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BUILDING SHARED UNDERSTANDING

2 | Feature

IN THIS ISSUE:

Rebuilding Trust Within Organizations by Dennis S. Reina and Michelle L. Reina

A worker who learns that he's losing his job when he walks into his office and finds that all of the furniture has been removed. A team that fails to give its leader crucial feedback about a new initiative for fear of repercussions. Sometimes the mechanics of managing change compromise people's dignity, respect, and trust. But organizational change doesn't have to happen this way. The betrayal people often experience is a result not of change itself but of how it is managed. Fortunately, most leaders are conscientious, trying to do the right thing in the face of all odds. How can they preserve or rebuild trust within their organizations, given the changing business landscape?

Healing begins when we observe and acknowledge that betrayal has occurred and that we understand its impact on others. Leaders can take certain actions that can have a positive impact on people. Seven steps—observing and acknowledging what has happened; allowing feelings to surface; giving employees support; reframing the experience; taking responsibility; forgiving; and letting go and moving on—will help you and others remain aware of the behaviors essential to healing and provide a common language and perspective that engages people in rebuilding trust.

7 | Toolbox

The Learner's Path by Brian Hinken

How can organizations ensure that their investment in the tools and practices of organizational learning result in tangible results? In addition to providing training and making structural changes, Gerber Memorial Health Services offers a personal development path based on the five disciplines, as described by Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline*. With this tool, employees can understand what progress feels like—moving from reacting toward creating, from protection toward reflection, from “my part” toward “the whole,” and so on. In addition, GMHS uses a framework called “The Learner's Path,” which is based on five questions that tie learning to actual results. The questions lead the learner toward increased responsibility, ownership, and self-reflection.

11 | From the Resource Shelf

Unleashing an Avalanche of Change by David W. Packer

The Pebble and the Avalanche: How Taking Things Apart Creates Revolutions (Berrett-Koehler, 2005) by Moshe Yudkowsky develops a theory for the structure that often underlies dramatic revolutionary change. As the title implies, it uses the metaphor of the single pebble, loosened high on a mountain, that causes an avalanche as it moves downhill and picks up mass and momentum. Systems thinkers will recognize this metaphor as a reinforcing process, in which an activity escalates over time. In all systems, at a certain point, a balancing loop will kick in to limit growth and maintain stability. The author provides a framework that enables readers to initiate a series of reinforcing loops to create an avalanche of revolutionary change and to disable the limits-to-growth balancing loops that can stop it.

12 | Pegasus Notes

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REBUILDING TRUST WITHIN ORGANIZATIONS

BY DENNIS S. REINA AND MICHELLE L. REINA

Edith was conducting an outplacement seminar designed to offer support to people who had just lost their jobs. Shortly before the session was to begin, she stepped into the hallway for some water when a manager approached her. “Edith,” he asked, “can you hold up the session for 10 minutes? I have two employees who need to be in your workshop today but haven’t been informed yet.”

Sometimes the mechanics of managing change overshadow relationships and compromise people’s dignity, respect, and trust. The manager in this vignette was insensitive to the needs of his employees. He was going to rush into informing them that they were losing their jobs and then send them immediately into a workshop about résumé writing.

Organizational change doesn’t have to happen this way. The betrayal people often experience is a result not of change itself but of how it is managed. Employees want to be a *part* of the process, not *apart from* the process. They want to hear the truth and have an opportunity to ask questions and become informed. How leaders manage change affects whether trust will be built or broken and desired outcomes achieved. Fortunately, most leaders are conscientious, trying to do the right thing in the face of all odds. How do they preserve or rebuild trust within their organizations, given the changing business landscape?

Change as Loss

People may experience change as a loss—the loss of relationships with those laid off or the dissolution of the “family” company environment that once existed. They may resent that they are doing more work for the same pay with fewer benefits. Often the organization is no longer the same place employees “signed on for.”

In a world where everything is changing rapidly, many people who previously looked to their workplace as a source of stability now regard it as out of control. It frightens them.

Sometimes the mechanics of managing change overshadow relationships and compromise people’s dignity, respect, and trust.

On the other hand, the people initiating the changes often gain from them. If I am the one gaining, it can be hard for me to see how the other person loses. Many leaders are uncomfortable watching people experience the pain of change and are uncomfortable experiencing their own pain. They often consider this to be touchy-feely stuff, not the stuff of “real business.” During times of change, leaders tend to retreat to the “hard side” of business for many reasons: It is where they are most comfortable, where their role is more tangibly defined, where they are skilled, and where they are the safest. But in their retreat to the safe side, they fail to honor themselves, their relationships, and the real needs of the people they serve. Their search for safety results in a betrayal of themselves, their role, and those they serve.

Such betrayal damages individuals, relationships, and performance. It robs people of their ability to believe in themselves and diminishes their capacity to contribute wholeheartedly to the organization. When people feel betrayed, they pull back. Morale declines, as does productivity.

Effective leaders acknowledge

their employees’ feelings of fear and loss and work to restore their confidence. Otherwise, the betrayal continues, and people’s trust in their leaders and their organization further plummets. Survivors go into a state of resignation: They take fewer risks, blame others, go through the motions, and are not as productive as they once were. If employees have been burned before, they are less willing to give their all and come through when needed. If leaders do not deal with feelings of betrayal, they will unwittingly destroy two of the very qualities they need to be competitive: their employees’ trust and their performance.

Healing from Betrayal

Healing from betrayal—whether intentional or not—begins when we observe and acknowledge that betrayal has occurred and that we understand its impact on others. As a leader, you can take certain actions that can have a positive impact on people, as outlined below. These seven steps will help you and others remain aware of the behaviors essential to healing and provide a common language and perspective that engages people in rebuilding trust (see “Seven Steps for Healing” from *The Reina Trust & Betrayal Model*[®]).

Step 1: Observe and Acknowledge What Has Happened

“Mr. Smith needs to effectively address the ‘pay package’ issue at the organizational level. If benefits or merit pay are going to be negatively affected, he needs to manage the message through an effective and timely information program. I think he underestimates the level of awareness and impact this change will have on employees.”

- **Acknowledge the Negative Impact of Change.** Aware leaders realize that employees are whole human beings with feelings. They know that people who do not feel supported in dealing with their feelings and concerns are less able to heal from their experience of betrayal. As a first step, these leaders acknowledge the potential downside of the change process.

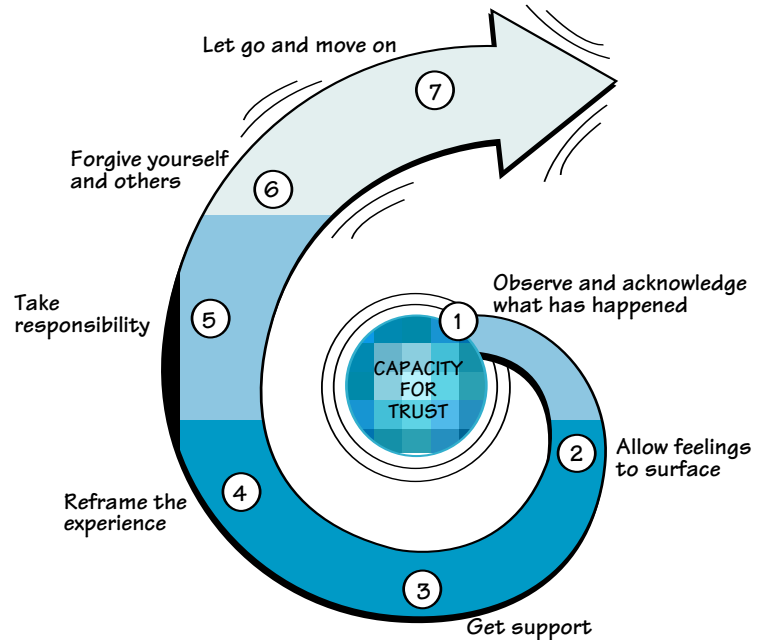
- **Start with Awareness.** One of the greatest mistakes leaders make in challenging times is to assume that, once a major change has taken place, trust will return on its own. This view is both unrealistic and irresponsible. Similar to healing at the individual level, the next step to healing at the organizational level is awareness that trust has been eroded.

- **Assess the Health of Your Organization.** Leaders can learn a lot by observing and assessing the climate within the organization. Notice what your people are experiencing and acknowledge it. Pay attention to what is building and breaking trust. Find out what is important to people. Listen to what they are saying at the water cooler, in the break rooms, and on the shop floor. When witnessing anger, don't just notice it; listen to it. Quite often, anger represents deeper feelings of hurt and disappointment. Remember, people in pain need to be listened to. They need someone they can trust to turn to for support and understanding. They need help to understand their own experience.

- **Acknowledge Feelings.** Effective leaders consciously acknowledge their employees' feelings of frustration, disappointment, and betrayal. It is only after acknowledging the feelings of betrayal that leaders are able to respond to them. Leaders must work very hard not to get defensive or try to justify or rationalize what happened. They must remember that people are entitled to their feelings. It is the role of a leader to listen, observe, and acknowledge.

Step 2: Allow Feelings to Surface

"I don't always feel heard—that I can address my concerns directly with certain



These seven steps will help you and others remain aware of the behaviors essential to healing and provide a common language and perspective that engages people in rebuilding trust.

Source: *Trust & Betrayal in the Workplace: Building Effective Relationships in Your Organization*, 2nd ed (2006 Berrett-Koehler Publishers) © 2000-2006 Dennis S. Reina, Ph.D. and Michelle L. Reina, Ph.D. Recreated by permission of the authors.

managers and be taken seriously. It is important to me that I am able to do so. There are occasions when my supervisor has to address issues with a particular manager on my behalf, because I wasn't deemed 'important' enough by him to talk to. This attitude discourages me and other employees from addressing serious concerns in the future."

- **Give People Permission to Express Their Concerns, Issues, and Feelings in a Constructive Manner.** Create safe forums, staffed by skilled facilitators, that support the expression of fear, anger, and frustration. Giving your employees a constructive way to discuss their feelings and experiences helps them let go of the negativity they are holding, freeing up that energy for rebuilding relationships and returning their focus to performance.

- **Help People Verbalize.** Help employees give voice to their pain—pain they are afraid or unable to

share. When you give your attention to understanding your employees, you let them know that you respect their pain. This is difficult work for leaders, but it is important and necessary for facilitating healing and navigating change. Your employees don't care how much you know until they know how much you care—about them and their well-being. People in pain need to have their feelings heard. They need to know that you are able to relate to what they are saying and feeling. When you do not acknowledge your employees' emotions, they feel unheard, resentful, and distrusting toward you. Another layer of betrayal occurs.

Step 3: Give Employees Support

"Our leader took the time to hear our story. She really listened and asked us questions. It helped to tell her how we felt. She heard how frightened we were about what was happening around us. It feels good to know that she understands

our needs. When she shared her views, I was able to see things in a much different way. I am beginning to have hope for the future.”

- **Recognize Your Employees’ Transitional Needs.** People have needs that must be met before they can adapt to change. They have informational needs regarding the new direction the organization is taking and the strategies it proposes to get there. They have relationship needs associated with belonging and their role in the new organization. And they need their skills and abilities to be valued. When leaders expect people to embrace change without having these fundamental needs addressed, people feel betrayed.

- **Back Your Employees.** Your leadership position allows you to be your employees’ advocate. Represent their interests, defend them from unwarranted criticism, and lobby for resources critical to their jobs. By backing your people, you are building contractual trust and meeting the implicit expectations people have of leaders. Furthermore, you demonstrate that you can be trusted to fulfill future commitments and that people can count on you to do what you say you will do.

Step 4: Reframe the Experience

“Our president, Mr. Allen, took the time to visit every field office in our region to explain the business reasons for GNP Industries’ downsizing the eastern division. This helped us put the change into perspective. It lessened the communication gap between the headquarters and the field branches. His actions let us employees know that he cared. We believed he was going to do everything he could to lessen the impact the changes were having on our jobs, our families, and our lives. We understood the direction the company was taking and knew our leader would continue to tell us the truth.”

- **Put the Experience into a Larger Context.** Helping your employees work through their emotions makes it possible for them to begin to heal.

This movement gives you an opportunity to rebuild trust and helps employees reframe their experience by discussing the bigger picture: the business reasons for change. Honestly acknowledge the changes the organization went through and why. In doing so, you must continue to acknowledge what people have experienced. Only then will employees be in a position to accept the new direction in which the organization is headed and to see their role in it.

- **Engage in Inquiry.** The questions that people ask will guide their journey. Responding to their questions honestly will provide employees with understanding, awareness, truth, and renewed hope for a trusting relationship with you and the organization.

Something quite powerful occurs when we tell the impeccable truth—with no exceptions, no justifications, no rationalizations.

- **Help Employees Realize There Are Choices.** Experiencing betrayal leaves employees feeling very vulnerable and at the mercy of the forces of change. They may need help seeing that they have choices regarding how they react to their circumstances. The more people are aware that they can choose their actions, the more they are able to take responsibility for those actions. Employees may need help in examining their assumptions, breaking out of their self-limiting beliefs, and exploring options and possibilities.

- **Embrace Mistakes.** Some of the behaviors discussed that aid in healing may be new for you, and you may not trust your competence in exercising them. It may take some practice to develop these skills and become comfortable using them. During this time, you may make some mistakes. That does not automatically make you a failure. Embrace these mistakes as opportunities for learning, thereby turning them to your own benefit.

After all, they provide valuable feedback regarding what works and what does not.

Just as leaders must be sensitive to employees’ needs, employees need to be sensitive to leaders’ needs. This may mean having some patience and understanding that the leader is grappling with change as well. Therefore, if a leader makes a mistake, it is not necessarily evidence that the leader can’t be trusted. It is evidence that the leader is stretching, growing, and learning. When someone is practicing new ways of relating, people need to be supportive and understanding of his or her learning.

To gain support and understanding, you might find it helpful to share with people that you are learning new skills. Sharing this aspect of yourself demonstrates your trust in them and further extends the invitation to rebuild your relationship with them.

It is possible that you as the leader feel betrayed as well. It is as important that your feelings of betrayal be acknowledged and that you get support to help people see that.

Step 5: Take Responsibility

“Leaders need to take responsibility for how change was implemented. The restructurings took people by surprise and left departments with minimal coverage to do the work. Questions were not answered and needs not addressed. It’s difficult to imagine the distress this has caused. Employees were in great distress and felt quite isolated.”

- **Take Responsibility for Your Role in the Process.** It is not helpful to try to spin the truth or cover mistakes. It does not serve you or the relationship. Something quite powerful occurs when we tell the impeccable truth—with no exceptions, no justifications, no rationalizations. Telling the truth is the fundamental basis for trust in workplace relationships. It demonstrates one’s trustworthiness. We take responsibility when we acknowledge our mistakes. Three

simple words, I am sorry, reflect taking responsibility and go a long way to rebuilding trust.

- **Help Others Take Responsibility for Their Part.** When people are in pain, they tend to blame leaders and behave in ways that contribute to betrayal. We support others in taking responsibility when we help them see their role in creating the climate of betrayal.

Employees may not have control over change, but they do have control over how they choose to respond. Even though people may feel betrayed, those feelings do not make betraying in return acceptable.

- **Make Amends and Return with Dividends.** It is the leader's role to break the chain of betrayal and reverse the spiral of distrust. Because actions speak louder than words, it is important that you take the first step in mending fences with your employees. Remember that rebuilding trust does not simply mean giving back what was taken away. It means returning something in better shape than it was originally in. You must not only replace but also make things better. If this is not possible, be honest about the realities of the situation and what you can do to make amends.

- **Manage Expectations.** To safeguard you and your employees against future betrayals, keenly manage expectations. Employees want to know what is expected of them and what they can expect in return. Emphasize the need to negotiate with them when their expectations cannot be fulfilled. Doing so strengthens contractual trust between you and your employees.

- **Keep Your Promises.** Managing promises is important in relationships. Trust is the result of promises kept. Don't make promises that you know you can't keep; doing so just sets up you and everyone with whom you have a relationship for a downfall. When you realize that you cannot keep promises, renegotiate them; don't break them.

Be careful of what you promise and what you appear to promise.

When you are attempting to rebuild trust, it is essential that you not try to justify past actions and that you address the perceptions of those who feel betrayed. According to Frank Navran in *Truth and Trust: The First Two Victims of Downsizing*, "It is enough for an employee to have believed that a promise was broken for trust to be violated."

Step 6: Forgive

"Many employees feel that they have been intentionally misinformed and lied to. They do not trust management. It will take time for forgiveness to happen. We need to bring in support to help us understand the surrounding circumstances and allow us to say what needs to be said, to 'get this off our chests.' This will help us shift from blaming management to focusing on problem-solving the issues, so we can begin to forgive."

- **Recognize That Forgiveness Is Freedom.** Forgiveness is a gift we give ourselves. It is about freeing ourselves and others from the anger, bitterness, and resentment that can deplete our individual and collective energy and spirit and interfere with relationships and performance. When we help people forgive others, we help them free themselves. With forgiveness, they heal for their future by changing their attitude about the past. We help them see new possibilities.

For most people, forgiveness takes time, and it happens a little at a time. Over time, employees may be willing to forgive, but you cannot expect them to forget. You can help them heal from the pain they felt, but you cannot erase the events of the past. Occasionally, employees may still be a bit angry after they forgive. It is natural that they may experience lingering feelings of anger for the perceived wrongs they experienced.

Occasionally, you as a leader may need to forgive yourself. You did the best you could, and for whatever reason, it still wasn't enough. Beating yourself up mentally and emotionally is worthless and self-defeating. Acknowledge for yourself what needs

to be said or done to put your mind and this issue to rest. Then just do it! Be compassionate and cut yourself some slack during the healing process!

- **Shift from Blaming to Focusing on Needs.** Because forgiveness is a personal matter, it is difficult for people to forgive a system. However, leaders can work to cultivate a more personal and trusting climate where healing and forgiveness can take place. They can begin to do this by helping people shift from blaming the organization or its leaders to focusing on their personal needs as they relate to the business.

It is important to address persistent resentment and blame in an organization, as they are toxic to the individuals involved and to the whole system. They undermine trust, morale, productivity, creativity, and innovation. People continue to blame when they perceive that those who are responsible have failed to take responsibility. At the same time, they feel that they do not have to take action and are therefore not responsible.

It is essential for leaders to help people shift from a blaming mode to a problem-solving focus. What do employees need to resolve the issues, concerns, fears, and pain they are feeling? What conversations need to take place? What still needs to be said? What needs to happen for healing to occur? What will make a difference right now?

Step 7: Let Go and Move On

"Our leader brought in outside skilled facilitators to provide the needed support through the transition. During the small-group discussions, they were neutral and made sure we were all heard. They held a tough line, helping us see our leader's point of view. The facilitators really drove home the responsibility we all shared. We had painful but powerful discussions. What a relief it was when we were able to forgive ourselves, because we were no angels. But things really shifted when we also forgave our leader. Wow—we have moved on and are all on board with our organization's new direction."

- **Accept What's So.** Leaders can help people accept what has happened. Acceptance is not condoning what was done but experiencing the reality of what happened without denying, disowning, or resenting it. It is facing the truth without blame. It is helping employees separate themselves from their preoccupation with the past and helping them invest their emotional energies in the present and in creating a different future.

- **Realize That You Won't Always Accomplish Your Goal.** Although you may not always accomplish your goal, it is important that you make a good-faith effort and that your intentions are honorable. It is quite acceptable for leaders to disagree with their employees or not support a particular cause. Effective leaders do so with honesty and integrity.

- **Take the Time and Make the Commitment.** Building trust takes time and commitment. When trust is lost, it is regained only by a sincere dedication to the key behaviors and practices that earned it in the first place. The road back is not easy. However, by listening, telling the truth, keeping your promises, and backing your employees, you will play an instrumental role in assisting your employees and organization to heal from betrayal, rebuild trust, and renew relationships.

- **Give Support!** Providing support is a sign of your dedication to the healing and rebuilding process. The number one mistake leaders make is expecting people to immediately move from step 1 (observing and acknowledging what has happened) to step 7 (letting go and moving on) without doing the necessary work of the other steps. We aren't built to work this way. People in pain cannot simply move on. They need to fully go through the healing process. When people are willing and able to do the work, it will lead to renewal!

Your commitment to practicing these seven steps, and engaging your people in the same, will lead to transformation. Imagine the possibilities! ■

Dennis S. Reina, Ph.D., and Michelle L. Reina, Ph.D., are the authors of *Trust and Betrayal in the Workplace: Building Effective Relationships in Your Organization* 2nd ed (Berrett-Koehler, 2006), from which this article was adapted with the authors' permission. They are also cofounders of The Reina

Trust Building Institute and each hold doctorates in human and organizational systems from Fielding Graduate University. Together and independently, they are sought-after consultants, keynote speakers, and executive coaches. Contact them at www.trustinworkplace.com

NEXT STEPS

Reflecting on Your Experience

Individually reflect on the following questions and be prepared to discuss your insights and observations with your teammates.

1. Think of a major change that reduced the trust within an organization or even caused a sense of betrayal. What did leaders do that contributed to the betrayal?
2. After the betrayal occurred, what steps, if any, did the leadership take to promote healing? What would you recommend leaders do to help themselves and their employees let go of the past and move forward?
3. During a major organizational change, what would you recommend leaders do to address the needs of employees? What would you recommend for managing the new expectations that are being created during this change process?
4. How could leaders reframe change in terms of a larger context that would make sense to employees?

Identifying Behaviors That Build or Break Trust

Use this template to identify which behaviors support or build trust and which behaviors detract from and break trust within the organization.

1. Draw a large T on a piece of flipchart paper, and label the top center "Trust Within Our Organization." Then label the left and right columns "Builds Trust" and "Breaks Trust," respectively.
2. Have the team identify the specific behaviors that build and break trust within the organization and list them in the appropriate column.
3. Rank and prioritize the behaviors under each column. Select the three behaviors that break trust the most.
4. Strategize ways to resolve these three troublesome behaviors.

Trust Within Our Organization	
BUILDS TRUST	BREAKS TRUST
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep agreements • Openly share information • Acknowledge others' skills • _____ • _____ • _____ • _____ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Miss deadlines • Cover up mistakes • Micromanage people • _____ • _____ • _____ • _____

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Peter Senge

Quickly sold out after it was shown to open the 2005 conference, this special video by Peter Senge was created solely for his keynote presentation. In it, he draws on the extraordinary global reach of his experiences with all kinds of organizations to discuss

how a new vision of an interdependent future is taking form on the planet. With his usual insight and grace, he observes how the 21st century has brought more opportunities for collaboration while raising new ethical challenges, especially for consuming/discarding nations and manufacturers with disproportionate environmental impacts. [BEG/INT/ADV](#)

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Intergenerational Alchemy: Turning Obligation into Mutual Aspiration



Mary Catherine Bateson

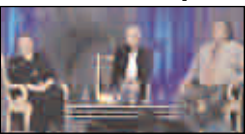
Through technological and medical advances, people in industrialized societies are living longer than they were a century ago. The resulting demographic shift has altered the ancient rhythm of family and community life. Much has been made of the

increasing burden—particularly economic—on younger generations to support a growing population of elders. But the experience and knowledge embodied by today's healthy, energetic seniors creates new opportunities as well. Mary Catherine explores how we might redesign patterns of life-long learning and problem-solving to create a better future. [BEG/INT/ADV](#)

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Rose von Thater-Braan, Leroy Little Bear, and Amethyst First Rider

In the 21st century, we must embrace different ways of knowing in order to generate sustainable ways to live and work together. A new paradigm is emerging that draws from a

dialogue between Native and Western science, in which each maintains its inherent integrity while enriching the other. This science of the whole integrates interrelationship and logic, interdependence and rationality, and sensing and knowing to create transformational possibilities. Rose, Leroy, and Amethyst offer a view of the Native paradigm and its methods of acquiring knowledge that have been refined over thousands of years. [BEG/INT/ADV](#)

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Declaration of Interdependence: Forging a Sustainable Future Together



Daniel H. Kim

As we continue to transition from the models of the Machine Age and the Industrial Revolution to the emerging models of what some call the Systems Age and the Knowledge Economy, we need to establish a "Declaration of Interdependence" to guide and

inspire our work together. What self-evident truths must we articulate that will enable us to forge a sustainable future together? How can groups from very different walks of life come to agree on a common set of purposes and practices? Daniel leads a generative exploration of these questions toward creating a synthesis of the whole conference experience. [BEG/INT/ADV](#)

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THE LEARNER'S PATH

BY BRIAN HINKEN

In my previous article, *Confessions of a Recovering Knower* (*The Systems Thinker* Vol. 16, No. 7), I described my journey from being a knower to being a learner and a framework that delineates the difference between the two. At one end of the learning continuum are knowers. They adopt a mental stance that they know all that they need to know in order to address the current situation. Their self-esteem is closely tied to their ability to know, be right, and not be blamed. At the other end of the continuum are learners, who have taken a mental stance that allows for them to be influenced, “not know,” and admit that they don’t currently have the ability to achieve their desired results.

Organizations can use this framework to create a personal development path an employee might pursue using the five disciplines, as described by Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline* (click here for “Shifting from Knowing to Learning”). With this framework, employees will be able to understand what progress feels like—moving from reacting toward creating, from protection toward reflection, from “my part” toward “the whole,” and so on.

At Gerber Memorial Health Services (GMHS), we have invested heavily in organizational learning, providing training and support to our leaders, along with implementing some structural changes that ensure that we use these ideas in cross-departmental teams. But until we incorporated the “knower to learner framework,” we only had vague expectation for leaders to improve their skills by practicing the five disciplines. Now, we are clear on what successful development along the continuum looks like, and we are

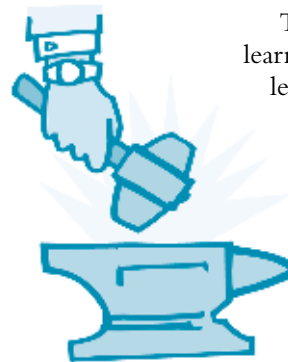
holding leaders accountable for that development.

But there is still another problem. Even if our leaders successfully developed themselves in the use of the five disciplines, they still sometimes achieved mediocre results. Through the use of a framework called “the Learner’s Path,” we have found a way for people to ensure that they tie their learning to actual results.

The Five Learner’s Path Questions

The Learner’s Path utilizes a five-question framework that leads the learner toward increased responsibility, ownership, and self-reflection. The five questions are: (1) Are you producing desired results? (2) Is this issue yours to address? (3) Is it necessary to use alternative action strategies? (4) Is it necessary to use action strategies that are beyond your current action repertoire? and (5) Are you open to renewal and correction?

The individual or group answers the five questions in succession. If they answer each question successfully, they increase the likelihood that learning will occur (by “learning,” I mean “increasing one’s ability to achieve desired results through effective action” and not simply the accumulation of more information in one’s head). When you answer the first three questions successfully, you can say that you have become a learner, and not before. Affirmatively answering questions four and five will, thereafter, deepen your learning.



The Anvil of Learning

We might think of these five questions as the “anvil” against which we shape and form our knowledge. Imagine a blacksmith trying to shape a piece of metal into something valuable and useful without the use of an anvil. He holds the metal to be shaped in one hand while holding the sledgehammer in the other. With no base on which to rest the metal piece, he grips it as tightly as he can while clanging the hammer against it with the other hand. The blows fall at odd angles and have little impact on the piece of metal. But when the blacksmith rests his piece of metal on an anvil, it gives him the stability and leverage he needs to form and change the metal into something useful and valuable.

This same principle is true of any learning effort: When you attempt to learn without the support and testing of the anvil of learning, you are unlikely to transform your learning into something useful and valuable—namely, an ability to achieve the results you couldn’t achieve before. Just as the anvil significantly leverages the blacksmith’s effectiveness, so the Learner’s Path leverages the learner’s effectiveness.

Walking Along the Learner’s Path

Let me illustrate how to use this framework with a story. I facilitated a meeting of a group of leaders, who were discussing the possibility of implementing a large-scale customer service improvement strategy. Customer service scores had been flat for two years, and some people advocated for doing something new to improve the scores.

I started out by explaining that I would be walking them through the Learner's Path/Five Questions framework, which would help them determine what level of learning would be necessary for the initiative. Then, I led them through a progression of the five questions, as follows.

1st Question: "Are you producing desired results?"

After reviewing the trends of flat scores (although at a very high level) over the past two years, they concluded that these scores were not good enough. They wanted to be known for something better than "customer satisfaction"—they wanted to give their customers "profound experiences." Had they said that they were satisfied with the current results, there would be no point for them to continue the conversation. The rest of the five questions would be a waste of time unless they felt some aspiration to improve current results.

2nd Question: "Is it yours to address?"

In other words, they had to decide if

they, as leaders, ought to take some responsibility for addressing this issue. They said, "If we don't take responsibility, who will? What is the alternative?" Again, had they said that they did not want to assume responsibility, the conversation would have stopped, and the group would have had to be content with some wishful thinking that someone else would do something about improving the customer scores.

3rd Question: "Is it necessary to use alternative action strategies?"

This question forced the group to struggle with some dilemmas. If they said, "No—we can keep using the current strategy," then I would have had to ask why they hadn't actually produced profound customer experiences all along. Alternatively, if they believed they should use some type of alternative action strategy, they would have to admit that their current strategy hadn't worked, which could be threatening or embarrassing to them. In this case, the leadership group decided that they needed to try an alternative action strategy. Again, had

they said "no," there would have been no point in continuing the conversation because they would not be convinced that they actually had anything to learn.

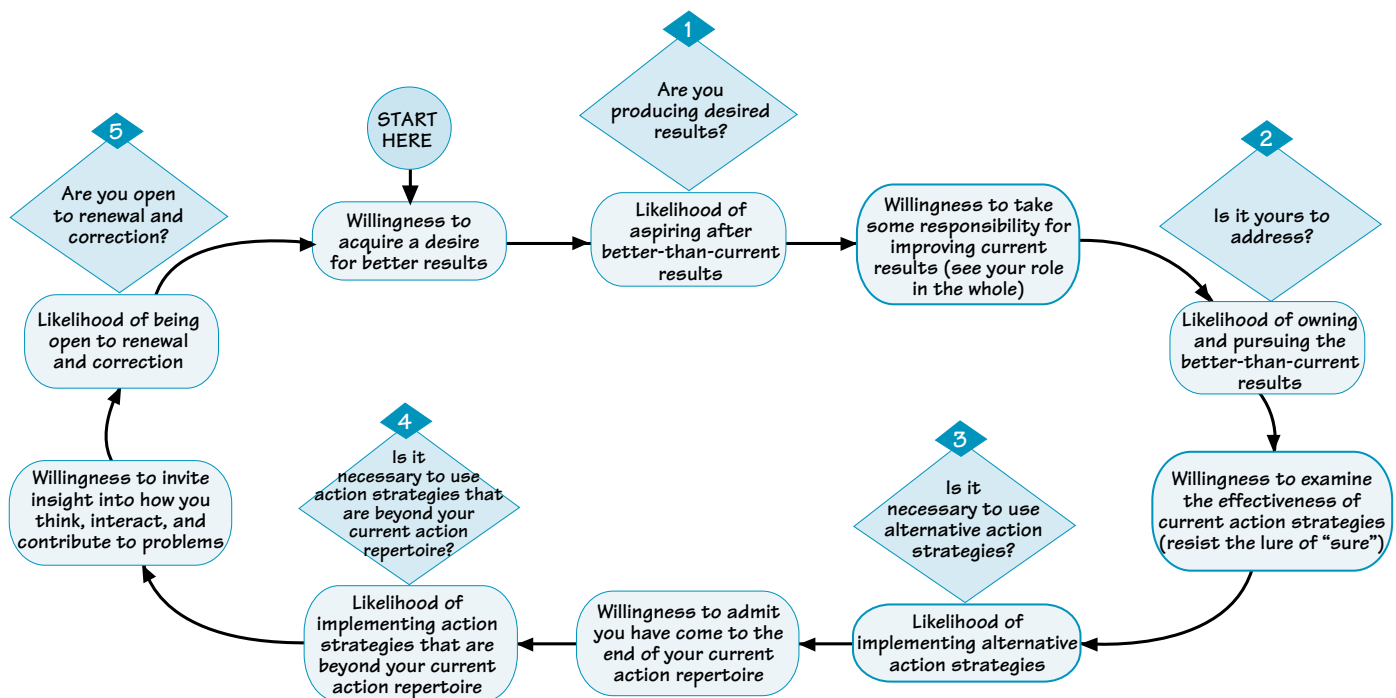
4th Question: "Is it necessary to use action strategies that are beyond your current action repertoire?"

At this point, the group answered "yes." They felt that, if they were to achieve profound customer experiences, they would have to implement an action strategy that they did not yet know how to implement. In other words, they would have to expand their current action repertoire (by "action repertoire," I mean action strategies they could reliably use to achieve desired results). Had they said "no" to this fourth question, the group would have assembled another action strategy from their current repertoire and, in the process, would be less likely to succeed.

5th Question: "Are you open to renewal and correction?"

Without hesitation, the group said "yes" to this question. Because I

THE LEARNER'S LOOP



The purpose of The Learner's Loop is to articulate what capacities a person must develop in order to increase their chances for successfully answering each of the five questions. Progressing along the Learner's Path is not a linear process; it is a closed loop, an engine of growth, around which a learner circulates, seeking continuous development.

doubted whether they really understood the implications of this answer, I clarified that this meant they would have to look closely and deeply at themselves regarding how they think, interact, and/or contribute to the current situation. They still said “yes.” They understood that they would be required to examine how their leadership had contributed to the flat scores.

As a result of walking along the Learner’s Path together, the leaders knew that, in order to achieve profound customer experiences, they would have to dramatically change the way they led the organization. They knew that it would not be enough just to do more of the same thing or to do the same thing better than before. They would have to learn to do new things and that this approach would require an openness to renewal and correction. The group used the five questions as an anvil against which they changed and formed their idea of the kind of results they wanted and the kind of learning that would be required of them in order to achieve those results.

Smoothing Out the Path

These five questions are deep and challenging when they are taken seriously. They are particularly difficult, and often threatening, to someone operating from a knower stance. How can knowers be helped to overcome their fear and sense of threat about answering these questions? The Learner’s Loop can help (see “The Learner’s Loop”).

The purpose of The Learner’s Loop is to articulate what capacities a person must develop in order to increase their chances for successfully answering each of the five questions. These capacities are described as a matter of “willingness”—is the person *willing* to take the necessary action to increase the *likelihood* of answering one of the questions successfully?

Progressing along the Learner’s Path is not a linear process; it is a closed loop, an engine of growth, around which a learner circuits, seeking continuous development. You will notice that there is a suggested order

for the first rotation, and then the loop feeds on itself thereafter.

At GMHS, we have designed a curriculum geared toward helping individuals increase their *willingness* to take the necessary actions and, thereby, increase the *likelihood* that they will successfully answer the Learner’s Path questions. I will describe below why these “willingnesses” are important and suggest some organizational learning tools, techniques, and frameworks that can be used to increase them.

1. *Willing to Acquire a Desire*

We are more likely to aspire for better-than-current results (successfully answer question #1) when we are willing to acquire a desire to improve current results. If we are totally content with our level of current results, we will feel no prompting to seek new learning at all. Sometimes, people truly are achieving all that they could imagine in a certain area, and, in that case, they should move on to other issues. At other times, people delude themselves into thinking that current results *are* acceptable, when everything and everyone around them is screaming for better performance. The disciplines of personal mastery and shared vision are key in stoking the fires of desire for improved results.

Organizations investing in their capacity for organizational learning should design their curriculum so that learners:

- Increase their self-awareness (e.g., Meyers/Briggs, DiSC, etc.).
- Uncover their personal values and vision (e.g., personal mission statements).
- Work from a creative, not a reactive, orientation (e.g., *The Path of Least Resistance* by Robert Fritz).
- Empower their actions with creative tension (e.g., *The Path of Least Resistance* by Robert Fritz).
- Co-create collective aspiration (e.g., shared visioning).

2. *Willing to See Your Role in the Whole*

We are more likely to own and pursue better-than-current results (affirmatively answer question #2) if we are willing to take some responsibility for seeing our role in the whole scheme of things. Systems thinking is

most often thought of as a discipline for analyzing and solving difficult problems—and it is useful for these things. It is also helpful for changing our perspective about who should be responsible for addressing problems in the first place.

Those organizations investing in their capacity for organizational learning should design their curriculum so that learners:

- Understand how structure influences behavior (e.g., the Iceberg diagram).
- See life as dynamic, complex, and interdependent (e.g., the concepts and tools of systems thinking).
- No longer see problems as “out there” (e.g., causal loop diagrams).

3. *Willing to Resist the Lure of “Sure”*

We are more likely to implement alternative action strategies (affirmatively answer question #3) if we are willing to examine the effectiveness of our current action strategies and resist the lure of being sure that we have the right strategy. Knowers are particularly resistant to this examination, for fear that it will be revealed that they didn’t actually know the best action strategy after all. If we are open to considering multiple perspectives, being unsure, or admitting our knowledge is less-than-complete, then we will be more willing to experiment with alternative action strategies and learn how to effectively improve current results.

The practices of the discipline of mental models are especially helpful at this point along the Learner’s Path, and a curriculum designed to teach skills in this area should enable learners to:

- Consider multiple perspectives (e.g., the story of the blind men and the elephant).
- Examine their thinking and assumptions (e.g., the Ladder of Inference and Left-hand Column).
- Pursue mutual understanding using “reflection mode” rather than “protection mode” conversations (e.g., AND Stance, 3rd Story, “Be in control” vs. “Mutual learning” model).
- Realize that “me” and “my view” are not the same thing (e.g., “I Am Not My Hat”).

4. Willing to Raise the Bar of Your Action Repertoire

We are more likely to consider new action strategies beyond that which we currently know how to implement (affirmatively answer question #4) if we admit we have come to the end of our current action repertoire and want to expand it. Up to this point, as learners, we have used “what we know” to achieve “what we can.” This incremental type of learning is called single-loop learning, and it will only bring us so far—never producing breakthrough results. To expand our action repertoire, we need to examine and challenge the mental framework under which we are doing our learning. This kind of deep learning is called double-loop learning (see “Double-Loop Learning Cycle”).

The group-oriented discipline of team learning is particularly helpful here. We need the help of others to confirm that we have, indeed, reached the end of our capabilities and to have frame-breaking conversations. A curriculum teaching this capacity should enable learners to:

- Implement double-loop learning (see “Double-Loop Learning Cycle”).
- Create the conditions for effective group learning (e.g., Four-Player Model, ground rules from *The Skilled Facilitator* by Roger Schwarz).
- Generate new insights (e.g. productive conversations, dialogue).

5. Willing to Invite Insight

We are more likely to be open to renewal and correction (affirmatively answer question #5) if we are willing to invite insight into how we think, interact, and contribute to problems. Doing new things in new ways and getting better results is an exhilarating and challenging learning experience. But we may still find ourselves reacting to problems rather than creating fundamental solutions; trying to get compliance from others rather than commitment; protecting ourselves during conversations rather than reflecting on our conversational habits; focusing on “my part” rather than on “the whole”; and getting into debates rather than engaging in mutual learning. Advanced learners are continually seeking deep change

in themselves as they move along the continuums of the five disciplines toward the learner stance.

Again, this is where team learning is particularly helpful, along with a renewed emphasis on personal mastery. A curriculum teaching this capacity should, additionally, enable learners to:

- Integrate all five disciplines into everyday practice (e.g., action learning projects).

Pursuing the “Trade” of Learning

Blacksmithing is a learned trade. No one could ever attend a three-day workshop and return as a master blacksmith. It takes years of apprenticeship and continual practice. It is not glamorous work, but consider the impact the blacksmith has had on the world. “When the first blacksmith began hammering on a hot piece of iron, little did he know how he was shaping the future. He forged the tools that made the machines that produce everything mankind has today. The blacksmith was the pioneer of the technology that carried mankind from the iron age to the

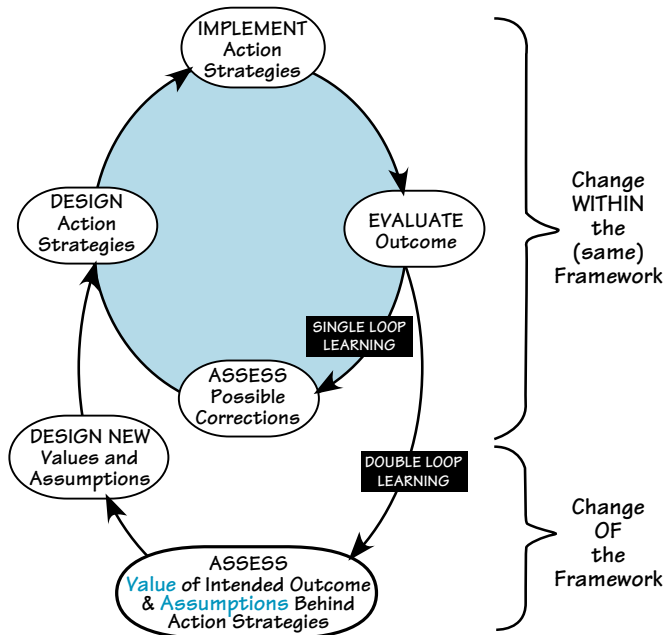
space age. It can truly be said that the first rocket to the moon was virtually launched from the face of the anvil” (Bill Miller, theforgeworks.com).

Just as a blacksmith forms and shapes his metal objects using a hammer supported and leveraged by an anvil, let us shape and form our knowledge using the hammer of the Knower-to-Learner framework and the anvil of the Learner’s Path. By doing so, we develop our capacity for learning and tie our knowledge to actual results.

Like blacksmithing, the “trade of learning” cannot be learned quickly and is not always glamorous. Nevertheless, consider the impact that it can have on our world. Responding to a changing world without deep, intentional learning is a risky proposition. Will it truly be said that the future we created together was formed on the face of the anvil of learning? ■

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DOUBLE-LOOP LEARNING CYCLE



To expand our action repertoire, we need to examine and challenge the mental framework under which we are doing our learning. This kind of deep learning is called double-loop learning.



UNLEASHING AN AVALANCHE OF CHANGE

BY DAVID W. PACKER

**The Pebble and the Avalanche**
by Moshe Yudkowsky

The *Pebble and the Avalanche: How Taking Things Apart Creates Revolutions* (Berrett-Koehler, 2005) by Moshe Yudkowsky is an interesting, readable book that examines change and develops a theory for the structure that often underlies dramatic revolutionary change. As the title implies, it uses the metaphor of the single pebble, loosened high on a mountain, that causes an avalanche as it moves downhill and picks up mass and momentum. Systems thinkers will recognize this metaphor as a reinforcing process, in which an activity escalates over time. In all systems, at a certain point, a balancing loop will kick in to limit growth and maintain stability. The author's aim, I believe, is to provide a framework that enables readers to initiate a series of reinforcing loops to create an avalanche of revolutionary change and to disable the limits-to-growth balancing loops that can stop it.

The Concept of Disaggregation

Yudkowsky's theory rests heavily on the idea that taking things apart (disaggregation) is the lynchpin for unleashing an avalanche of revolutionary change. Personal computers "took apart" large central computers and put the capability into the hands of many. The Internet "took apart" point-to-point messaging and created a structure that put anywhere-to-anywhere communication in the hands of the masses. Both developments dramatically changed how we interact and distributed power that once was highly centralized. Today's World Wide Web creates an

increasing number of stakeholders who may, at the extreme, spend time and money improving the capability and adding functionality "just for the sheer joy of sharing." In a classic reinforcing process, this enthusiasm draws more people and ideas into the process, further broadening ownership, and so on. Imagine if one entity with total authority owned the Internet—where would we be today?

The book goes into a number of examples, most based in technology, in which the ability to see what could be disaggregated led to revolutionary change. For example, wooden clocks were once made by carpenters, one at a time. Standardization didn't exist; each piece in the end product was unique to a craftsman, and clocks were available only to the wealthy because of the cost. But by disaggregating the parts from the whole so that craftsmen could focus on volume production of pieces that could be easily assembled in a standard way, an industry emerged. Similarly, U.S. telephone services were once totally controlled by AT&T, a large national firm that bundled together all aspects of service. But when AT&T was broken apart (by government action) in multiple ways (companies, lines, exchanges, research, even handsets), the process led to a continuing surge of creativity, competition, cost reduction, simplicity, specialization, and synergy. Both supply and demand increased, creating explosive change to the field and myriad benefits to the world that continue today.

Separating the Parts from the Whole

The book goes on to suggest steps for devising a way to identify infrastructures that can be disaggregated; develop interfaces so that the resulting parts can work together to meet the

organization's needs; gain acceptance for change; evaluate the results; and employ feedback for continuous improvement.

Yudkowsky also offers several examples of what happens when things are forced in the other direction—toward aggregation. He points to the centralization of decision making in the Soviet system as an example of massive failure caused by moving in exactly the wrong direction. He also takes aim at Microsoft's effort to aggregate web browser functions with their operating system, claiming that it illustrates the negative results of combining features and centralizing ownership in order to extract short-term profit—a strategy that antitrust action rightfully ended. The author believes that initiatives aimed at short-term control are almost always misguided, because people will ultimately realize the benefits of disaggregation that are being sacrificed.

Yudkowsky's intent is to give readers a theory they can use to think about needs and then determine how they can break apart a technology or business infrastructure in order to produce an innovative solution. Near the end, he provides a "how-to" structure for such evaluation.

Summing up, this useful book encourages looking at things differently. It focuses on substantive, not incremental, change and shows how revolutions, both technological and cultural, have created the world in which we live. The author challenges us to look forward to creating the future with the deliberateness that comes from understanding the systemic forces at play and using them to best advantage. ■

David W. Packer (dpacker@stcollab.com) is a managing partner of the Systems Thinking Collaborative, a consulting firm that specializes in improving organizations' abilities to manage their most complex issues through systemic intervention.



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LEARNING LINKS

"There is no such thing as a failed experiment, only experiments with unexpected outcomes."

—R. Buckminster Fuller

"Life just seems so full of connections. Most of the time we don't even pay attention to the depth of life. We only see flat surfaces."

—Colin Neenan

"Insight, I believe, refers to the depth of understanding that comes by setting experiences, yours and mine, familiar and exotic, new and old, side by side, learning by letting them speak to one another."

—Mary Catherine Bateson

For information about reading and using causal loop diagrams, go to www.pegasus.com/cld.html.

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