

## Ongoing Discussion “Thought Piece”

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## ***BOUNDARY-LESS THINKING***

***Sheldon Rovin***

Boundary-less thinking (BLT) is thinking beyond the boundaries or constraints, usually self-imposed, that inhibit change, are often used to justify cherished, but unfounded practices and beliefs, maintain a tight grip on the status quo, and keep organizations functioning sub-optimally. BLT includes *at least* trying to base decisions and actions on evidence and sound facts, rather than the myths and “common knowledge” that suffuse organizational life. For the boundary-less thinker, the facts may not always be at hand, but the effort to get them is. A boundary-less thinker benefits from an insatiable curiosity, playfulness, and a recognition of unlearning (This is not forgetting!) as a natural part of learning. BLT means accepting error as inherent in all humans and as a means for learning, not something to fear. In the face of an emergent, uncertain world, our boundary-less thinker realizes the folly of trying to achieve certainty by planning to the nth degree. With these thoughts, and from a systems perspective, she tries to dissolve problems rather than solve them.

Well, what does this really mean? Let’s put some flesh, metaphorically anyway, around some of these broad concepts. My underlying purpose is to try to explain why the vast majority of so-called change efforts fail, at least why they don’t reach fruition in the fashion intended by the planners, and what just might work.

There is a war of the parts against the whole (John Gardner) in our society and its organizations. Vested interests abound in the form of countless single issue groups: gun control and anti - gun control, pro-choice and anti - choice, for the war in Iraq and against it, to name but a few at the national level. I won’t even mention the conflicts between

religions and in some instances between sects within a given religion. At local levels more of the same plus those for urban development and those opposed, those for increased property taxes to aid their schools and those opposed, you name it and there are supporting groups pro and con.

This war, caused by single interest thinking, leads to constant conflict among units (parts) in organizations or among community groups as they compete for resources and power. In organizations, divide and conquer (Russell Ackoff and Sheldon Rovin) is the predominant way of managing. The budgets of the various departments most often are handed out independent of the other units (parts), rather than from meeting with all the departments together to decide what serves the best interests of the entire organization. All of this results in sub-optimization of the whole: none of the parts functions optimally because the defining nature of the system (organization), the interaction of the parts, is ignored.

Paradoxically, no one part of a complex system can function at its best. Why? Because it would mean the part has all the resources it needs, can make systemic decisions independently and go as fast as it wants. Unless it's a single unit organization, none of these conditions can be met. They probably can't be met even then. Despite this, the competition (combat?) between the parts for resources runs rampant in most organizations.

The boundary-less thinker (BLT) thinks past the boundaries of the units. She considers how the parts intersect and how they work together to make a better whole, how the parts make the organization greater, different and more productive than just the sum of them. Our BLT thinks *part of*, not just part. How, they ask, does a given change

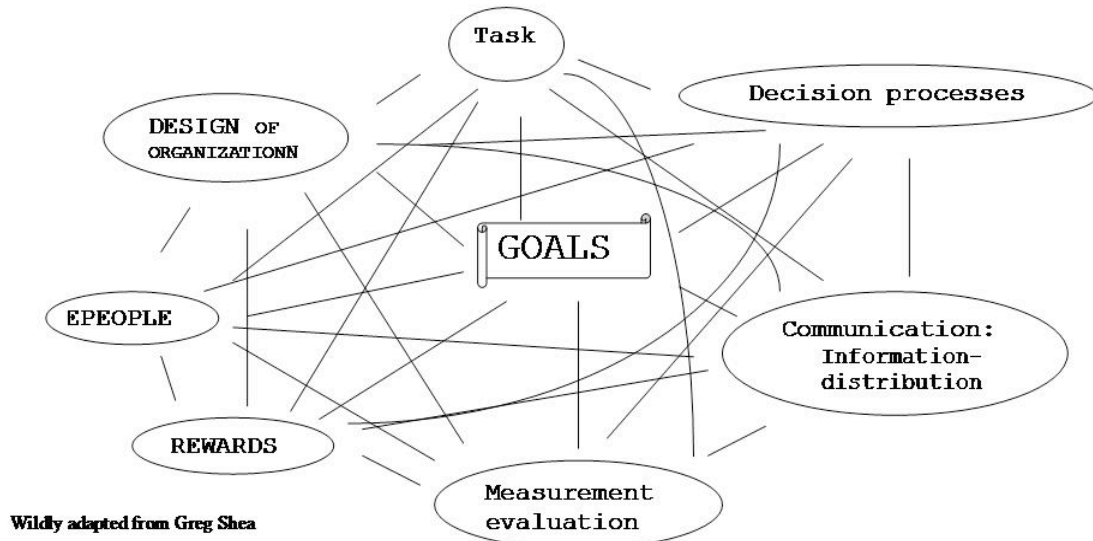
improve the whole, not just the part? They know that improving one part doesn't necessarily improve the whole and actually may harm it. *Sometimes improving the whole depends on weakening a part.*

“The war of the parts against the whole” is an impediment to any change effort. That's why the leader's focus on the interactions is essential. A system thinking leader thinks *more about integrating than directing.*

Another fault underlying change efforts resides in the piecemeal, non-systemic approach taken that dooms the effort before it starts. This can be shown quickly and simply by the diagram in the figure on page 4. The ovals, “boundaries,” represent the various aspects/functions of the typical organization. Of course, there are others but these are most of it. If you are serious about real change, systemic change, then at least three of these aspects must be redesigned in concert with new goals.

You can't change only one thing and have a prayer of a chance to accomplish anything positive on behalf of the entire system. Actually, changing only one aspect or unit is likely to cause harm, at least in the longer term. The reverberation of changing one part of a complex system by itself may not be felt immediately, but it will sooner or later in the form of unintended consequences, jealousies, more work for another unit that may not be prepared or have the resources to do it, and a change in the relationships of all the units.

**EFFECTIVE CHANGE** means Changing (Redesigning) at least 3 systemic aspects Of the organization or unit as well as the goals.



Again referring to the figure, the different aspects shown, how decisions are made, the reward system, how information is transmitted and the evaluation processes, in aggregate, can be viewed as the organizational culture, if you will. Organizational culture can be defined in as many ways as there are definers. I define it as the things that are taken for granted in an organization, what you do without giving it much thought. Another way of putting it is that culture is the tacit assumptions made about how the organization works, the unspoken, unchallenged assumptions that people have about their worlds, that people don't think about unless the matter is raised. Most behavior, whether it be in an organization or a community, rests on these tacit assumptions.

And the question of assumptions is paramount when trying to make systemic changes. Real, systemic *change is virtually impossible in the face of unexamined,*

*unchallenged assumptions.* Einstein's oft quoted aphorism, paraphrased here that the ways of thinking that caused our problems can't be used to solve them is apt. But how do we change the way we think? How do we challenge our assumptions if we're not sure what they are? This is the task of the boundary-less thinker—to think without the constraints of habit, the self-imposed boundaries, to challenge dogma, to surface the underlying, unwitting assumptions that drive behavior, to question authority when it's apparent it needs to be questioned and to act reflectively, not reflexively.

O.K., you might say, how do we do this? Here are some suggestions. One place to start is by learning how to unlearn. Unlearning is not forgetting. Unlearning is to be able to say, with reason, the contrary to what you know. The wiser one becomes, the more one is able to contradict one's own ideas. Unlearning is an iterative process that demands freedom to question underlying assumptions, sometimes sacred ones. Remember, "Sacred cows make great steaks."

Another suggestion is to embrace error, not rationalize it. It is through error that we learn to question and discard unwarranted assumptions. There is no learning without error. Being correct only affirms what we already know, what we have learned. This is easy to say, but difficult to put into practice because punishment is associated with error. Error will not be acceptable until the punishment is removed.

A third and final suggestion, for now, is to start from scratch, at least with your thinking. Children constantly start from scratch, until, of course, they start school. Children are natural boundary-less thinkers: they don't know what boundaries are and they don't worry about them until an intervention by parent or teacher. That's why they are so creative.

Russell Ackoff developed the process of Idealized Design. It is a boundary-less way of thinking about what you want. Idealized Design is a *process* of design of or planning for a desired future and creating and/or using existing means of achieving it. The process enables you to work toward achieving what you want NOW, not at some time in the future. *It is planning backwards from where you want to be to where you are now.*

It starts with the assumption that the organization or unit or relationship that you are planning for was destroyed last night, and you are free to redesign it without constraint. This way of thinking frees you from the baggage of typical planning, the constraints - organizational and personal - and reasons not to do things that impede your doing what you really want to do.

The opportunity to create the greatest change and be the most *creative* is when you start from scratch. Whether a project, a relationship, a unit, or an organization, starting something new offers more possibilities than trying to change an existing entity. It is also easier and more fun!

Idealized Design/Redesign provides the opportunity, if only in your mind, to start from scratch, be playful, and not consider constraints. It helps you come closer to what you really want, rather than what you think (assume) you have to settle for.

Readings:

John Gardner. On Leadership. The Free Press, New York, NY 1990.

Russell L. Ackoff and Sheldon Rovin. Redesigning Society. Stanford University Press, Palo Alto, CA, 2003.

## Biography

Sheldon Rovin is Emeritus Professor of Healthcare Systems at the Wharton School of Business and past Director of Healthcare Executive Management Programs at Wharton Executive Education and the Leonard Davis Institute of Health Economics. He is Emeritus Professor and past chair of the Dept. of Dental Care Systems, School of Dental Medicine. All of these positions are at the University of Pennsylvania. Among the programs he directed at the Wharton School are the Johnson & Johnson-Wharton Fellows Program in Management for Nurse Executives, the SmithKline Beecham Executive Management Program for Directors of Hospital Pharmacy, the Wyeth Ayerst-Association of Professors of Gynecology and Obstetrics Program in Management, and the Wyeth Ayerst-APM Executive Management program for Chairs of Medicine. Dr. Rovin's publications include over ninety journal articles and book chapters, and nine books. His latest three books are Medicine and Business: Bridging the Gap (2001) published by Aspen Publishers; Redesigning Society (2003) written with Russell Ackoff and published by Stanford University Press; and, Beating the System: Using Creativity to Outsmart Bureaucracies, written with Russell Ackoff, was published by Berrett-Koehler in July, 2005. An earlier book entitled Managing Hospitals: Lessons from the Johnson & Johnson-Wharton Fellows Program in Management for Nurse Executives (1991), won the Journal of Nursing Administration's 1992 Management Book of the Year Award. Dr. Rovin's principal consulting interests are the application of systems thinking, idealized design, interactive planning and creative thinking to the design, management and leadership of organizations. He has won several teaching awards. He was the Dean of the University of Washington, College of Dentistry from 1973 to 1977. Prior to this he was professor and chair of the Dept. of Oral Pathology and professor of General Pathology at the University of Kentucky Colleges of Dentistry and Medicine, respectively. Dr. Rovin is a diplomat of the American Board of Oral Pathology and holds DDS and MS degrees from the University of Michigan.