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IF YOU'LL EXCUSE ME FOR A MOMENT, I NEED TO CHANGE MY BEHAVIOUR.

Leadership Through Learning Part 4 I: Managing Time and Power Dynamics

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“In his forward to this book, my friend Ken Blanchard shares an experience where, faced with phenomenal success, he chose wonderment. In other words, he adopted a childlike fascination, a spirit in which it was obvious to him, regardless of circumstances, that things were unfolding as they should. This, to me, is the way to go through life.”

— James Ballard, **What's the Rush? Step Out of the Race, Free Your Mind, Change Your Life** (1999)

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 (**InfoMine** Vol. 9, No. 4). 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. Erik Ringmar, in his book **Surviving Capitalism**, states this clearly: “Companies, in short, are social entities governed by social rules rather than simply by the imperatives of profit maximization. Working in a company is not a matter of helping bosses make money as much as a matter of getting along with others, and of keeping one's nose clean.”

Although it is tempting to believe that we have individual freedom, choice, and autonomy, the fact remains that we operate within cultural systems that exert power over us and determine the stories we tell and the patterns we live. 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 (e.g., individuals, teams, departments, and the organization as a whole). We tell

stories about our cultural experiences to explain the patterns we live. These stories are called *cultural stories*.

Cultural stories are stories told about social order, and people's relationship to that order. Culture can include family, team, organization, and/or wider societal patterns of practice that may be relevant in a given situation. Cultural stories are also based in ideological positions that individuals and/or groups hold, and from which they operate. Cultural stories can be useful in helping us to understand how the ideological stance is affecting our and other people's behaviour in an organizational context. Cultural stories often limit how we and other people think and act, thus contributing to the repeating patterns of behaviours within cultural systems. If we continue to operate unconsciously, we continue to recreate the same patterns of behaviour in the future. Strategic practice requires us to recognize the cultural stories that are limiting efforts to change. This step allows us to exercise freedom of choice about which cultural stories we wish to tell and enact.

In terms of managing time, the only control and freedom you have is at the individual level — what you choose to do with what you know about how you and others are being controlled by the cultural system. In the previous **InfoMine**, we analyzed what a cultural system dynamic might be like at an organizational and team level and how you might react to those cultural systems. Knowing that you are affected by the power of these cultural systems, your next step is to determine what you can do with that knowledge.

In **InfoMine** Vol. 14, No. 3, we showed you the options you have available to you in 5 reflexive choices and the leverage points found in 3 negative archetypes. All of these options involve you doing something different than you usually do in your typical pattern lived. From the strategic practice perspective, you need to decide how political you want to be. Being political is what you do knowing that you are being affected culturally by power dynamics that result from the cultural system dynamics.

For example, let's assume that it is important to you that you remain in the good graces of your team and the organization. The first step is to think about which group has the largest effect on you culturally — the organization or your team. Let's assume your team has a larger effect on you than the organization. You need to consider how you might approach the action in such a way that fits the cultural stance of your team, which is operating from a Level 2 or com~peting stance. The action you need to take needs to be from the Level 2 or com~peting stance. There are a number of leverage points that can inform your action.

- Provide a variety of experiences.
- Encourage reflection.
- Ask questions to cause people to think through ideas.
- Act as a role model for learning from experience.
- Be patient with experiential learning and the novelty it provides.
- Champion and support initiatives.
- Provide opportunities for systematic experimentation.
- Support training in continuous systematic improvement techniques.
- Be receptive to new ideas.
- Act as a coach, mentor,

facilitator, and role model for continuous improvement.

Once you have selected your leverage point, ask yourself what might be a first step to take action on this leverage point. Make sure that this action is small, and one that you are able to do with little effort within the next month. If you have an understanding of all three systemic storytelling processes (systems thinking, reflexive practice, and strategic practice), you can put all of your ideas together from each of these processes and see how they fit together.

Being political involves reducing risk as much as possible. To reduce your risk in taking action, you might want to do the following extra steps from the systems thinking process:

- Identify the negative side effects that might occur as a result of taking action. To do this, review all 10 negative archetypes (see **InfoMine** Vol. 10, No. 6), and select the ones you think have a good chance of occurring. Before you take action, determine how you might mitigate these negative side effects by minimizing their effect or making sure they don't occur at all. As you take action, you can be on the lookout for these negative archetypes as negative indicators that tell you that they are coming into play. This gives you a good chance of dealing with the negative side effects before they become unmanageable.
- Identify the positive ripple effects that might occur as a result of taking action. To do this, review all 10 positive archetypes (see **InfoMine** Vol. 11, No. 2), and select the ones you think have a good chance of occurring. As you

take action, you can be on the lookout for these positive archetypes as positive indicators that you are moving towards your goal.

Now you are ready to take action and see what happens! You are aware of the power dynamics so now your action can be politically astute. You may notice that the idea of being political is not negative. Rather, it is about surviving in a power dynamic in a way that keeps your integrity intact and is not harmful to others. Being political in its most positive sense is being mindful and conscious of what is going on, what stories are being told, what patterns are being lived, and what choices are being made. Being political is being mindfully strategic.

“... [We] begin by abandoning our lifelong careers of trying to change the world. Whenever we find that we are stressed or upset, rather than assigning cause or blame to the outside event, we assume distortion in the way we are perceiving things. This is more than attitude adjustment. It is the practice of truth — making our perceptions match the way things really are.”

— James Ballard, **What's the Rush? Step Out of the Race, Free Your Mind, Change Your Life** (1999)



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

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