenge we now face is to establish more frequent and regular mechanisms for sharing experiences and offering "refresher" seminars. Also, we have yet to learn how to surface the really difficult "undiscussables" that Chris Argyris talks about. But we do know that Human Dynamics has given us an immensely valuable springboard from which to begin this work.

Digital has now enjoyed three consecutive profitable quarters. But many of us feel that we cannot sustain this forward momentum without enabling the continued empowerment, connection, and creative potential of each and every employee. What better foundational technology to utilize than Human Dynamics, which goes to the very core of human functioning and development. We hope, in time, to build on our bottom-up and middle-across success and add a third and final piece to the strategy of Human Dynamics at Digital—top-down engagement and action. ⬛

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Notice to All Readers

Because of the scheduling of the 1995 *Systems Thinking in Action*™ Conference (Sept. 18–20), the October issue of *The Systems Thinker*™—our Special Conference Issue—will be mailed one week later than usual. Look for it in your mailbox the week of October 13.