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mentoring human action



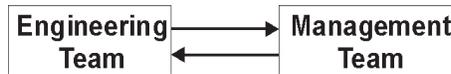
Leadership Through Learning Part 4D: Culture Clash

by Tom Boydell, Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko

“Although it is tempting to believe that we have individual freedom, choice, and autonomy, the fact remains that we operate within cultural systems that are based on ideological stances. As we interact in any cultural system, we affect others, and others affect us. We are in a dynamic of interactions that seems to have no beginning or end. It is within this dynamic that we can experience cultural stances from various perspectives.”

— Tom Boydell, Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko, **Corporate Culture and Organizational Change: Strategic Practice Guide**, (2005)

To understand how cultural stances interact, consider this real-life example of a clash of cultures that occurred between two connected cultural systems (shown below).



This example demonstrates how you can use the cultural stances that might be at play to understand the ideological stance of each cultural system, and how different cultural systems might clash.

An engineering team in an oil and gas company is focused on troubleshooting problems that occur as a result of project implementation. On this team, there are three engineers, four technical support personnel, and one administrative support person. All team members demonstrate outstanding relational skills when dealing with others. For many years, they have been working in a management structure that allowed them to make decisions and to allocate resources locally.

Recently, there has been a change in the management structure, and the new management team wants all teams to be more aligned to what management deems as important in the short term. As a result, management believes that all teams must be guided and closely monitored. For a team used to negotiating its own actions locally, this is a major shift, because this team is now being told on what to focus, and is being monitored for compliance. As a result, team members do not understand how they can work effectively within this new management culture.

The engineering team members completed a cultural system analysis to determine where they felt the management team was now focusing energy and attention. They discovered that the management team operates primarily from a Level 1 cultural stance or *con-forming stance*. When the engineering team saw this pattern emerging from their analysis, they understood that they were dealing with a management team that was operating from **Level 1: Implementing**. This meant that the engineering team was constrained to learning that was dependent on management approval, and was expected to conform to what management believed to be *right*. *The right answer is what someone in authority, someone with power, says is right* (in this case, the management team).



The engineering team members then analyzed their own cultural system. In doing this, the engineering team members hoped to find a reason why the engineering team was so ineffective in dealing with the management team.

As a team, the engineering team members respect and work cooperatively together to get things done. The team leader supports each team member in his or her work, and in both personal and professional

development. There is a great deal of delegated authority, and a high level of trust that people will take responsibility for their work, and will ask for help when needed.

The team has been very successful not only at troubleshooting but also at transferring many of the troubleshooting skills to the field personnel. Much of the team's work has resulted in reduced costs and reduced problem occurrence. This team has also struggled with overwork and heroic efforts, but has seldom complained about this condition. Team members see overtime as part of their jobs.

The engineering team members completed a cultural system analysis to determine where they felt they were focusing energy and attention. They discovered that they operate primarily from a Level 3 cultural stance or *co-operating stance*. The engineering team would say that its strength is the team members' ability to build *cooperative* relationships, which is at Level 3. This team's focus also seems to be more widely dispersed in its capacity to operate from all three levels. When the engineering team members saw the cultural pattern emerging from their analysis, they understood how different their team's perspective was from that of the management team. The engineering team operated primarily from a **Level 3: Integrating** perspective. The management team operated from a **Level 1: Implementing** perspective.

This insight helped the engineering team to understand why it seemed so difficult to interact with the management team. The engineering team had assumed that the management team operated in the same way as it did, and defined the *right answer* in the same way: *There is no single right answer. Instead, there are many equally valid interpretations.* In fact, the two teams were coming from opposite ideological stances.

Before doing the cultural system analysis, the engineering team members could not understand why all of their strategies and approaches with the management team failed. After analyzing the cultural systems of both their team and the management team, team members understood the constraints under which they were trying to deal with the situation. Their failures now made sense, and they were able to understand why management did not see things their way.

It was clear that the management team was operating primarily from a **Level 1: Con-forming** cultural system, while the engineering team was operating from a **Level 3: Co-operating** cultural system. However, prior to the analysis, the engineering team assumed that the management team would work in a cooperative way by allowing the team to be a partner in the discussions of the team's work plans. As a result, the engineering team approached the management team from a cooperative perspective, and was surprised when

the team encountered resistance and a lack of cooperative behaviour from the management team. Instead, the management team kept telling the engineering team what to do, which is aligned with a Level 1 cultural perspective.

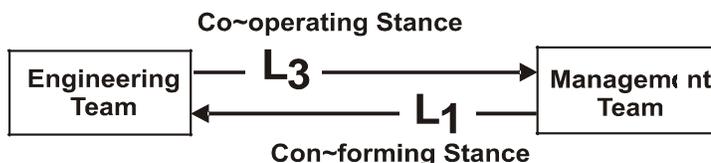
For the engineering team to be successful, the team would need to work within the constraints of the management cultural system of **Level 1: Implementing**, instead of fighting against the constraints. Before selecting an effective strategy, team members needed to understand the cultural context in which they were operating. Knowing this gave them the capacity to make effective and sustainable changes.

"Cultural stances thrive because the *cultural stories* we tell about the patterns we are living keep the stance in place. These *stories told* are powerful and memetic in nature. Their power comes from what these stories seem to give us — a sense of coherence — making the cultural stance seem right and justified, even if it is ineffective."

— Tom Boydell, Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko, **Corporate Culture and Organizational Change: Strategic Practice Guide**, (2005)



Corporate Culture and Organizational Change: Strategic Practice Guide, see www.mhainstitute.ca for more information



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

Phone: (403) 257-4597
 Fax: (403) 257-4649
 E-mail: info@mhainstitute.ca
 Web: www.mhainstitute.ca