



NEW INSIGHTS ON THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE

BY MARK ALPERT



The Path of Least Resistance for Managers
Revised Edition
by Robert Fritz

If you read the original *The Path of Least Resistance for Managers* since it was first published in 1999, then you will recall the insight, wisdom, and practical approaches to improving organizational performance that it includes. You'll recall the lessons explained through the art and science of structural dynamics and its key message: that the underlying structure of an organization, or anything else in life, determines its behavior. The underlying structures of an organization produce two types of outcomes: advancing or oscillating. In an advancing structure, you are able to create positive results in the areas you care most deeply about. In an oscillating structure, you can't—it's the one-step forward, one-step back syndrome. The way out of an oscillating pattern is to change the underlying structures. Robert Fritz went on to teach us about structural tension, tension charting, structural conflict, and structural redesign. He made us think deeply about our company's purpose, business strategy, true vision, and what it means to be a great organization.

After more than a decade, Fritz has revised and expanded this classic title. Like all great books, you pick up something new every time you read it. This version goes deeper into the principles of system dynamics, provides new insight about the forces at play within the underlying structures of an organization, and gives tips about how to recognize and address them, based on an additional 12 years of experience.

- Energy moves along the path of least resistance.
- The underlying structures of anything will determine its path of least resistance.
- We can determine the path of least resistance by creating new structures.

The revised book is filled with new examples from organizations in the business, military, education, healthcare, and not-for-profit sectors. By exploring the underlying structures affecting their organizations, leaders came to understand the influences that were producing their outcomes. Armed with this insight, they learned how to change the underlying structures to create a new path of least resistance—and better results.

One great example is of a high school in Colorado that was underperforming in every category. The new principal implemented a structural approach to change. The organization's focus changed from constantly resolving conflicts to identifying what stakeholders wanted to create together. The faculty and staff articulated plans that defined the actions necessary to move from where they were to where they wanted to be. It was not easy work. The journey required discipline, patience, and learning. Over time, the school realized successes that bred new successes, resulting in a total turnaround. Within five years, this school went from underperforming to serving as a shining example.

The Highest Leverage

Fritz's blueprint for creating a new structure, aligning the workforce, and focusing on the future is structural tension. Structural tension helps you come to grips with your current reality and define the actions that will get you to where you aspire to be. The resulting tension between present and future determines the path of least resistance. It's important to understand the tension, hold on, and use it to pull your organization toward a better future. Not all of the organizations that Fritz highlights were successful right from the start, but once they got a hang of the process, there was no turning back. The

TEAM TIP

According to Fritz, tension seeks resolution. Use the structural tension between your team's current reality and its desired future to fuel change.

Three Steadfast Principles

The three steadfast principles that serve as the foundation for Fritz's work remain the same:



new insights, discipline, and learning they accumulated along the way is the stuff that separates organizations able to climb to the top of their markets and those that do not.

Organizations are full of structural conflicts that can be hard to see if they occur over time. Here's a hint: If your organization demonstrates a regular pattern of oscillation, structural conflict exists. In a typical example of oscillation, an organization institutes repeated change initiatives only for business to return to the old ways over time. These efforts might involve attempts to decentralize decision making only to centralize it again in a year or two. Plans to expand the product portfolio might be cancelled because of capacity limits. Or stockholders might demand high ROI, reversing management's efforts to reinvest.

The way out of these patterns is to eliminate the competing goals. Managers must decide which goal provides the company the highest leverage and

establish it as the priority. That clarity will make room for real structural redesign. For instance, an Air Force laboratory's improvement efforts did not end up improving the organization, causing widespread frustration instead. Once leaders understood the underlying structural forces, they were able to redesign the organization in a way that allowed them to focus on the most important outcomes and move toward their goals.

To the leaders out there who are wondering why they are unable to sustain organizational success, what went wrong with that last improvement initiative, or why their employees don't seem to "get it," I recommend that you read this book. You may be looking for fixes in all the wrong places. As Fritz emphasizes, real and lasting improvement comes only from redesigning the structure and creating the path of least resistance. ■

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