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Facilitating with Style: Using Organizational Engineering to Facilitate Teamwork and Collaboration

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By: William Matthews

ABSTRACT

This article presents background information on and application examples of a new technology called Organizational Engineering. The work of Gary Salton, Ph.D., Organizational Engineering uses sociology and information processing theory to understand, measure, predict and guide the behavior of groups of people. Organizational Engineering theory is built around the idea that everybody develops a cognitive strategy that they then use to guide their ongoing decision making. The character and quality of the information that they select determines the nature of their decisions as well as the kind of actions they are likely to use while executing these decisions.

Using the I-OPT instrument, Organizational Engineering can not only identify individual decision making preferences, but can accurately predict a team's decision-making preference as a unified whole. Knowing where team members share a common decision making pattern (and where they do not), and knowing the characteristics of that pattern can be invaluable information for a facilitator in understanding the team's decision-making strengths and vulnerabilities.

Whether a facilitator needs to help assemble the most effective team for the task at hand, diagnose where a team is stuck or struggling in order to "intervene" effectively, or coach individual team members to enhance effectiveness, Organizational Engineering provides facilitators with a new and effective set of tools that can quickly and accurately assess current performance and recommend measures for consideration at multiple levels of relationships.

For more information on Organizational Engineering, contact one or more of the following individuals:

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INTRODUCTION

Webster's defines facilitate as "to make easier." Yet, this definition hardly begins to describe the complex mix of theory, technique, tools and artistry that comprise the practice of facilitation. Roger M. Schwarz defines group facilitation as, "a process in which a person who is acceptable to all members of the group, substantively neutral, and has no decision-making authority intervenes to help a group improve the way it identifies and solves problems and makes decisions, in order to increase the group's effectiveness."2

Anyone who has ever tried to move a group forward knows that the process Schwarz describes is often easier said than done. Why is it that some groups start out with a bang only to quickly fizzle out? How come some teams initially show no ability to work collaboratively yet surprise everyone with its accomplishments in the end? Hunter et.al. suggest that an effective facilitator, "knows that group members can achieve amazing results and are stopped mainly by baggage from the past.3

Such explanations have their origins in psychology, which has contributed a major proportion of the theory and tools that we employ in the disciplines of facilitation and group development. However, theories, when used to blame the victim for failure are increasingly meeting resistance. But psychology is not the villain here. Group and organizational development has taken a discipline that was essentially designed to address the issues of the individual and has attempted to apply it to groups of people. Beyond here-and-now concepts such as groupthink and pressure to conform, hypotheses about the impact on the group of individual group members' baggage from the past often fails.

Suppose that as a facilitator, instead of focusing on past baggage you could focus on accurately predicting how a team would cycle through Tuckman's four phases of development. You could use that information to facilitate (accelerate may be the better word choice here) the team's development as Daly and Nicoll have suggested.4 Rather than confining one's interventions to assisting stalled groups, you could assist an organization or group in optimizing team / group performance or impacting the project management results by helping to structure the group with "right" minded individuals, downplaying any "baggage" individuals might bring to the team.3

There is a new approach now available to facilitators, an approach that is based on relationships, not individuals, one that has been proven in firms across North America. If we assume that the purpose of putting people together in groups is, as Schwarz suggests, to make better decisions and take more effective action, then for issues concerning the success or failure of groups, we can now increasingly rely on Organizational Engineering.

A NEW APPROACH

Organizational Engineering (OE) is a new technology that directly addresses and reliably resolves relationship issues at the group level. It accurately predicts how groups of people, assembled for common purpose, will behave. It can identify natural coalitions. It tells how difficult or easy it will be for people to reach a group decision. It can estimate the direction the group decision will take.

Organizational Engineering uses an information processing approach as its guiding paradigm. It does not contradict what is being done with psychological approaches to understanding group dynamics. Rather it extends it. OE postulates that groups must develop a decision-making strategy to be effective, just as individuals have to adopt a decision-making strategy to survive in today's constantly changing world. These strategies can be measured and influenced. Take the simplest of examples, getting dressed in the morning.

You get up and go to your closet. The first (unconscious) choice is to decide how you are going to decide. Should you assess what you are going to do today and use that as a guide? Do you just grab the first thing that hits your hand? Should you be creative and "express" yourself in your garments? Do you follow your pre-planned schedule based on your wash day? The list of decision-making options could go on forever. If you try to take into account every potential condition that could affect your decision on dressing you will never get out of the closet and will probably starve to death.6

Thankfully, we find very few emaciated skeletons in closets with puzzled looks on their faces. This suggests that we must have figured out ways of filtering information, and not everyone filters using the same approach. The book Organizational Engineering (Salton, 1996)7 postulates the concept of "method" as the vehicle humans use in their (input) filtering process. There are two basic strategies available. A structured strategy uses a mental "template" to organize and filter information. A person discovers a "template" that works in his or her environment(s) and tends to reuse it. For example, a person may adopt a template that says that they will scan all exposures, define all options, resolve competing or conflicting options and plan the implementation. To one degree or another, this template can be applied almost everywhere. One consequence of applying this template is that the

person will probably avoid being tagged with the nickname "Speedy."

At the other end of the continuum, a person might adopt an unpatterned strategy. The "template" here is to weave together anything that seems to fit in such a way that it resolves the issue at hand. In our closet example, a person using this strategy grabs successive elements of an outfit that look "okay" together. Much less information is being processed and the individual will probably be one of the first ones to arrive at breakfast. However, it is unlikely that the person will win any "best dressed" competitions. The underlying unpatterned strategy yields a "satisfying" result rather than an optimal one, but it saves transaction cost.

To summarize Salton's paradigm to this point, OE postulates that people use different "templates" in filtering the massive amount of potential information which might impact a decision. The choice of the filter influences the nature and character of the behavioral responses.

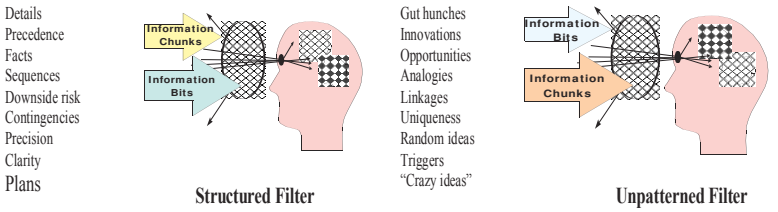

ILLUSTRATION 1

Method is used to govern the information flows that are used by the person as inputs to making decisions.

The other side of the information-processing paradigm is the output. The outcome of whatever processing a person does is described in Organizational Engineering by the concept of "mode." Organizational Engineering (Salton, 1996, p.15) postulates that, at the extremes, there are at least two "modes" available.

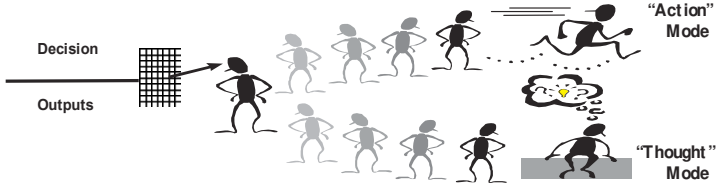

ILLUSTRATION II

Mode governs the character of the response.

The first is the "action" mode. In this mode a person's behavioral response is directed at immediately addressing the issue being confronted using expedient strategies which "may" resolve the issue. In the ordinary world of business, a person in an "action" mode might grab a telephone and call a customer before working out exactly what is to be said. The essential element of the action mode is that the individual is organizing the response to effect some element in the outside world that directly pertains to the issue at hand.

Another mode available to a person is "thought." In this realm a person's response is an idea, plan, assessment, evaluation or judgment. The response does not directly affect the issue but is rather a step along the way toward effecting it. The "thought" response is intended to give direction to subsequent action.

In today's information-based society, the ability to "live" on the output of the "thought" mode is even more available than in the past. Thought is as viable of a survival strategy for an individual as is action. However, for a society as a whole action is more valuable than thought. It may be possible for a species to survive without much thought. It will not survive without action.

Organizational Engineering teaches that input and output can be linked without involving the exact methods and mechanization's that a person uses. It accomplishes this by using the concept of strategic posture or "style." In effect, the various methods and modes combine to create characteristic behavior patterns dictated by the amount and character of the information interacting with a person's "template" of response preferences. These "styles" can be summarized in Table I as:

Table 1
SUMMARY OF STRATEGIC STYLE CHARACTERISTICS

Reactive Stimulator: The pure RS is an action oriented individual. They typically work with low detail, are tightly focused on near-term objectives and seek tangible results. They operate in the action mode using unpatterned methods.

Logical Processor: The pure LP is methodical and action-oriented. They are naturally detail oriented and work best where assignments are clear and precise with will-defined expectations. LP's operate in the action mode using structured methods.

Hypothetical Analyzer: The pure HA is a problem solver. Their focus is on problem and their solution. Their primary concern is identifying the best way to address a situation with a typical output being a plan, assessment, evaluation or judgement. HA's operate in the thought mode using structured methods.

Relational Innovator: The pure RI is an idea generator. Relationships between divergent ideas are quickly identified. Seemingly disparate ideas, concepts and innovation are quickly integrated into coherent theories and systems. The RI operates in a thought mode using unpatterned methods.

The importance of Organizational Engineering lies in the effects input and output has on team behavior. This occurs because a large part of one person's input is the output of some other person(s). Similarly, each person's output is someone else's input. The fact that the individual is not the principal focus of Organizational Engineering does not mean that the people involved are ignored. The "I Opt™" instrument creates an individual report which usually gets an "Ah Ha!!!" response from the participants. Its focus, however, is clearly on outcome-related rather than psychological issues. For example, a typical "I Opt™" individual report is able to identify preferences in areas such as those listed in Table II:

Table II
SAMPLE OF INDIVIDUAL INFORMATION RETURNED

GOALS	long or short range, specific or general
DIRECTIONS	specific or general guidance, flexible or rigid
SUPERVISION	mininal or intense, consistent or variable, etc.
APPRECIATION	personal or abstract focus, ideas or outcome content
ORGANIZATION	straight-forward or complex, defined or ambiguous
DETAILS	conceptual or operational, high or low volume
CHANGE	generation or resistance, slow or fast, etc.

Because the information is not psychological in character, team members generally freely share their individual profiles. It is immediately obvious to them that no deep, dark secrets are in danger of being revealed. Rather, the entire focus is on the information flows that must occur if a group is to be a real team. It's hard to get defensive or behave "dysfunctionally" about information flows so, usually, people don't. Rather, they focus on how to go about adjusting the flows so that they can execute their preferred strategy in a way that allows its optimization and through that, their contribution to the team. This provides the facilitator with a perfect opportunity to open the doors to true synergistic performance.

THE TOOLS OF ORGANIZATIONAL ENGINEERING

The "I Opt™" instrument is the ruler of the Organizational Engineering paradigm. A ruler is a thing in and of itself, but its value lies in its ability to guide the creation of bigger things-bridges, roads, buildings, and other things useful to the human species. In the case of "I Opt™" and the Organizational Engineering paradigm, the bigger "thing" of interest is the team. The first step in understanding how this works is how method and mode are combined.

Salton conceives both the method and mode as existing on continuums with each person having an element of each combination within their behavioral toolkit. The strength a particular combination holds determines the probability that any given response will conform to the characteristics of that strategic posture or "style." The relative probabilities are depicted graphically using a "strategic profile" of the kind shown in the Illustration III.

The profile is arranged so that adjacent "styles" or "strategic postures" share common characteristics. For example, both the Relational Innovator and Reactive Stimulator use unpatterned methods. Therefore the area in the quadrant which they share (labeled "Changer Pattern") represents the probability that this individual will employ that method in addressing a given issue. Similarly, the Hypothetical Analyzer and Logical Processor share a preference for a structured method. The area the share (labeled "Conservator Pattern") represents the probability that the individual will employ that strategy.

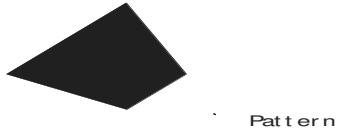

ILLUSTRATION III
A single person has a profile. The profile displays the strength of commitment to each style and relates the styles using the concept of "pattern." A pattern represents shared characteristics along either the method or mode dimension.

Like an individual, the team has an output. OE proposes that the character of a team's response will be largely governed by probability. The level of probability is determined by the interaction of the strategic information processing profiles of group members. In other words, if all of the individuals in a group share a strong RS strategic style, it is probable that the output of the group will be rapid-fire initiatives repeatedly addressing the issue until one of them works. If the group were predominantly HA's, the probable response will be ever more detailed and all-embracing analyses and plans. In this situation, the members share a common structural view and can reasonably be expected to use it in resolving common issues. If a group is composed of a mixture of people, the output will be determined by the strength and interaction of the probabilities imbedded in each of the individual profiles. The distinction becomes clear in Illustration IV.

In Illustration IV, the most probable group response will conform to the "Changer" pattern. It is the quadrant with the largest area. The "Changer" pattern engages the idea generation capabilities of the RI and the action oriented RS. Both of these strategic styles use an unpatterned method and so can be expected to respond quickly using minimum detail. Speed is a probable behavioral outcome.

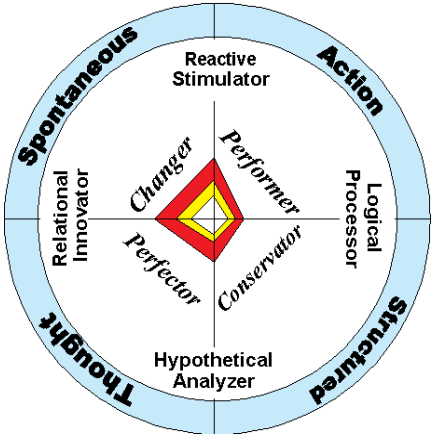

ILLUSTRATION IV

Single person profiles can be overlapped, one on top of the other to arrive at a geometric composite of the group as a whole. This area can be interpreted with mathematics to arrive at probabilistic judgements on the most likely behavior of the group acting as a single unit.

The "Common Area" of a team usually has at least some representation in each quadrant of the joint profile. This means that there is some basis for joint agreement in each of these areas. In other words, it is possible that the new team entity will respond in a manner consistent with any of the four patterns described by the four quadrants. The "Changer" pattern is only distinguished because it is the most probable.

On any single decision, the team may land in any one of the quadrants. However, just as in a dice game, over a stream of transactions the team described by Illustration IV will most often behave in a manner consistent with the "Changer" pattern. This information is useful to the facilitator in determining how to put together a team for optimal performance or how to help a team self-correct.

ORGANIZATIONAL ENGINEERING APPLICATION

Organizational Engineering's most powerful effect can be seen where it is used to assemble a group form scratch. For example, it has been used to optimize the organizational structure of multiple teams required to operate in a coordinated fashion in a new power station at Tampa Electric8. The company needed to create four operating teams and one relief team to cover the 24/ 7 needs of a new state-of-the art power station. Since each team would be "turning over" the plant to the next, having teams that believed that the other teams would make the same kinds of decisions and preventing "turfism" was of prime importance. So teams were structured at the onset to ensure that each team shared the same basic decision preferences and tendencies - suitable for the leading-edge, detailed nature of the facility. In addition, the relief team was structured to optimally move in and out of any of the four other operating teams.

Slaby and Austrom report on an engine design team for a major automotive manufacturer. The team was charged with producing a new engine to deliver greater horsepower and reliability. Because the anticipated number of production units was relatively small and tooling so costly, a decision was made to use existing components in a modified design. After design plans were completed, the team signed off on a six-month time horizon for product delivery - half of what is normally required. Using OE and the "I Opt™" survey, the article authors predicted that the decision-making style of the team would not support a commitment to innovation within the given time horizon. It just wasn't in the team's decision-making nature, which was an analytical/ perfection orientation.9 The manufacturer's options were to provide a longer time horizon or reconfigure the team. Reconfiguration won out.

Organizations as diverse as Birdseye and the Federal Aviation Administration have been using OE to transform managers into coaches and mentors by pairing coach/ mentors with protégés.10 An interesting discovery reported by Mae Frances Leach, Director of Organization Development for the FAA's Southwest Region is that contrary to what intuition might suggest, coaches with balanced styles almost always insure failure of the process. Here again, the facilitation was applied at the front end, seeking to create optimal pairings rather than correcting mis-pairings.

SUMMARY

Organizational Engineering (OE) is a new technology that directly addresses and reliably resolves relationship issues. Organizational Engineering uses an information processing approach as its guiding paradigm. It does not contradict what is being done with psychological instruments. Rather it extends it. The relationship between OE methods and psychological instruments is one of correlation. If an ounce of prevention is indeed worth a pound of cure, facilitators now have a set of tools that can be applied equally effectively before a team is formed or after. It can be applied at various levels of complexity of organizational operation. Because its focus is on how people make decisions, it is less threatening than traditional psychological testing, and because its focus is on evolving group relationships, the effects of past "baggage" brought to the team by its members plays a limited role if any.

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