Running head: Are Schools Organized for School Improvement?

Organize your School for Improvement.

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Abstract

W. Edwards Deming has suggested 96% of organization performance is a function of the organization's structure. He contends only about 4% of an organization's performance is attributable to the people. This is a fundamental difference as most school leaders work with the basic assumption that 80% of a school's performance is related to staff and their weaknesses and that these are the primary drivers of a school's performance. Thus, almost all school artifacts are driven by the assumption it's the teachers' fault. By utilizing a review of the history of organizations, this article purposes to challenge the status quo of thinking on the topic of school improvement. The author emphasizes and correlates important subtopics as Organizations as Machines and how humans do not fit into that mold so readily; the emergence of system thinking; and the move from managing an organization as if it were a machine (mechanical system) to the onset of facilitating the organization as a system (social system). Purposefully, this article confronts the following points with great interest and persuasion. Humans are tool users. American schools all use performance tools. Our schools must rethink their choices of performance tools. In a final analysis, these questions are provided to encourage our present thinking about the education of our children: Are there more effective tools than the ones we currently employ? Is this the best our schools can do? What can we learn from organizational development that will allow us to improve our schools?

Are our schools organized in a manner allowing for organization improvement? W. Edwards Deming has suggested 96% of organization performance is a function of the organization's structure. He contends only about 4% of an organization's performance is attributable to the people. This is a fundamental difference as most school leaders work with the basic assumption that 80% of the schools performance is related to staff and their weaknesses and that these are the primary drivers of a school's performance. Thus, almost all school artifacts are driven by the assumption it's the teachers' fault.

If it is assumed W. Edwards Deming is correct, then a review of the history of organizations may help to answer this question and others. Is this the best our schools can do? What can we learn from organizational development that will allow us to improve our schools? To help answer these questions, let's briefly examine the history of organizations.

Since the dawn of time, organizations have evolved in response to human needs. An organization is viable when two or more persons working together can accomplish more work than the same number of persons working separately. Organizations are synergistic by nature.

From the earliest bands of wandering pre-humans to the Egyptians, Huns, Greeks, Romans, Chinese, Mayans, etc., humans have used organization as a tool to survive and even thrive. We can speculate humans learned from their organizations' successes and failures. Organization memory emerged as the key to creating a learning organization. This was accomplished through experimentation, observation, and the ability to capture and share what was learned from the experiences. This ability to create organizational memory is key to the

evolution of more effective future designs with higher performance levels. This ability allowed organizations to benchmark their performances and apply more effective designs.

The process of implementing more effective designs has not been quick or linear. Since organizations, just as humans, operate from entrenched theories (mental models), resistance to change is built into each design. Mental models only yield to more effective mental models when confronted with extreme environmental conditions or from overwhelming evidence that significant advantages can be demonstrated by embracing the new mental model.

Early in the twentieth century, the study of organizations began to be formalized. What previously had been learned from passing knowledge down from one generation to the next by military, church, government, and business leaders, now became a more formal field of study. The study of organization performance evolved into a science. Practitioners and scholars recently became interested in learning more about how better designed organizations could accomplish more work. Initially, however, their biases focused on how to better manage the individual workers and their work.

Humans are Tool Users

Even our bodies are tools. Life requires that we knowingly or unknowingly facilitate energy flow as a prerequisite to living and working. Humans, above all other earthly creatures, have the potential to use tools and exponentially facilitate energy flow.

Our world, our culture, and our very existence rely on our ability to use tools. This same requirement applies to individual and organization performance. In turn, these same requirements apply to schools and individuals operating within schools. Student achievement is a product of the use of both mental and physical tools.

Student achievement is a reflection of the performance potential inherent in the tools we provide to school personnel and how they are used. Understanding the capabilities of various tools and their use is at the heart of any learning about individual and organization performance.

The performance tools currently being used in schools were not chosen by the persons working in schools today. The performance tools now in use were chosen four generations ago. That is to say, as we move through the third millennium, we are using performance tools chosen by persons who long ago moved into the hereafter. Even the persons they trained are now deceased.

Focus on Analysis

Since the Renaissance, the world of study has been dominated by analytical thinking. This thinking dominates our current world view and for good reasons. By breaking down processes, systems, and functions one can discover how something works.

This approach led to great strides in all fields. By applying what had been learned, humans worked with nature and applied this knowledge to our benefit. By applying analysis, humans began to better understand the role of bacteria and viruses in the control of diseases. Steam engines, internal combustion engines, and nuclear power are all products of this powerful thinking tool used in conjunction with systemic thinking. It is difficult to name a single aspect of human activity that has not been touched by this approach to thinking and problem solving.

The application of analysis to organizations produced significant leaps in organization performance. Interchangeable parts, assembly line, mass production, division of labor, job descriptions, selection systems, quality control, efficiency management, management by objectives, hierarchy, command/control, motivation theory, human needs, planning, organizing, and supervising among others are all primarily products of analytical thinking. Over time,

practitioners and scholars began to recognize the value and flaws inherent in applying analytical thinking to organization performance.

Organizations as Machines

The formal study of organization performance began in the 20th century with a primary focus on organizations as machines. Significant gains in organization performance were realized by applying this approach.

The impact was so overwhelming that no industry could resist applying the basic ideas of assembly line/mass production technology and autocratic governance. Even today, this approach is the foundation on which most organizations are built. Consider the primacy of the interchangeable parts/assembly line/autocratic governance approach to schooling.

Humans are not Mechanical Parts

Over time it became obvious that humans were not machines. This simple observation led to studies demonstrating the unique ways humans react to each other in a work setting. Humans, unlike machines, are not mechanical parts. Human thought and decision making ride on a river of emotions. Humans have needs. In order to best optimize organization performance, these needs must be part of any organization design strategy.

Looking back, the machine metaphor was applied to work and organization at a time when workers had low needs. Complementing this low level of need was the fact that workers had little formal education and few skills. This produced a scenario placing workers at a dependent level of maturity. The environment was ripe for the mechanical view to produce high levels of organization performance. In most organizations in modern industrial societies these conditions no longer exist.

The performance tools that have been handed down for generations and are still employed by most schools are based on the following:

- Applying analytical solutions
- Relying on training focused on improved behaviors and attitudes
- Featuring programs and practices
- Using a pattern of autocratic management and supervision
- Depending on antiquated structures of time and facilities
- Designed to operate in a stable environment

Analytical solutions are products of the application of analysis. In analysis, the manager breaks down the problem into small manageable parts and works on the identified parts.

If we think about it, 100% of the programs and practices in our schools in the late 20th century operated exclusively on the analytical model. Almost every single program and practice was born as a result of analysis. Management development programs are all products of breaking down a known task or problem and creating an antidote to the particular disease or problem.

The same is true of practices. Principal competencies are all products of analysis. By observing outstanding principals and breaking down their behaviors, it is assumed that practices can be identified, taught, and replicated by the trainee. Of course, this is not true, but it sounds rational, very rational. Herein lies the deceit.

The same thing can be applied to teacher competencies. Most teacher training, observations for performance appraisal and evaluations are based on analysis.

Among the many flaws in this approach is the assumption that the participants operate in a stable environment. Most educators would agree that schools have never operated in stable environments and have been operating in less and less stable environments over the years.

An excellent analysis is flawed; even if it were perfect, it would only be good for the day on which it was conducted.

What this means is that programs and practices are time-fixed, but school environments are constantly changing. Programs and practices have to be updated and retraining is the key means of maintaining analytical performance tools at some level of usefulness. Training is the operative word. Training assumes a constant environment and training content is designed accordingly.

Not only is the environment changing, but the rate of change is accelerating. This rapidly accelerating rate of change in our schools does not allow schools enough time to retrain personnel, and since funds are always in short supply, the process of updating programs and practices is always behind. Since the updating and training associated with it require time and funds, the cycle is endless, and schools, as they say, are "a day late and a dollar short."

Since schools are at different levels of stability, some schools work better than others when analytical solutions are applied. This leads some educators to spin their wheels trying to replicate the processes used at what are considered "better" schools (best practices). All of this is an illusion with enormous costs to both schools and taxpayers.

Systems Thinking Begins to Emerge

Little by little, scholars began to realize that organizations were not machines. This understanding became more universal as the study of organizations continued throughout the 20th

century. This is not to say that one cannot view organizations as machines. Many managers still do.

Significant gains in performance became possible when leaders moved from managing the organization as if it were a machine (mechanical system) and began facilitating the organization as a system (social system).

It became clear that leaders were leading systems, but had almost no knowledge of how systems worked. This lack of understanding was even more acute when applied to social systems. Organizations are very complex. There are three basic kinds of systems. There are mechanical, biological, and social systems. Organizations are types of very complex social systems called living synergistic social systems.

A living synergistic social system has the ability to create the conditions for its own existence. Living synergistic social systems are thinking systems. Their ability to facilitate energy flow is a result of all the parts of the system functioning as a whole. Wholeness, thinking, and creativity are attributes that exist only when all the parts of a living synergistic social system are viable and supportive of each other. Living synergistic social systems are products of the synergy that results from the interactions that create their wholeness. The essential nature and almost all of the value of a synergistic system resides in its synergy-producing interactions (relationships) and not in its parts. Like all systems, living synergistic systems cannot be separated into parts and maintain their essential natures.

The systems movement revealed flaws in the assumption that organization performance is the sum of the performance of each part. Systems thinking revealed that the interactions among the parts of a system produce most of the system's performance. In this case the 80/20 rule applies. Twenty percent of the total performance of a typical system is found in its parts,

while 80% of the systems performance potential is found in the interactions among the system's parts.

The leader that treats a system as a machine is focusing only on the parts separate from the system as a whole. In the system's view, the machine age leader by focusing on the parts of the system is only tapping into 20% of the system's potential. In the system's view, the leader of a system can increase the system's potential by shifting the focus to the interactions of the parts.

This is why some leaders work so hard and produce so few improvements. They are working on the parts with less than 20% of the system's potential. When schools import programs (i.e., a new math program) they are working on the parts.

In a living synergistic social system, performance is based on the degree of synergy produced. The leader can increase the flow of energy and organization performance by designing and facilitating an increase in the number of meaningful interactions among the parts of the system.

In a living synergistic social system, the design typically refers to the structure and the parts refer to the people. The structure creates boundaries in which a certain range (number) of interactions is possible. The people in the organization determine if the interactions are meaningful, not the leader. Meaning is shifted to the people.

As the systems movement matured, scholars observed the need to look at the system's containing system in order to better understand and leverage performance. Organizations aligned with the containing system's intent produced additional gains in organization performance. The concept of alignment became an important tool for leveraging organization performance.

Additional performance tools for the third millennium are based on:

- Facilitating natural forces that govern individual and organization performance
- Relying on learning and the effective use of organizational learning
- Featuring natural laws, mental models, living synergistic systems, and structure (dynamics)
- Using a pattern of systemic leadership
- Operating in a stable or unstable environment

Natural forces are those forces created by God, not humans. Natural forces can be learned. Humans can learn how to facilitate and apply them to significantly improve the flow of energy resulting in improvements in individual and organizational performance. Increasing student achievement is possible by applying these learned natural forces.

What's the Point?

- Humans are tool users.
- American schools all use performance tools. Are there more effective tools than the ones we currently employ?
- Our schools must rethink their choices of performance tools.

Applying only analytical tools has a certain level of impact on performance. The tools of analysis are effective when used for the purposes of repair. When analytical tools are used for the purpose of improvement beyond the system's design limits, they can actually reduce performance.

The exclusive application of analytical tools is based on the idea that school leaders operate in a stable environment using tools that are products of an analytical process. Since the process of analysis results in the creation of repair tools and not improvement tools, its use is not a valid performance choice for most school applications in the third millennium.

Analytical solutions become outdated at the moment of their creation. Schools using these tools must constantly update their analysis and retrain their personnel on new products. This requires time and money, and most schools have little of either. Too often, schools are playing "catch up" with not only the latest new idea or tool; they are also playing "catch up" with their competition for recognition, grants, and accountability measures.

Analytical leaders are unaware of most of the natural forces that control the flow of energy in living synergistic social systems. In our coaching program, we find a great number of principals and school leaders actually behaving in ways contrary to the natural forces that govern the performance of living social systems. In other words, by working harder with good intentions, they are making matters worse.

When leaders become aware of natural forces and how they function, they create the potential within themselves to facilitate energy flow within the system in which they work. Since natural laws are what they are, they operate effectively in stable and unstable systems relative to the containing environment. This is an advantage over analytical solutions that operate best only in stable environments.

Leaders learning the nature of natural forces constantly build on their knowledge bases, while analytical leaders spend a great deal of their time and energy discarding old knowledge for the replacement knowledge.

As we move into the third millennium, management training is the vehicle of choice by universities, colleges, service centers, and district training programs. Most management training focuses on orienting future school leaders to analytical solutions.

"Programs and practices" is the name of the game. Using analysis, the trainees learn more and more about less and less. This is the nature of most research. The more deeply the

researchers go, the less their results have to do with anything. In other words, their products are, in most cases, useless to the front-line practitioners.

Are schools trying to build better systems using analysis exclusively? Do our school systems know when to use analytical thinking and when to use systemic thinking?

Our universities, colleges, school systems, schools and other stakeholder groups must begin to discover, learn, and share the wisdom of the natural forces that shape the world and govern living synergistic social systems if they are to effectively educate the students of this century.

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