

Introduction

Setting the Context

How many times have you gone to a seminar or workshop, spent a day or two or three and got really excited about the possibilities but returned to work only to find it remains the same old workplace? Did you ever get fired up but found your new enthusiasm squashed? Did you ever wonder why organizations say they want motivated employees and “self-starters” but stifle their energy?

I have spent 50 years studying leadership, organizations and organizational cultures. I have taught in some of the best universities’ business schools on three continents and consulted with some of the most recognizable names in global business. One of the things I enjoy most is conducting hands on workshops to try out new, proven, and productive ideas in the workplace. After three days the energy level and sense of being connected to people who were literally total strangers just moments before, is truly moving. At the end of the workshop participants are energized. They can see a future for their organizations that, for too many people, is simply unimaginable. They see an organization where fearless communication, decency to one another, making and keeping commitments, re-designing processes so everyone gets heard and taken care of, is the norm! It is very exciting.

Sometimes, during an in-house workshop, where all the participants are from the same organization and are glad to meet new colleagues or to learn about workpartners at a deeper level, a sense of sharing an important purpose in life emerges. A new opportunity to see each other afresh has been created. At the end of the workshop, the energy and connection is there. It is palpable. And thrilling.

The tragedy is, and you knew it was coming, that frequently that energy is lost. A few weeks pass and it’s business as usual again. It’s as if the organization’s immune system has turned in on itself. I cannot avoid feeling the pain of helping to raise so many people’s consciousness about what could be, only to hear that their ideas are being dismissed, crushed - even threateningly silenced. I first thought I could simply improve the workshop, create even better materials; I appealed to participants to commit themselves to higher levels of service to their organizations. I would follow up, check-in with them after a while to see how things were going and nudge them a bit if needed. Still, same thing. Business as usual.

One day at a professional meeting I ran into a participant from one of my workshops. "It didn't work," he said. "We just didn't have the time and, well, it just got lost in the shuffle."

"That's too bad," I said, rather lamely. Then I thought to myself, this is like riding a merry-go-round grasping for the brass ring! Each workshop, seminar, new tool, and technique seems to suffer the same fate. Even when you get the ring you are still stuck on the same old merry-go-round. We need to get off! Then I added. "You know, we have to stop grasping at new tools and techniques just because we think the 'old' ones haven't worked." "Well," he said, "I'm not sure. Something's more has got to give. Maybe we just haven't discovered what it will take to make a lasting difference." His next workshop was on the promise of remote work!

After that encounter I decided to look at the latest management thinking. The stuff of best-sellers. Yes, remote work, leadership the Navy Seal way, total quality, even neurobiology applied to a new paradigm! I set as my purpose an attempt to get to the bottom of this paradox: so many people spending their lives wanting to be great leaders and managers; wanting to make valuable contributions; and wanting to motivate colleagues yet failing so consistently. I had to find out what exactly it would take to make these great ideas work. How could managers know up-front whether their organizations, and they, personally, were ready to use the new tools and techniques to their best advantage? How could the insights and wisdom available from so many practitioners, scholars, and exemplar organizations be put to good use instead of wasted?

The result is this book.

I discovered myself flush with new insights but at a loss to convert those new insights into action. I took another look at the techniques and tools, and how they were used, and discovered that it was not the tools or techniques that were wrong; after all, they all worked for someone! But they needed to be used properly and organizations had to be receptive to dealing with the ramifications of their use: the failures, the need for overcoming resistance, the need to prepare the system for the new way of being.

While much was to be learned, and at times the findings looked terribly simple, another troublesome paradox emerged. Many of the tools work only if the right conditions are present such as open communications, high integrity, and frequent opportunities to discuss issues between "bosses" and "subordinates" as partners. There must be trust or none of these insights will work; indeed, the organization needs to first deal with that

problem before attempting to use any of the ideas here in. Yet, if the conditions are right, specific tools often become unnecessary; under the right conditions, organizations invent what they need to meet their unique circumstances in accordance with their unique requirements at the time. Thus, when General Electric under Jack Welch was ready, it invented “workout,” “360-degree evaluations” and “boundarylessness” via “cross-functional teams.” They may have actually reinvented these concepts but to them, as a response to the specific set of circumstances they faced, they had the right environment to explore these new possibilities. They came up with these tools, among others reported here, and creatively solved their problems.

There was another hard but equally important lesson to learn: if the tools all worked (and they did, or they would not be all over the management literature), then why are they failing in so many organizations? Why were so many well-intentioned managers, like the fellow who had taken my workshop, learning so much but able to apply so little? Well, there are two answers for that. First, the organization is either inhospitable – like barren land to fertile seeds. Or, second, the manager does not have the personal skill or willingness to take the necessary risk to apply the technique properly. But rather than admit you are afraid to upset your personal applecart or the status quo, or face the fact that the organization is simply not suited to applying the new tools, we blame the tool or technique and move on to the next one.

Fads are made by people. Fidget Spinners did not make themselves, or Candy Crush, or Pokémon Go, cronuts, Gangnam style or wearing torn jeans or any of the other myriad fancies we follow. We make them. In the management literature, the tools work. Japanese management works; it is not the stuff of executive seminars anymore but it does serve the business community in Japan quite well. Torn jeans still appeal to some people. Mini-skirts are back, total quality management (TQM) is still great, re-engineering can still save millions of dollars, and new paradigm management is a recognition of important values, and a way of being, that many people find essential in the workplace. If these ideas become fads, they do so because of their excessive uninformed popularity; fads are made by managers zealously advocating the latest tool or a single tool when a whole workbench of tools is required. And fads are made because after the masses follow the “trend” only to be disappointed with their organization’s or own personal failure, interest subsides and a new panacea is sought.

More Paradoxical Tension

My study resulted in yet more paradoxical tension. On the one hand I want to share my knowledge of the tools and techniques and the underlying reasons for their success and why they fail. Anyone spending a career in business will find the summary an essential reference of important tools and techniques. This knowledge alone will entice many

readers to study these insights with the hope of finding the holy grail. There are indeed many possibilities for improving yourself, your workplace environment and productivity. Part II of this book will look at the key techniques themselves. But, in discovering the underlying wisdom and wishful thinking regarding the use of the tools, I also discovered that an organizational immune system is at work to repel new thinking and behavior. Thus, it was necessary to critique organizations and managers who inappropriately apply or misuse the tools; those who, perhaps unwittingly, become part of the immune system.

The substance of Part I is a look at the many ways organizations and managers fail in using the tools as well as the common wisdom they display when using the tools properly. The tension arises in revealing great new tools yet knowing there are real systemic reasons why they may only be partially successful – if at all.

Of course, until you face “The Moment of Truth” and decide if your organization can appropriately use the tools, you really will not know whether these tools and techniques will work for you. In that regard, you are invited to conduct an organizational diagnostic and self-appraisal in Chapter Eleven. In doing so you will immediately know if you and/or your organization is up to the challenge posed by using the tools.

This diagnostic opportunity will save you much time, money, and disappointment, if done candidly, before embarking on the use of any of these tools and techniques. This is partly because the tools are proposed for general use after being successful in other organizations without regard to underlying conditions in your organization. This is no fault of the toolmakers, however. They simply have assumed that all organizations are like theirs: receptive to experimentation, use mindful trial and error, and are willing to do what it takes to solve problems they face. Thus, tools are presumed to work because they worked in the exemplar organization. We now know better.

While proponents of the tools in the management literature are guilty of an enormous underestimation of what is required by others to fully utilize those tools and techniques, they are sincere and not charlatans. We all sometimes fall into this wishful thinking as well. Heck, if Google did it, why can't we? In fact, we often demand to see the evidence that others have used a tool successfully before we will try it, then stumble into the dangerous trap of not asking ourselves if we are as prepared as they were before embarking on the process. You wouldn't try to run a four-minute mile, if you have not prepared yourself, so remember to prepare your team or organization to engage with some of these tools, too.

All of the insights will apply to many organizations. They will be effective to varying degrees of success and most of them offer an opportunity for very positive things to happen – even if the technique is not fully operationalized. Some tools, however, require a very high level of readiness to use at all. For example, if you intend to become a “learning organization” or change the organizational culture in another way, you must first examine the current values, policies, norms, and individual readiness within the organization. You cannot mandate learning. A learning organization is an environment which must be created but it also requires individuals who are learners, structures that encourage thoughtful trial and error, a tolerance for ambiguity, and risk, etc. Thus, the proponents of a tool may be wildly underestimating the conditions required for its success and not lay out the required foundation for its best use. Or, as is most often the case, they have simply made assumptions based on their implicit understanding of the organization(s) they worked with.

Having said that, however, tools can be used to varying degrees of success and if conditions are not perfect, that should not discourage you. But at least you know up front what to expect and you will have a realistic sense of what is possible in your own environment.

I would certainly encourage you to study art even if you are not da Vinci or Picasso. I would also recommend that you be patient. Developing a talent in this field requires as much effort as in others. Avoid the “make it so” mentality of Captain Kirk aboard the Enterprise “going where no man has gone before.” Hats off to the crew of the Enterprise but your work with these tools will not be quick, easy, or flawless. Organizational change is messy, takes time, and has many unpredictable twists and turns. You can be prepared and this book will help you.

The wisdom shows that certain qualities are inherent in the organizations where the tools and techniques succeed. Authentic communication, positive relationships, and high integrity are vital qualities but there is little discussion in the literature around nurturing these qualities first – before the tools are used. They are often considered soft and “touchy-feely” thus, of little consequence. Dismissing these qualities is, ironically, direct testimony to just how important they are though willfully ignored in organizations as “too time consuming,” “too hard to measure,” “too hard to practice,” etc. These are warning bells that the organization would be wise not to ignore. If you hear them do not undertake a major use of the tools and techniques discussed in this book.

More Warning Bells

A recent survey by Yankelovich Partners should also set off warning bells regarding your organization's ability to fully benefit from your new knowledge.

In a survey reported by CNBC:

- Of the roughly 50% of employed Americans who intend to make career changes because of the COVID-19 pandemic, 41% are seeking flexible and/or remote work, 39% desire a raise and/or promotion and 33% are interested in changing industries.
- Sixty percent of workers say they are not rewarded or recognized for good job performance, while 63% believe poor job performance receives immediate attention.
- Sixty-three percent of workers say their supervisors do not know what motivates them to do their best.
- Empowerment is a joke in many companies. Workers still feel their input is not valued. Thirty-three percent said their employees never valued their ideas (emphasis added).
- Forty-one percent of workers feel their team assignments are unrealistic or unfair though 80% of their managers disagree.

With this kind of organizational climate, careful preparation before using the tools and techniques mentioned here would be wise.

Remember, not all tools are relevant to every organization. The second section discusses the 7 major tools and their pros and cons. You can judge instantly if any one of them is appropriate for further study and application in your organization.

A review of the wisdom and wishful thinking of the major tools raises the questions: do the people in your organization have the will and the character to commit to one another the necessary emotional energy to work through the process to make it work? Do they have the interest in learning the required skills? The desire to make the organization really work for everyone?

Other tough questions will emerge about each person's work role. Will the organization be willing to alter its expectations of roles as they evolve through the process? Are the individuals also willing to renegotiate their roles and the kind of relationship they expect to have with the organization?

Most of the techniques presuppose a participative mindset. When the tools and techniques are applied in hospitable environments their chance of success is greater than when applied in a resistant or closed environment where their effect will be only marginal at best and negative at worst.

Apollo 13: The Incredible Success of a Failed Mission

You may remember the flight of Apollo 13 or seen the movie starring Tom Hanks as Commander Lovell. On April 11, 1970, Apollo 13 blasted off in what was considered another routine flight to the moon. No big deal. But then it happened: a life-threatening breakdown in flight.

In watching the film version of the story unfold, several remarkable things occurred to make a rescue possible and successful. And, they all have a bearing on creating the proper environment for the successful use of the management tools and techniques reported here. More importantly, they speak to real leadership and the incredible possibilities when people, faced with a challenge and unobstructed by their environments in their pursuit of a solution, can tap their full potential.

The first was the reliance each crew member had on the work of their colleagues. In this life or death situation when you might imagine widespread second guessing, and fear and panic breeding distrust, the crew of Apollo as well as the staff in mission control, implicitly trusted one another's abilities and accepted nothing short of positive and resourceful thinking. Everyone remained riveted on their goal as long as there was life aboard Apollo.

Second, everyone in mission control was expected to, and did, contribute every ounce of their expertise and imagination.

Third, each person communicated exactly what they knew, what they thought, and what they believed. There was no fear – except for the well-being of the crew on the verge of death in space.

Fourth, never having faced these circumstances before and not having contingency plans for this particular catastrophe, they immediately began creating options – each person leading or supporting – in relation to their skills and expertise.

Fifth, the successful action required three parts: (a) developing a unique solution that met all requirements of the problem, (b) communicating that solution which was akin to giving instructions for surgery over the telephone; and (c) following those instructions and participating in their modification in real time with virtually no room for error.

Sixth, and finally, when all was done that could be done to remedy the on-board malfunction, there was still the problem of using the lunar module to accomplish an

Earth landing which it was not designed to do. Here the crew had to manually maneuver the craft so that its entry into the atmosphere was angled perfectly. If they came in too wide, they would literally bounce off the atmosphere into outer space and die of starvation; too narrow and they would burn instantly like a bug in an electric zapper. Of course, they made it.

The lessons about human courage and cooperation are clear. What is not so clear, perhaps, is the importance of the management environment in mission control and on-board the spacecraft which made their efforts possible, which allowed for an expeditious and successful solution and for the perfect execution of the rescue flight plan.

If you create this kind of environment in your workplace all of these tools and techniques will serve you well. If you create that environment you will also be able to fashion appropriate tools and techniques on your own; certainly you will have the confidence to pick and choose and modify what you learn here to suit your needs.

Leaders find that if they are personally ready and motivated that beginning a conversation and dialogue with others about the future and using new techniques to get there, is an appropriate first step. The complete three step process is first, to communicate your intention, and to informally survey those you work with. Then, move into a directed conversation with potential allies and like-minded individuals who may join with you as early adopters of new techniques. Finally, with step three, engage in a deeper level of discussion – a dialogue. The three steps help set the stage for readiness. From awareness to understanding to commitment.

How to Use this book

The ultimate purpose of this book is to keep you intelligently informed about new management thinking and to help you determine your personal and organizational readiness to apply what you learn. Further, the wisdom can be distilled to a rock-bottom declaration that it is all about authentic communications, strong positive relationships, and a character of high integrity. But see Chapter Three for a full discussion of the wisdom of these techniques and tools.

The book is divided into three parts and serves three related purposes. Part I is an introduction to the underlying truths revealed in a study of current management tools and techniques. You will learn the wisdom that leaders espouse, and model, to make these tools work for them. Part I is also a critique of why the tools may also lead to partial success or even complete failure. The focus shifts to the responsibilities of

managers and organizations to use the tools properly. Part I also helps you diagnose your personal and organizational readiness to use the wisdom and the power of contemporary management tools.

Part II is a look at the most prominent tools at work today. The seven clusters of techniques and ideas that are discussed can help you and your organization succeed. Here you will explore the wisdom and wishful thinking for each one. You will know what it takes to make them work and what to avoid that leads to failure.

Part III is an annotated compendium of more than 100 tools and techniques that all managers should be aware of. It will serve as a ready reference and enjoyable browsing. It will keep you up-to-date and conversant in all of the latest management thinking. It includes many references for further study if you wish to explore the tools and techniques in depth.

While this book gives you an overview of more than 100 tools and techniques, it alone is not enough to provide you with all you need to know in order to use these tools. Rather, it will help you identify which ones may be useful for your specific needs. Then you can conduct additional study and locate appropriate assistance.