

A Whole-Person/Systemic Approach to Organization Change Management

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Over the past few decades large-scale organization change has become a way of life in American business. TQM, cycle-time reduction, process re-engineering, theory of constraints, and general flattening of the organization have, at various times, led the parade of favored approaches to organization change.

But many organization change initiatives, in these or other forms, have failed to deliver promises of increased productivity and morale, decreased costs, decreased waste, and increased customer satisfaction. McKinsey has reported that more than two-thirds of Quality initiatives over the past few decades have failed to realize the benefits stakeholders expected.

Often among the failures a common theme has been the lack of collaborative cultural inquiry and re-design. New work structures—such as autonomous teams—are established and people simply are expected to become empowered by these new ways in which they are working. Yet, largely due to a lack of understanding of the power of the collective human system to obstruct the progress of initiatives, many merely structural change programs have foundered. A sad result of these failures has been to reinforce fear, defensiveness, and cynicism among people at work toward organization change efforts.

In cases of successful, durable change, what are the characteristics of these programs that we can point to as important factors in the successes to date? If there are common factors in successes, what are they, and how can we learn whether these and/or other factors may be helpful for particular change agendas? And even if we can point to fortunate success stories, the question arises: what is missing in these initiatives that could help them be even more successful?

As the 21st Century dawns we increasingly see a move toward the integration of methods and techniques from widespread disciplines into meta-methodologies for organization change. In a spirit of cross-disciplinary inquiry, practitioners from fields as diverse as family therapy, martial arts, systems science, and organizational behavior are working together in teams to design new, more sophisticated approaches to change. This monograph sketches one particular, integrative approach to organization change. This integrative approach seeks to help organizations continually reinvent themselves by helping the people in them develop and refine new sets of interlinked skills and capabilities, ones that will help them become powerful players in the dynamics of change, minimizing the likelihood that they or their organizations will be left in the dust.

The general, or contextual, model of organization change is one featuring at least three streams of coordinated inquiry and design (see Figure 1, page 3).

These streams correspond with the following categories of group activity:

- **Structural:** in which work structures, processes, and procedures are examined, diagnosed, re-engineered, implemented, and evaluated
- **Group tools and skill building:** in which individuals in groups develop enhanced skill in managing group processes. Includes meeting facilitation, the use of group problem-solving and continuous improvement skills, and development of skills for establishing dialogue as a model of exploratory group communication
- **Cultural:** in which all the stakeholders examine the culture and values they currently have, reinventing them, if necessary, to help the people work together effectively in new and more effective ways. Additionally, practices from fields such as family therapy, mindfulness meditation, and the martial art of Aikido are offered for enhancing individual leadership through increasing inner mastery

A General Model for Integrating Cultural and Structural Change

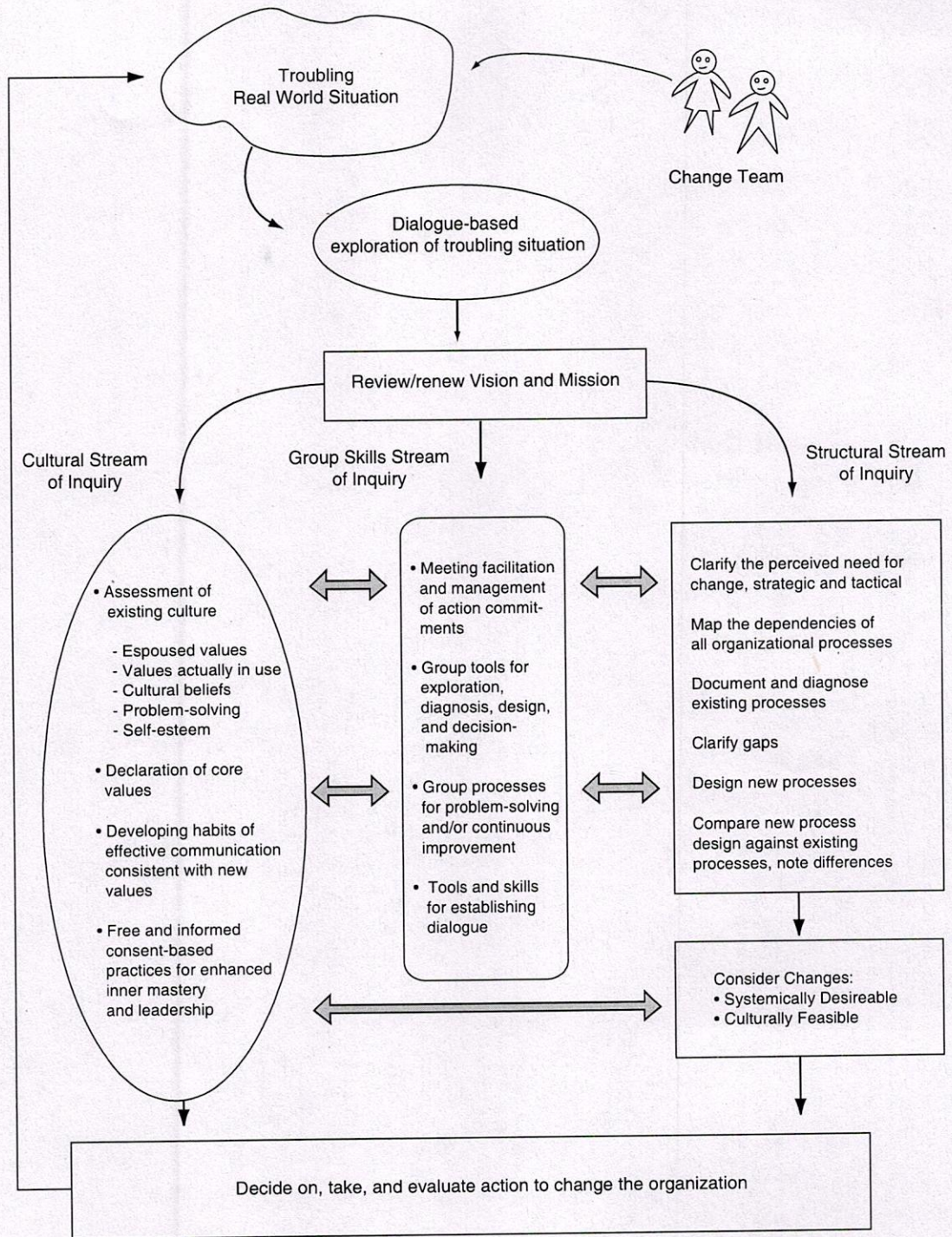


Figure 1 (© Adaptive Learning Design, 1998)

Many individuals in successful organizations have developed skills in refining both structural stream activities, and group process and meeting management. Fewer appear to have developed skill in speaking and listening in order to lead non-coercive cultural inquiry and design. Fewer still appear to have established practices of mindfulness, grounded presence, and connectedness with others which can lead to increased leadership through inner mastery.

In order to support systemic change management by preparing people for its complexities, the following organization of nested core competencies is offered (Figure 2). This model suggests that some capabilities are more critical to an individual's ability to be effective in change initiatives. Interestingly, until very recently, only the outermost layer of skills—those of structural inquiry and design—has been considered necessary. However, due to the complexity of integrating change in both structural and cultural streams, and due to the stresses that arise out of our existing habits of conversation and our physical reactions to surprises or ambiguity, the three inner layers have begun to attract more attention by change theorists and practitioners.

Inner Mastery. The innermost circle denotes that set of practices and skills by which individuals are able to maintain a grounded, focused, and authentic presence in the midst of mounting chaos and stress. Individuals with developed skill in Inner Mastery tend to appear to others as leaders worthy of trust. Leaders with Inner Mastery skills can sense and maintain a connection with others because they are more completely in touch with themselves. In contrast, most of us are not at all at home in our bodies. We are not in touch with the physical sensations that may accompany our being effective or ineffective. We do not have a sense of where our physical center is, and our reactive thoughts and fears seem to drag us in every direction, especially in stressful situations.

Approaches to helping individuals develop a more embodied presence include forms of mindfulness meditation and martial arts training. Within the field of martial arts, the art of Aikido stands out as a useful path because of its focus on the dynamic connection among individuals, and because of its emphasis on the harmonious resolution of conflict through collaborative movement, not force. With increased mindfulness that comes with practice we are able to notice more rapidly when we are drifting off of our center, and are able to bring ourselves back to center more rapidly and gracefully.

The application of Aikido principles in workplace training is becoming increasingly recognized as a potentially powerful, new form of organizational learning. Recent books such as *An Unused Intelligence* and *Leadership Aikido* explicitly prescribe Aikido-based exercises for dealing with difficult work and leadership issues. Non-strenuous exercises such as these bring participants to the experience of merging with another's energy through physically moving in connection with the other as an alternative to resisting or giving in. Within the past year the Dialogue Project and the Society for Organizational Learning, both at MIT, have recognized the value of through-the-body learning, based on Aikido principles, and are working to integrate this mode of learning into their various approaches.

Organization of Core Competencies for Individuals Leading Systemic Change Initiatives

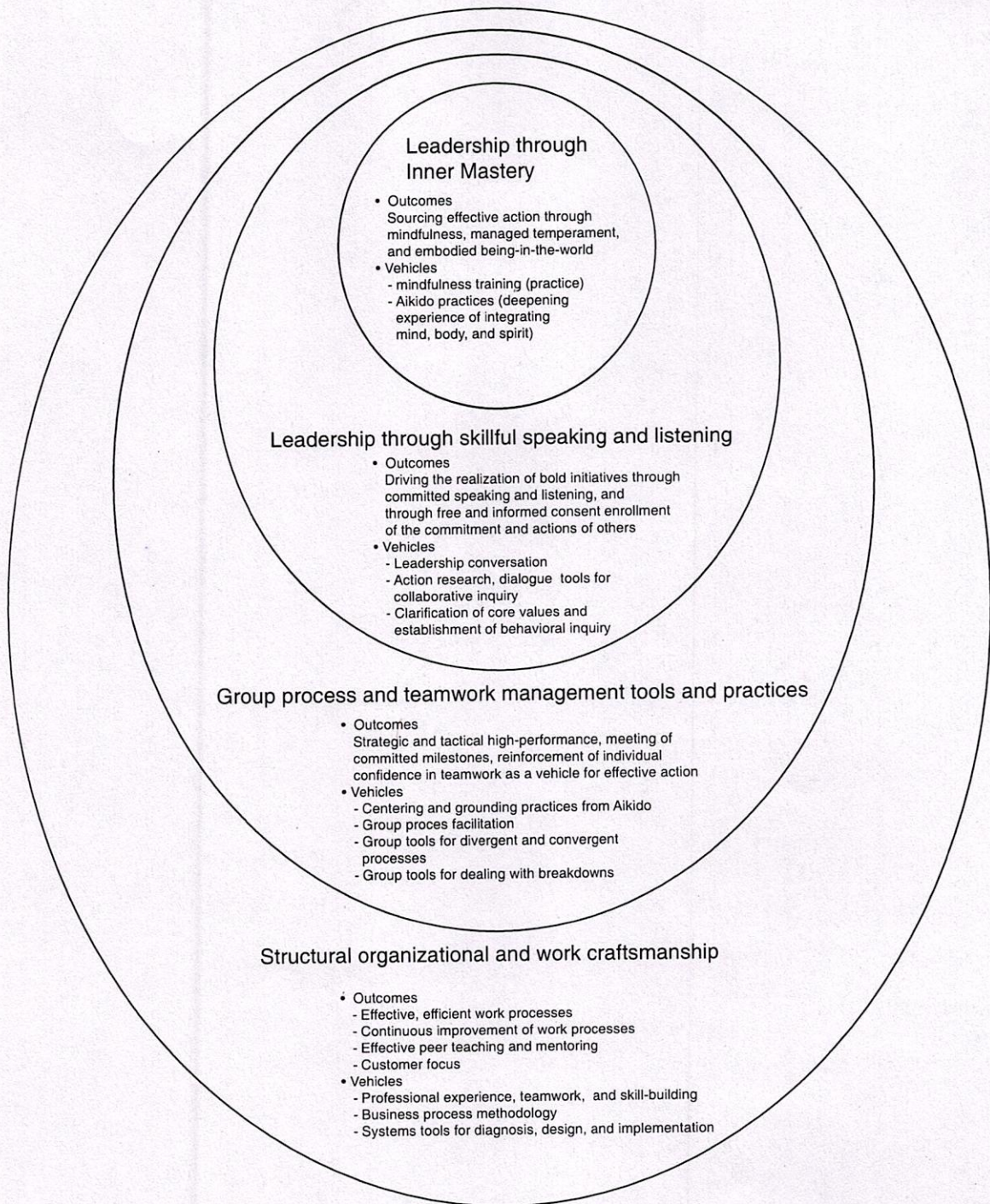


Figure 2 (designed in collaboration with Chris Thorsen)

Skillful Speaking and Listening: The second inner-most layer, that of leadership through skillful speaking and listening, includes communication skills for enhanced inquiry, clearer action commitments, and for dealing more effectively when breakdowns occur. Leaders with these skills tend to make clearer requests, be more accountable for their promises, and more likely to hold colleagues accountable for their commitments in ways that lead to a minimum of defensiveness and resentment.

As communication breakdowns occur, leaders with these communication skills are more effective at driving conversation leading to effective corrective action, rather than to defensiveness, resentment, and distrust.

Key among the approaches to enhancing effective communication so that individuals can realize these capabilities is a blend of the speech act work of Fernando Flores with the values-based action research of Chris Argyris and Donald Schön. The latter approach is especially valuable insofar as it establishes a pathway to personal growth that minimizes the likelihood of coercive, manipulative coaching. A value, drawn from Argyris and Schön, upon which this blend of approaches rests is that of promoting free and informed consent of participants to methods, coaching, and techniques they will encounter during training and daily life at work.

Group Skills for Process Management: The third layer from the center denotes skill in meeting facilitation and the use of tools for making group processes leading to decisions and action more effective and collaborative. These skills have become increasingly a part of organizational training and practice over the past 15 years, and most managers are familiar with their use.

Structural and Organizational Design: The fourth layer denotes the category of re-engineering tools, capabilities, and practices that are most familiar to change agents. Those of organizational and process diagnosis, design, and implementation. Among these are traditional TQM, Process Re-Engineering, Matrix Organization, and so forth.

Helping individuals to develop capabilities from within all four circles appears to provide them with domains of expertise for driving effective change that traditional structural-only models have lacked. The challenges in designing effective, non-coercive training processes for the inner circles are formidable. Yet the potential gains for effective change management appear great enough to warrant the development of suitable new practices.

It is important to acknowledge that there is likely to be no single, general model for organization change. These models are offered as conversation-starters, or checklists for developing strategies for driving effective change in organizations by the people who will live and work in the organizations either anticipating change or in the middle of it already.