



RAISING AWARENESS OF HOW SOCIAL STRUCTURE INFLUENCES PERFORMANCE

BY DENNIS SANDOW

In my recent feature article, “Extending Systems Thinking to Social Systems” (Volume 18 Number 5), I presented the systemic law known as “structural determinism,” as described by Matriztic Institute founders Professor Ximena Y. Davila and Dr. Humberto R. Maturana. Structural determination explains that whatever occurs in any system is determined by the structure of that system. Now, this common law is easy to understand by reflecting on the nature of systems. If we randomly pull wires from the engine of our automobile, we change the structure of the system. In some cases, the core elements of the car’s system are conserved and the vehicle will still run; in other cases, the underlying system is altered because we have removed wires that are critical to running the car.

I have suggested that this systemic law also applies to social systems in organizations. In my studies, I have found that managers create the structural conditions for outstanding performance by giving workers the freedom to organize themselves. In contrast, in epidemiological studies, Dr. Michael Marmot at the University College London discovered that when employees have little control over their jobs, they experience a higher risk of heart disease when compared to those workers who have more control. So this notion of struc-

tural determination in social systems is not trivial but essential to organizational performance, social well-being, and individual health.

The Exercise

But it’s not enough for me to state—and for you to read—these ideas in a newsletter article: We need a way to raise our awareness about the importance of underlying social structures and the network of relationships that exists within them. The following exercise has consistently generated that awareness when I have conducted it with groups, whether in China, Europe, Latin America, or the U.S. I encourage you to try it yourself, as it generates keen insights into the nature of performance and social-well being.

The exercise takes approximately 30 minutes to complete. It is best done with a group of at least 10 people and can be used with very large groups. Each participant needs a piece of paper and a pen or pencil, and the facilitator needs a whiteboard or chart and easel, although I have done this exercise without them.

The first step is to ask each person in the group to reflect on something they have accomplished in the past 6–12 months in any domain, including work, church, family, or community, and to write that accomplishment down at the top of their piece of paper. Give them a few minutes to do so; you will notice when most people have finished writing. Once participants have completed this step, ask them to write down the names of the people who helped them achieve their goal.

Next, ask them to describe how it feels to reflect on this experience.

This is where the exercise becomes quite interesting. Have individuals in the group “shout out” their answers. Regardless of the language, people give answers such as “proud,” “grateful,” “pleased,” “appreciative,” “happy,” and “delighted.” Well-being has a myriad of emotional expressions. The facilitator records the answers on the left-hand side of the flipchart or whiteboard.

Now, have each participant give the piece of paper to the person sitting next to them. Each person has someone else’s paper with their accomplishment and those who helped them with it. Ask everyone to cross three or four names off the list of those who helped with the accomplishment and then return the piece of paper to its original author. Once this is done ask, “Imagine that those people who have been crossed off your list are not available to help you again. How would this affect your performance?”

Once again, let the participants “shout out” their answers. You do not need to write these down. Everywhere I go, people answer this question by describing the effects on their productivity and performance: “I couldn’t have done it,” “It would have taken me forever,” “It would have been twice as difficult,” etc.

Finally, ask how participants feel as they reflect on those now missing from the list and the effects on accomplishment. Return to the whiteboard or flipchart and record their answers on the right side. I consistently hear answers such as, “depressed,” “a sense of loss,” “frustration,” and “upset.” Like well-being, expressions of pain and suffering have a myriad of emotional expressions.

TEAM TIP

Complete this exercise before undertaking any kind of restructuring or reorganization.

I will sometimes conclude this exercise light-heartedly by saying, “Very good. We all have just gone through a reorganization or restructuring!” But I believe it is best to be in a brief dialogue around our new awareness of the necessity of healthy social systems. In doing so, participants will discover that pain

and suffering are often the unintentional consequences of intervening in organizations without first taking the time to understand them. They will also know at a deep, visceral level how the structure of our social circles determines performance and well-being. ■

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