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Diane Vitale MBA

Molloy College, dvitale@molloy.edu

Pauline Sutcliffe MSW, MA

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Courses for Horses: A Systemic Approach to Making Change Stick in the Workplace

Pauline Sutcliffe, MSW, MA(London University)

PO Box 803. 11 Sandown Court
Wainscott, New York 11975 –0803
(516) 983-3637
ps@vitalone.net

Diane Vitale, MBA

PO Box 1332. 11 Sandown Court
Wainscott, New York 11975 –0803
(631) 790-5770
dv@vitalone.net

ABSTRACT

In this paper we will argue that systems theory is more accessible and acceptable in the development and sustaining of change in the workplace. Consideration and attention must be given to the importance of finding a common language and using the same currency.

Keywords

Systems theory, change, life cycle, life stages, cybernetic theory

1 INTRODUCTION and LITERATURE REVIEW

The limitation of language has hindered the wider use and understanding of systems and cybernetic theory, and their application beyond the therapy room to the corporate workplace. The challenge seemed to be “how” to find a common language with a circular – not linear (cause and effect) emphasis. In order to compensate for this inadequacy we looked to models of circularity and process to synthesize and produce “our” model which is highlighted later in this paper.

“...You must be able to easily articulate (in a manner that everyone can understand) how you will be able to connect the dots of opportunity that were previously unseen or unrecognizable”. (Llopsi, 2012)

In a recent book review in the NY Times by Martin Riker of a book entitled “Raw Materials” A memoir, presented as a self-interview, by Nobel Laureate Imre Kertesz writes, “Two of the great pessimistic proclamations of 20th-century literature – Adorno’s “To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric” and Beckett’s “I can’t go on, I’ll go on” have at least one thing in common. They both address the inadequacy of language to articulate reality”. (Riker, 2013)

To add further complexity to the language dilemma, Koestler posits the view that “The problems of studying the family are exacerbated by Western languages, which have few words or even phrases for describing units of more than one....” (Koestler, 1979)

Arthur Koestler, addressing this conceptual difficulty, observed “to get away from the traditional misuse of words whole or part, one is compelled to operate with such awkward terms as ‘sub-whole’ or ‘part-whole’.” He coined a new term “to designate those Janus-faced entities on the

intermediate levels of hierarchy”: the word *holon*, from the Greek *holos* (whole) with the suffix *on* (as in proton or neutron), which suggests a particle or part. (Koestler 1979). Koestler’s concept is particularly valuable for family therapy, because the unit of intervention is always a holon...” but should transfer well to other settings if one uses this and keeps in mind – a unit of intervention, whether an individual or group will be a holon.

2 THEORIES AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Many other theorists have grappled with these issues and developed models directly from their therapy room. Unfortunately they remain linear, too psychopathological (individual problem centered) and not systemic (still linear cause and effect).

Bowenian theory references the need to address the “whole” person but this should not be confused with Koestler’s holon – which does not mean “whole” as Bowen conceptualizes; rather that every individual is a whole and a part = holon.

Therefore this “new” concept requires theorists to conceptualize individuals and groups in a profoundly different way. In our view failure to do this may account for the failure of otherwise very sound theoretical therapeutic frameworks to transition with success into the workplace.

A good example of this is Bowenian theory – particularly his model of the family life cycle – which is highly successful in the therapy room and which is used and adapted in the workplace but retains most of its therapeutic culture, language and currency and fails to incorporate any of these dimensions from the workplace which are significantly different.

Bowen “explicitly expanded the application of his theory to the workplace, arguing that the ‘basic patterns in social work and work relationships are identical to relationship patterns in the family, except in intensity’ (Gilbert, 2006). Over the past 30 years this application has continued to be developed in several ways. Therapists familiar with Bowen theory have applied their knowledge as consultants to workplace relationship issues....” (Chambers, n.d.).

According to Bowen, “‘Attending to self’ is a major component of functioning well in the workplace, in whatever role.” In “Nothing is as Practical as a Good Theory: Bowen

Theory and the Workplace – A Personal Application” – Chambers (n.d.) goes on to say that “Monitoring myself means paying attention to which people, issues and situations preoccupy me, and then asking questions about the nature of the attraction. What is the real issue? Who is really responsible for it? What is my responsibility in this situation? Do I have a role that is neutral, self-defined and role defined? Which problems, issues or people am I avoiding? What is the anxiety and what is the reality based problem? How comfortable am I with real differences of opinion and approach and expertise? Monitoring self also means an honest look at the work/non work balance I am really living. Am I properly present and responsible in both areas, or allowing one to distract from anxieties in the other?” (Chambers, n.d.)

Again this underscores our earlier point the being took strongly reminiscent of the therapy room, and appears not to understand the difference between the objectives of the therapy room and organizational objectives. Neither does it show an attempt to understand the culture, the language or the currency of the workplace. Buy-in at the organizational level will be difficult at best– and staff will feel unwillingly enticed into a therapeutic encounter – which is not the point.

Development of a Systemic Model Appropriate for the Workplace

Our challenge was to construct a systemic / cybernetically informed model that would take these issues into account, use the language, currency and culture of the workplace and develop a process to achieve relevant and easy application and ultimately achieve buy-in by all constituents.

From our experience we are more convinced that providing a change model that is a synthesis of the therapeutic models that include systemic / cybernetic theory with organizational theories the value of these apparently disparate disciplines can actually accelerate the change making process towards change that will stick.

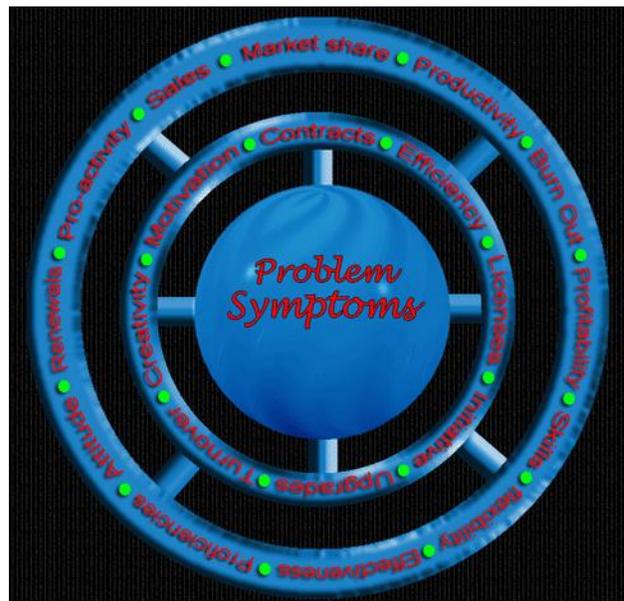
We have developed a process, which attempts to synthesize the values of the therapeutic world with those of the workplace, which resists the possibility of leaving people feeling like they have had their psychic plundered. Our model elaborates.

vo change process.jpg

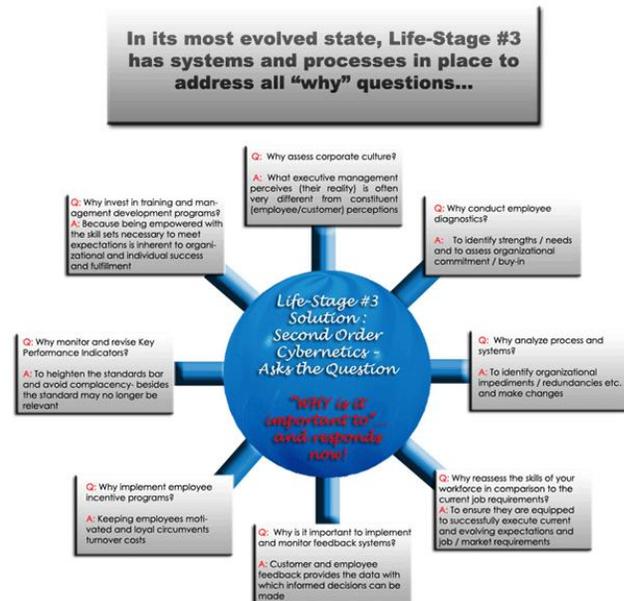
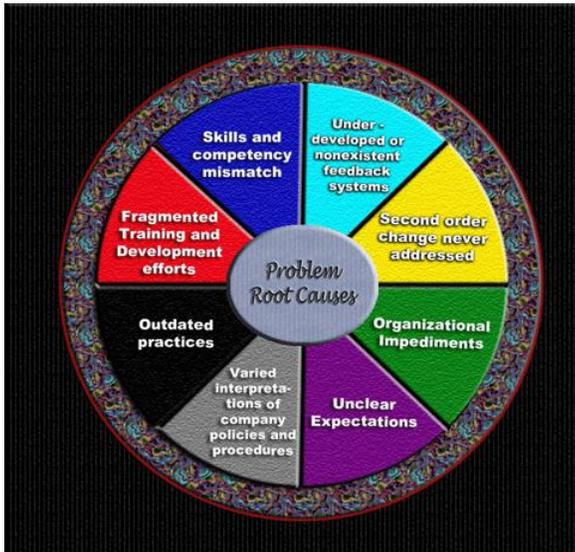
“In linear systems, output is proportional to input. In nonlinear systems this is not the case – a little bit of input can produce an enormous change in output – or not.” (Chaos, Complexity, Self-Organization, n.d.).

It was hard for us to recognize why systemic thinking lacked traction in the workplace. Other theorists in attempting to transfer their models into the corporate world appeared to adhere too strictly to individual lifecycle / growth and development model/s. These are still essentially linear, lack the language of the corporate marketplace causing both culture and currency dissonance. We conducted a case study that elaborates this point and is available upon request.

Drawing from many years of experience in the corporate world we were able to tease out some major characteristics (symptoms – i.e.: loss of market share - see below) in common that appeared to occur because of “other” more systemic issues - what we refer to as “root causes”.



We articulated several major organizational “symptoms” – these were the ones most frequently reported to us (above) and identified the reasons (root cause) for “why” these symptoms appeared or existed. These characteristics (symptoms) were almost always the focus of organizational concern and attention (and in fact provided employment insurance to the management consultant industry).



Our premise is that sustainable change will not occur if second order change is not achieved. You will see from the VO change model that we used the language of organizational theory and practice and underpinned them with systems cybernetic thinking.

Change that Sticks

Transient change requires less of a financial investment of organizational resources but in the long term far more costly as it will require constant repetition. Change that sticks requires a slightly greater financial investment in the short term and is dependent on the integration of systems, cybernetic and organizational theory but will achieve change that sticks and therefore should be the economically viable model of choice.

We applied life stage ideas and systemic applications to create a practical organizational change model to assist organizations in the change that sticks.

Our premise is that sustainable change will not occur if second order change is not achieved. You will see from the VO change model that we used the language of organizational theory and practice and underpinned them with systems cybernetic thinking.

You will see from our model that we believe it is important to take organizations and their employees to a level of understanding about why change is necessary – in order to move the organization forward into the 21st century.

While our model requires an initial investment of the organizations human, operational and financial resources – we package interventions and collaborate with management to create buy-in at every level of the organization. At the end of the day if the employees buy into the change effort and own it - then they sustain it – this is change that sticks.

When employees are committed to the change making effort and they understand and own the change propositions – all they need are the tools to drive the change making effort. We provide the tools, show them how to use them and then leave - they no longer require our hands-on presence and that's the smallest part of where the savings are.

It's a process but when change sticks you don't have to keep reinventing, retraining and resurrecting the past. When we have facilitated an organization in reaching life stage 3 we, in effect, hand them the baton; we empower staff and management to drive and sustain the change making effort.

The organizations of the future understand the value of partnering and a true partnership means empowering staff and management to replace the consulting firm (us) and remaining on hand to act as consultants – step in and reappraise, tweak and suggest.

3 CONCLUSION

We spent a considerable amount of time finding a 'common' language to compensate for the inadequacy of language and looked to models and the circular process to develop our model.

We used psychological systemic and cybernetic theories to provide a framework – a process to provide the feedback loops – in addition we used the culture, language and currency of the marketplace. Which we could generalize

and which made sense to employers and employees alike – we speak their language.

In addition we were able to engage the marketplace with our model because it is visible, the language is familiar to them and they could see that we could use our model as a template and then customize a program to fit the life stage of their organization with a view to problem solving with them and moving their organization forward.

Furthermore our model affords us the opportunity to measure our value added - whereas models more reliant on psychological interventions are much more difficult to evaluate and often are much more long term and a turn off to employees who resist buying in to anything that has a self revelatory component to it – after all, they were hired to do a job – not to be analyzed!

4 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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