



### Leadership Through Learning Part 1: What Does It Take?

by Marilyn Herasymowych  
and Henry Senko

".. why has no company we know of managed to install such systems and procedures that remove the complaints? No matter how sophisticated the new information systems and procedures are, the complaints continue: 'Our biggest problem is poor communication.' Why do managers not discuss the fact that no matter how information systems are developed the complaints remain the same?"

— Ralph D. Stacey, Douglas Griffin, and Patricia Shaw, **Complexity and Management: Fad or Radical Challenge to Systems Thinking?** (2000, 2002)

In the last series of newsletters, we explored complexity and its effect on corporate culture. The series focused on the implications of a linear approach to how we view and deal with complexity. It is clear that a linear approach cannot begin to address the organizational dilemmas we face in organizations today. The last two newsletters (*InfoMine* Vol. 10, No. 1 and Vol. 10, No. 2) suggested the need for a shift in thinking from a linear approach to a

systemic approach as a way of working with complexity. In this next series of newsletters, we will explore theories, methods, and tools that are based in a systemic approach.

In 1990, we read a book called **The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of a Learning Organization**, written by Peter Senge, and became intrigued with the idea of a learning organization. As MHA consultants, we had been struggling to find ways to help organizations to create results that were sustainable over time. As Stacey, Griffin, and Shaw state in the opening quote, no matter what we did to help teams in organizations, the complaint about poor communication persisted. In retrospect, we had been using methods and tools based on a linear approach. The result was minimal success, and even less sustainable success.

We knew that we needed to challenge our approach to helping teams in organizations. At the time, Senge and his concept of a learning organization seemed to provide an answer. Looking back, it is now clear that we were moving from using a linear approach to using a systemic approach. We spent the next ten years learning what it meant to become a learning organization, and developing our understanding of how a systemic approach works within teams in an organization. We did this by working with a number of leaders and teams who had tried a number

of change initiatives that had not produced sustainable results. These leaders and teams were frustrated, but also knew that they could not accept defeat. They needed something new to address the dilemmas they were facing in their organizations.

We asked these leaders and teams to consider using the concept of a learning organization to guide their change initiatives. Willing to try something new, they joined us in researching, field-testing, and evaluating a variety of thinking and learning processes to identify those that produce exceptional and sustainable results. Although the journey was filled with ups and downs, the results were outstanding. Every team that underwent the journey, and stuck it out, produced measurable bottom-line results that out-performed other teams in the organization, often doubling revenue generation and cost savings. Even more astounding was the fact that these teams also learned how to work together in ways that appreciated and respected differences, and created self-motivated accountability and commitment to the team efforts.

Complexity is rife with paradox. According to Stacey, Griffin, and Shaw, "... life in organizations is essentially paradoxical. Managers are supposed to be in charge and yet they find it difficult to stay in control. The future is recognizable when it arrives but in many important respects not predictable before it does. We sense the importance of difference but experience the pressure to conform." These paradoxes, among others,

thrived in these teams. We discovered that, in their journey to create a learning organization, these teams created their capacity to live in paradox.

For example, one of the mantras evident in many organizations is “We have no time.” These teams learned that this mantra is untrue. They learned that, if they did not take the time to collectively understand what was going on, they actually wasted more time fixing the same problem over and over again. Instead, they spent a lot of time to reflect together, taking advantage of the paradox *slow down to speed up*. The result was that the teams that spent more time reflecting, and learning how to learn, actually worked less time, and used less effort, to produce greater measurable and sustainable results. They spent more time in face-to-face conversations talking about everything from the work that they did to how they felt about how they were working together. These teams spent over 20 days a year learning how to do this, and out-performed every other team in the organization.

We have worked closely *with* these leaders and teams to develop practical methods and tools that enhance a team’s capacity to produce outstanding results by thinking and acting from a systemic approach. This next series of newsletters focuses on three of these methods and tools:

- **Systems Thinking:** This method helps individuals, leaders, and teams to analyze tactical dilemmas that seem to have no easy solution, and to take effective action to deal with them. We have developed a unique approach based on the

work of Peter Senge and his colleagues. In 2000, we published a Guide on our approach to systems thinking. Based on our work of the past two years using this Guide in organizations, we have revised and published it as **Navigating Through Complexity: Systems Thinking Guide**.

- **Reflexive Thinking:** This method helps individuals, leaders, and teams to analyze relationships that work and those that do not work, and to create the conditions for effective working relationships that value diversity and difference. We have been field-testing this method with both teams and individuals. Our preliminary results are outstanding. People are quite taken with a method that explains the dynamics that underlie relationships at work. We are currently working closely with Christine Oliver in England to publish the **Complexity, Relationships, and Strange Loops: Reflexive Thinking Guide** this summer.
- **Energy Flow:** This method helps leaders and teams to understand why most change initiatives do not work in the current corporate culture, and to select change initiatives that will work with the current corporate culture, or that will create a new corporate culture. We are working with Mike Pedler and Kath Aspinwall to develop the Energy Flow Model further, and to draft a Guide for field-testing this summer. We plan to publish this Guide by December 2003.

These three methods and tools make up a leadership and team development program called *Leadership Through*

*Learning*. The basic premise of this program is that leaders and teams can learn to use these methods and tools by working on real work dilemmas, rather than on case studies. Each of these methods and tools is based in a substantial body of published research. However, a body of research does not help people in organizations to use the ideas in their organizations. That’s why we have tested these methods and tools with real teams solving real problems in real time. If you want more information on these Guides, see the enclosed flyer, and continue to keep in touch with the development of new publications by visiting our website at [www.mhainstitute.ca](http://www.mhainstitute.ca).

“We seem to think that life should not be paradoxical, that we should be able to resolve the paradox and find solutions to the problems it gives rise to. However, believing one thing and experiencing another must be a source of stress and anxiety. On the other hand, if we find ways of understanding the unavoidably paradoxical nature of life, we may find the liveliness of acting in the tension.”

— Ralph D. Stacey, Douglas Griffin, and Patricia Shaw, **Complexity and Management: Fad or Radical Challenge to Systems Thinking?** (2000, 2002)

**MHA Institute Inc.**  
Unit 248, Suite 205  
259 Midpark Way SE  
Calgary, Alberta T2X 1M2 Canada

Phone: (403) 257-4597  
Fax: (403) 257-4649  
E-mail: [info@mhainstitute.ca](mailto:info@mhainstitute.ca)  
Web: [www.mhainstitute.ca](http://www.mhainstitute.ca)