

MHA Institute Inc.

Mentoring Human Action

InfoMine

Vol. 8, No. 2 ■ March-April 2001

Check it out!
www.mhainstitute.ca



The New Sciences and the Learning Organization Part 5C: Addicted to Speed at Any Cost!

by Marilyn Herasymowych, MCE

“[High-reliability organizations are] those that can carry out extraordinarily complex tasks quickly with few errors and almost no catastrophic failures. In theory, such organizations shouldn’t be possible. Yet high-reliability organizations maintain failure-free performance by investing a large slice of their resources in preventative planning and careful analysis of their mistakes (non-catastrophic though they may be).”

— Thomas Homer-Dixon, **The Ingenuity Gap: How Can We Solve the Problems of the Future?** (2000)

The key to closing the ingenuity gap is to *slow down, in order to speed up*. This means that our concept of time must change from one in which we believe there is no time, to one in which we believe that taking the necessary time now will save us time

in the long term. This is much easier said than done, because it requires a fundamental shift in our ways of working — one that is not an easy sell to people in organizations. Let us look at an example.

One of the services that MHA Institute provides to clients is long-term team development. This usually means working with a team in a nine-day program spaced over six months. During the nine days, MHA consultants meet with the team, helping team members to deal with their complex issues in a way that enhances both their productivity and their working environment. To do this, the consultants provide team members with tools that will give them access to their ingenuity.

The key to this program is the correlation of tools with applications to real work issues and tasks. For example, let’s assume that a team is doing work planning. While team members are doing the work planning, an MHA consultant uses a work planning tool consisting of a set of instructions on how to do work planning (see **InfoMine**, Vol. 8 No. 1). While team members are discussing work planning, the consultant reminds them to use the communication tools (another set of instructions). When this is done correctly, the work planning process itself is slow and tedious, because

the consultant is continually stopping the process to remind the team how to use the tools. Many team members and managers find the activities associated with slowing down and stopping to be boring and frustrating. A common comment during this program is “This takes too much time! Can’t we speed this up?”

If teams work through the entire program, with the consultant slowing down the process, team members actually increase their ability to solve problems in real time. For example, these teams solve a number of issues, and team members develop a deeper understanding of the diversity both within and outside their team. However, there are often disturbing perceptions of the work that MHA consultants do with these teams. Even though the program is a success in many ways, many team members and managers perceive it as a failure. Here are three reasons why we think these perceptions exist.

People Forget

During and after the program, team members quickly forget how much they have done as a result of slowing down and discussing issues. They forget how many issues were solved, and how their ways of working changed in the process. They forget that they actually understand each other better than when they first started the program. They forget how much they have personally learned

about themselves. Often, they find it difficult to understand that the six-month program is just a start, and that, to close the ingenuity gap, team members must take time during their day-to-day work to slow down and reflect. If they return to their old habits, they get the old results. Unfortunately, it is all too easy for the team to return to their old habits (see **InfoMines** Vol. 7 No. 2; Vol. 7 No. 3). At that point, many team members often blame the poor results and lack of change in the workplace on the fact that the “training didn’t work and, therefore, it was a waste of time.” According to Homer-Dixon, “We adapt so easily to changes in our world that we often forget where we’ve come from”

People Are Easily Influenced

MHA consultants use several tools and processes to help team members to increase their access to ingenuity. Learning to use these tools and processes takes a lot of time and is quite repetitive. Often, it is easy for team members to see the repetition and use of time as wasteful, when they could be getting real work done. Vocal team members, concerned with how time is being used, can easily influence managers and supervisors, who see their prime concern as a need to produce results. Even though these vocal team members may be in the minority, their voices are the ones that are heard, and, therefore, they carry a lot of weight. Other team members, who may believe the program has been effective, keep quiet, not wanting to rock the boat. If the negative voices are considered to be the voices of the entire team, it is easy for a manager or supervisor to draw the conclusion that the program is wasteful and ineffective.

People Are Impatient with the Journey

Even though we make sure that managers, supervisors, and team members understand what is required of everyone in the program, it’s really easy for them to want to go through the program faster. The only time that the MHA consultants can honestly say that they have had success with teams slowing down to speed up is when the teams and their supervisors have gone the distance. In other words, these teams committed to spending the time necessary to do it right. Each time MHA consultants work with a manager, supervisor, and/or a team that short cuts the process, it is a dissatisfying experience for everyone, including the consultants. For example, under pressure to deliver results, a team leader can easily short cut the program by focusing only on the work planning, and ignoring the learning that can result from the process of doing the work planning. As soon as this happens, there is no doubt in the consultants’ minds that the learning process has stopped.

People Have Good Intentions

Managers, supervisors, and team members do not mean to speed up and short cut the learning process, which inevitably sabotages the outcomes. In every case, the clients with whom MHA consultants have worked have genuinely believed that the program could help, and have meant to stay with the program to achieve long-term change. When these managers, supervisors, and teams speeded up the process by short cutting and undermining the learning aspects, they did so with the best of intentions. They always had good reasons. Speed is a powerful drug, seducing us into believing that we have no time to waste. And speed catches all of us unaware, rushing us headlong into mediocre performance and mediocre results. However, that does not make

it acceptable practice in organizations — especially for those organizations that have a desire for high performance.

We willingly pay the price of falling prey to speed addiction. The faster we go, the more mistakes we make, the more we complain, and yet — the faster we go! Whether we like it or not, we make the choice that faster is better. And we do little about it when we don’t get the results that we want. It’s far too easy to blame others, or to say that people are victims of speed. However, according to Phil McGraw, author of **Life Strategies**, “There are no victims; there are only volunteers.” Thus, we are the only ones who can deal with our speed addiction, and we must accept the responsibility for changing our own thinking and behaviours.

“You can always count on instability. ... The result is *transition paralysis*, the behavior people exhibit when they are so staggered by instability that they burrow into their foxholes and keep their heads down. It’s a common phenomenon; people start to think there’s no guarantee of reward for doing *the right thing*, and too many risks associated with doing *the wrong thing*. So, they play it safe and do nothing.”

— David A. Nadler, **Champions of Change: How CEOs and Their Companies Are Mastering the Skills of Radical Change** (1998)

<p>MHA Institute Inc. Unit 248, Suite 205 259 Midpark Way SE Calgary, Alberta T2X 1M2 Canada</p> <p>Phone: (403) 257-4597 Fax: (403) 257-4649 E-mail: info@mhainstitute.ca Web: www.mhainstitute.ca</p>
