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Learning Organizations Part 12: Systems Thinking and Relationships

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“No organization can hope to be both flexible and specialized unless its own structure is able continually to evolve. Because the web of inclusion is always spawning new lines of connection, and connecting people in new ways, it can serve as an instrument for constant reorganization.”

— Sally Helgesen, **The Web of Inclusion** (1995)

Today, our organizations, in both the public and private sectors, are downsizing, reorganizing, right-sizing, redesigning, and re-engineering in an attempt to be effective in a turbulent and uncertain marketplace. Although all of these are valid perspectives, more often than not, they do not come close to what is necessary for organizations

to become effective in this new, chaotic environment.

The reason that most of these initiatives fall short of their intent is that they often forget the most important component of an organization: its people and the relationships they form that allow the work to get done in the most efficient and effective way. Without people, there is no organization. Without effective relationships among the people within an organization and its customers, there is little or no need for the organization. Today, more than ever, what determines how successful an organization is, and how successful it will be in the future, is the well-being of the organization's people, and the quality of the relationships that they form.

Sally Helgesen, author of **The Web of Inclusion**, uses the metaphor of a

web because this organic structure promotes the inclusion of **all** people within an organization in the decision making process, regardless of their functions, positions, or relationships with the organization. These relationships are independent of any hierarchical or organizational structure. “The *dynamic interconnectedness* of the web means that web organizations reflect organic rather than mechanical principles; that is, **they work the same way life does.**”

Fritjof Capra, author of **The Tao of Physics**, agrees with Helgesen's perspective on this issue. Capra talks about the need for organizations to build sustainable communities. He defines sustainable communities as those that “exist in social and cultural environments in which we can satisfy our needs and aspirations without diminishing the chances of future generations.” For organizations, this means that all decisions are made by

considering the long-term impact of the decisions on the organization, on its people, on its customers, on the global marketplace, and on the planet as a whole.

Without question, all organizations need to redefine their structures to meet the emerging needs and issues that arise in today's complex marketplace. However, to be sustainable, an organization must preserve its identity while it constantly changes. An organization's identity does not lie in its structure, its hierarchy, or its buildings. The organization's identity lies in its people and the relationships that they form within the organization and with its customers. It is the pattern of relationships that remains stable, while the structure of the organization changes to meet the emerging needs.

In **The Web of Inclusion**, Helgesen lists five areas that organizations must work towards in order to develop quality relationships:

- **Marketing:** Marketing can no longer be only one department's responsibility. Everyone in the company must "think like a marketer."
- **Diversity:** Organizations must value diversity, not only in the types of people that they hire, but also in the thinking that different kinds of people bring to the organization.
- **Empowering the front lines:** When organizations empower the front lines to make decisions, and to become accountable and responsible for

those decisions, the organizations demonstrate that they value the customer.

- **Making training part of the process:** Training can no longer be defined as one- or two-day training events. Training and learning must become continuous and ongoing, and must occur *in the workplace* instead of in a classroom.
- **Building strategic alliances:** Organizations cannot afford the luxury of isolationism. They must work together by developing "partnerships with those who can supply what they cannot."

Remember Senge's first discipline of a learning organization: personal mastery. It starts with you. Here's how you can personally develop this pattern of thinking.

- **Marketing:** Start thinking like a marketer. Consider what makes your part of the organization valuable to your customers.
- **Diversity:** Encourage alternative points of view in all of your conversations with others, whether in team meetings or in your day-to-day work.
- **Empowering the front lines:** Whenever possible, encourage people in front-line positions to make decisions. If you are in a front-line position, consider which decisions you can make, and why you are in a good position to make those decisions.
- **Making training part of the process:** Become a continuous learner. Don't wait for your

organization to send you to a course. Start looking at every part of your job as an opportunity to learn. As well, act as a coach and support your co-workers in continuous learning.

- **Building strategic alliances:** Build partnerships with other people, both within your organization and in other organizations.
- "As the new century approaches, organizations of every variety are being challenged to reconfigure in ways that will make them better able to take advantage of innovative technologies and to be more responsive to a vastly expanded market — **while in the process, becoming more satisfactory places for people to work.**"
— Sally Helgesen, **The Web of Inclusion** (1995)

For more information on understanding an organic perspective to systems thinking:

- Read **The Web of Inclusion** by Sally Helgesen
- View the video **Sustainable Communities: A Management Challenge** with Fritjof Capra
- View the video **Building Learning Infrastructures** with Peter Senge

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