



DON'T FIGHT THE SYSTEM—CHANGE THE RULES AND THE SYSTEM WILL CHANGE ITSELF!

BY ROBERT S. GRAY

After more than 30 years of “fighting the system” and trying to “change the culture” in large organizations, I’m a little tired. I have spent a great deal of my managerial tenure as a sort of corporate insurrectionist, at one point becoming the author and leading practitioner of a formalized set of “Guerrilla Deming” tactics in an extremely hostile and nearly improvement-proof bureaucracy. Although we ultimately succeeded (and the organization went on to become a Baldrige Award winner), there were some harrowing moments and narrow escapes. Corporate subversion, no matter how well-intentioned and well-disguised, carries a daunting risk-to-reward quotient. The first of the “commandments” of our little Deming cell was “Thou shalt come to work each day willing to be fired”—and some of us were.

It is in this context that certain practical adjuncts of systems thinking jump out at me as more subtle and dignified (and less risky) alternatives to corporate insurgency in influencing systemic change. (And okay, I’ll admit it—now that I am one of those who get to call the shots from the top of the organizational hierarchy, I have come to view my former guerrilla dispositions as rather distasteful.) One of the most repeated exhortations in systems thinking articles and texts is “Don’t fight the system—change the rules and the system will change itself!” So, how can we go about changing the rules, and what should we look out for? Here are just a few ideas—I’m sure other, wiser, and fresher souls have more.

• **Keep on Keeping on.** First, as Ludwig von Bertalanffy pointed out, “A system is an entity which maintains its existence through the mutual

interaction of its parts” (it only sometimes looks like a disarticulated blob of random activities!). Thus, one of the first things we need to keep in mind is that by doing something different in our own little patches of turf, we are actually changing the larger system. Organizations tend to expand structurally, operationally, and conceptually to encapsulate and explain all repetitive realities within their boundaries; therefore, if you can make something good happen—and sustain it—the organization will eventually have to absorb it. So my brilliant advice is, to quote Churchill, “Never give in, never, never, never.”

“Thou shalt work underground as long as is possible, as thou knowest that publicity doth trigger thy corporate immune response.”

• **Make Partners and Allies of Accidental Adversaries.** If you have been in a big organization long enough, you’ll probably notice that the incumbents of certain jobs almost invariably detest and resist each other. The individuals may come and go, but the dysfunction remains. This interaction usually occurs because the organization is structured so that the jobs in question compete for the same resource or otherwise come into conflict to accomplish their missions. This dynamic becomes one of the “rules” of the system. But when smart adversaries get tired of the game, form an alliance, and find ways to work synergistically, they change the rules—and the system must shift to

accommodate the new reality.

• **Measure What Matters—Creatively.** Organizations tend to rely on standard, stable, and predictable measures. These metrics are part of the system and are based on certain rules. But sometimes we do a thorough and highly professional job of measuring the wrong things. (One of my buddies, a Marine colonel, grouches, “We spend so much time weighing the %\$#@! pig, it’s dying of starvation!”) So, what if we continue to measure what we have to, but add and highlight what really matters? With a little nudging, the “right stuff” may become the new rule.

• **Become an Expert on Corporate Immune Responses.** (I’m dusting off our seventh old guerrilla commandment here, “Thou shalt work underground as long as is possible, as thou knowest that publicity doth trigger thy corporate immune response.”) Judging the speed and direction of the corporation’s responses to changes in its internal environment, as well as either avoiding or selecting to attract these responses, depending on the context, is something of an art form. As with many things in life, timing is everything. For example, when being awarded or publicly praised for some startling success, it is fun and often useful to respond by giving credit to the “new” thinking or techniques. Lots of interesting possibilities here, but at a minimum, the fact that you are usually not summarily executed for challenging the status quo can change the rules.

• **Simplify!** As organizational development consultant Steve Nyland points out, “Change is constant, life is messy, and everything is connected. Almost nothing, living or otherwise,

grows toward simplicity.” Organizational leaders grow so tired of hearing why things can’t be done without toppling everything else that they often develop a bias for the uncomplicated (yeah, that’s a problem, too). But in this context, if we can package and explain our agendas with stunning clarity and clear cause and effect, we can exploit this bias to our advantage—and change a rule or two.

• **Advance Changes During “Spring Thaws.”** Most big organizations have a relatively static, inflexible 3–6 year budget/planning system “frozen” in place. But from time to time, the company must “unfreeze” to adapt to changing conditions. Again, timing is everything—and in ambiguity there is opportunity. When the

organization “unfreezes” to adapt to new demands or opportunities, the time is ripe to advance innovative solutions that will change the rules when the organization “refreezes.”

When all else fails, consider the following from Jacob Riis:

“When nothing seems to help, I go look at a stonecutter hammering away at his rock perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundred and first blow it will split in two, and I know it was not that blow that did it, but all that had gone before.” ■

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What lessons have you learned from your own experience about “changing the rules so the system will change itself”? What are some of the pros and cons of taking a “stealth” approach to introducing new concepts into your organization versus launching an overt change initiative? Send your responses to editorial@pegasus.com.

YOUR THOUGHTS

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