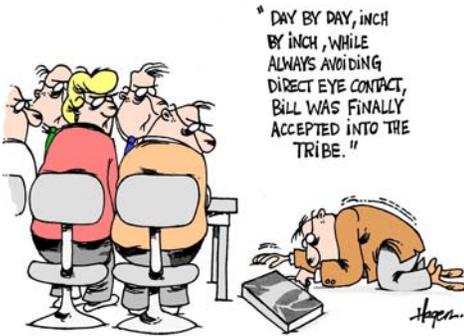


mentoring human action



**Leadership Through Learning
Part 4J: Does Strategic
Practice Really Work?**

by Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko

“Human beings have trouble letting go sometimes, but it is the very opposite of effort. You just do it.”
— James Ballard, **What’s the Rush? Step Out of the Race, Free Your Mind, Change Your Life** (1999)

A strategic practice approach is often used to understand and deal effectively with situations in which:

- You are unsure that others’ motivation and actions come from the best of intentions.
- You observe that your own and others’ positions, feelings, interpretations, and actions are unpredictable and polarized.
- In reacting to others’ actions, you experience contradictory impulses.
- You confide your thoughts only to people you trust.
- You are hoping that things will turn out okay, but deep down inside, you fear that it will not improve.
- You feel a lack of progress in communication, ending up back where you started.

Strategic Practice and Conflict

In 2003, we worked with an engineering team in a medium-sized oil and gas company. This team’s work was focused on troubleshooting problems that occur as a result of project implementation. Team members worked primarily in the field. On the engineering team, three members were engineers, highly skilled in their respective technical areas. Five members of the team were technical support and one member was administrative support. All team members demonstrated outstanding relational skills when dealing with other team members, peers, and the people the team served. However, recently, there had been a change in the management structure, and the engineering team was now reporting to a new management team. The new management team wanted all teams to be more aligned to what management deemed as important in the short term. As a result, management believed that all teams must be guided and closely monitored. For an engineering team used to locally negotiating its own actions, this was a major shift, because this team was now being told what to focus on, and monitored for compliance. As a result, team members did not understand how they could work effectively within this new management culture.

There were two non-negotiables that are important in this story:

- Management would not take “no” for an answer. Management wanted this team

to get in line with its new direction of focused energy on specific goals and actions.

- The team could not continue to do everything as it once did. There was not enough energy for a return to the *good old times*.

The team was committed to its work in this organization, and specifically committed to the people the team served. Team members did not want the situation to deteriorate, and were highly committed to figuring out how to work within the constraints of the situation. The team believed that, if nothing changed, the team leader would be terminated, some team members would leave, and things would continue to fall through the cracks. There was a worry that the team would be reduced to its minimum number, causing less and less success in their work. The team could be seen as redundant, or in need of restructuring, perhaps into other teams.

We had done a systemic analysis with the team using systems thinking and reflexive practice, but the team had not been able to break through to a possible solution that would work for everyone involved. However, it was the cultural analysis that created the breakthrough in the team’s thinking. The engineering team’s summary statement was that its strength lay in the team members’ ability to build *cooperative* relationships, which was at Level 3 *co~operating* stance. This team’s focus also seemed to be more widely dispersed in its capacity to operate from all three levels. However, any ways of operating from Level 1 *con~forming* stance and Level 2 *com~peting* stance were

based in a Level 3 *co~operating* stance. For example, two descriptors from Level 2 were discussed in detail. The result of the discussion was to understand how Level 3 changed the way in which the descriptors were considered:

“Actively seek, obtain, and evaluate feedback on your performance and on the way you manage yourself” was highlighted in Level 2, but it has a Level 3 proviso attached to it.

“Accept feedback, but in a cooperative model in which team members choose what they wish to do with the feedback.”

“Help colleagues, teams, and individual team members to delight their internal and external customers” was highlighted in Level 2, but it also has a Level 3 proviso attached to it. “Help others in a collaborative way, in which all parties win.”

The engineering team’s summary statement was that the management team was operating from a Level 1 *con~forming* stance. However, any ways of operating from Level 2 *com~peting* stance or Level 3 *co~operating* stance were based in a Level 1 *con~forming* stance. For example, the same descriptors from Level 2 were discussed in detail. The result of the discussion was to understand how Level 1 changed the way in which the descriptors were considered:

“Actively seek, obtain, and evaluate feedback on your performance and on the way you manage yourself” was highlighted in Level 2, but it also has a Level 1 proviso attached to it. “Actively seek, obtain, and evaluate feedback on your performance to make sure that you are performing to the defined standard.”

“Help colleagues, teams, and individual team members to delight their internal and external customers” was highlighted in Level

2, but it has a Level 1 proviso attached to it. “Delight only those internal and external customers that you are *told* to delight, and only in the ways in which you are told to delight these customers.”

The engineering team was stunned by the analysis. They now understood why their efforts to work with the management team had been ineffective. The engineering team wanted the management team to work in partnership and collaboration. The engineering team wanted the freedom to move, and wanted management to trust what the team did. Any actions outside of this frame were seen as going against the Level 3 *co~operating* stance of the engineering team. This was light years away from what the management team wanted from the relationship. The management team wanted the engineering team to do what they were told to do. The engineering team would be given freedom to move, but only within a rigid frame of adherence. Any actions outside of this frame of adherence would be seen as going against the Level 1 *con~forming* stance of the management team.

The engineering team members chose to focus their actions on what they could do, and how this could create less rigidity from management. The engineering team believed that the management team was not open and was highly resistant to anything the engineering team might do. Even more critical, the engineering team leader needed to develop a lot of psychological safety on the part of the management team and how it dealt with the engineering team.

As a result, the engineering team:

- Presented information in the way the management team preferred
- Developed work plans in which all tasks were within specified roles

and tasks assigned by the management team

What Happened?

The management team was pleased with what the engineering team presented, and eased monitoring pressure off the engineering team. The team and team leader stayed together throughout the difficult time period. It was very difficult for the engineering team, but it was also one of the team’s most profound learning experiences. Team members survived the cultural war by being more open to the management team’s perspective. Perhaps this was not a perfect solution, but it worked to relieve pressure. The bonus was that the engineering team members developed critical leadership skills in dealing effectively with constraints in a cultural system.

“... [R]ealize that in each and every day of your life there are situations that provide opportunities to practice changing your mind. You have only to be aware of the inner tip-off. This signal is subtle, but you can train yourself to feel for it. It is the first hint of impatience, irritation, edginess, worry, or upset.”

— 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

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