

4workingmagic

Performance to the Power of N

- Achieving New Levels of Organisational Potential and Performance -

This 5 page article is intended for those who are disappointed with current levels of performance; those who are doing well & yet know that much more could be released; and those who are under pressure to achieve more with and through their organisations. It starts with a premise, that is, that current performance, whatever its nature, is a reflection of evolving patterns. Such patterns may be quite complex and involve a set of interacting variables operating at different organisational levels - the individual, the interpersonal, the organisational, and the business/environment level. It builds upon a logic; that in order to substantially change existing performance levels it is necessary to change the patterns which give rise to these levels. Such changes may be described as pattern interrupts. They may have their origin in external necessity and/or internal aspiration. It extends an invitation: To discover how to release and grow the potential of an organisation - the power of N!

Managing Change By Changing Managers?

To change performance, at least the performances of companies, it is often thought best to change the managers of the enterprise! A new man at the top, a new management team, in short, some 'new' management personnel is often alluded to.

Often, our personal experience seems to fit with this way of thinking. We may be able to cite many occasions when a 'new man at the top' has resulted in many changes in practices and performance. And yet, when we inquire into our experience, we may notice times when there have been many changes in management personnel without much, if any, change in performance. We may also begin to notice examples of dramatic changes in performance without any exchange of management players.



Is there a case, then, for a change *in* players without a change *of* players?

Stuck With Success?

Many of us, though cognisant of a changing world, may be stuck with our 'winning formulas'. Formulas for success which have been forged in the past. We have an intimate knowledge of these formulas. They frequently operate without our conscious awareness, they shape our actions, they have been tried, tested, and well-proven. You can see them at work in the operating practices of companies, and in the context of our own interpersonal relationships.

We continue to do the best we know how, given these winning formulas. There is, however, a problem. For there is a tendency for *our* winning formula to be *the* winning formula, and for it to remain constant despite changing contexts. Contexts that require companies to be not only quick on their feet, but also alert in their mind. To be able to create a future as well as adapt to events.

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Yet we continue to apply the '**Rule of Repeated Action**': "*When in doubt, do what you did yesterday. If it isn't working, do it twice as hard, twice as fast and twice as carefully*". We apply this even when we know the definition of insanity: "*Doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result!*"

So, yesterday's triumph, repeated over and over becomes tomorrow's excess. Even though we intellectually grasp that there can be no one 'winning formula', that is, there can be no static solution in a dynamic world.

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If we are stuck with **our** success, stuck with old formulas, then we, ourselves, may be a major impediment to change. Not only that, but our past experience, and our sense of being right, may make us impervious to the changes going on around us.

The parable of the frog may apply: Place a frog in a pail of hot water and he'll jump out. However, place that same frog in a pail of cold water and he'll happily swim around. Slowly heat that water and he will keep on swimming until he expires from too much heat. Poor frog! The trouble is that his internal apparatus is wired up to detect sudden changes in his environment. Slow or gradual changes go unnoticed.

Pattern Interrupts: Change Though Crisis?

Are we like the frog? Does it take a sudden change, a shock or crisis, to change our winning formulas and move us to action?

There is a prevailing theory of change in the Western mind: For significant change to occur it needs to be precipitated by crisis. Again, experience appears to validate this theory. It seems to me that this theory is akin to the pail of boiling water. It is necessary to first shock people through crisis, before they will perceive the need for some change and action. The trouble is that I know of some companies, and, I suspect, some people, do not recover from the crisis. They get boiled!

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Now some might say that is the risk you take, and that not much will happen without taking risks. Maybe there is something in that. But first, let's inquire into the theory, a theory that postulates that shock or crisis is necessary for change. The outcomes are that people either change or suffer shock without any consequential change. But even where they do change, any change has been grounded upon one's ability to **react**. We become schooled in our reactive capacities, and skilled perhaps in our adaptation to crises, not, though, in our ability to act, create and generate without crisis.

We Know It So Well: The Prevailing Condition

Many organisations and people have settled into a routine, an established pattern of relationships, habits, and practices, including ways of seeing and thinking, that make available a certain level of performance, and no more. Though such patterns may have the benefit of relatively high predictability and control, difficulties arise when these established patterns are insufficient to respond to changed circumstances and challenges.

There may be recognition that the organisation is not achieving its full potential; that *"more is wanted from less"*; that *"things have to change"*; that *"business-as-usual"* is no longer enough. There may even be a unity of agreement on what's needed, and yet little difference in practice is seen. People still deal with each other in ways that ensure a drift back to what was. It is as though we are stuck, stuck in ways of thinking, in patterns of relationship, and rules of behaviour, that are somehow limiting.

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Possibility, Paradigms and Performance

There is a growing awareness that change which fails to tackle the way of thinking - the shared mindset or paradigm - in an organisation is likely to be superficial and, at best, generate only a very limited success.

Among other things, what limits the capacity to change is the thinking and habits that people bring to the situation. By 'thinking' I refer not only to the thoughts people have, but also to the structure of thinking, or the way we think. This underlying pattern of thinking, this 'shared set of assumptions' is called a paradigm.

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Paradigms help to shape our perception and understanding of the world. In doing so, they provide a framework for action. This appears to be no more enlightening than to suggest that our actions are influenced by what we see and think. Yet it goes further. For what we ourselves see, what is perceived and interpreted from the multitude of events around us, is shaped by our paradigms. Our paradigms are like a lens through

which we interpret the world. Change the lens and a 'new world' occurs, a world with a new set of options and possibilities. This 'lens' acts as a filter and has the effect of shaping our world - the world we see and relate to. In turn that 'world' may be expanded or limited by changing the lens through which we interpret or engage with the world. Thus our possibilities may be limited by our paradigms.

*"The real act of discovery consists not in finding new lands but in seeing with new eyes."
Marcel Proust*

Paradigm Shifts and Culture Change

Where paradigms limit possibility it follows that processes that help us to become aware of our paradigms, together with processes that help to change our paradigms - to create paradigm shifts - can help to open up possibility, indeed, to create possibility where there may have been none.

In the context of organisations many paradigms are shared - they show up as 'how it is here', in the culture of the organisation. Joel Barker, futurist and author, has described organisations as being a "forest of paradigms". Such 'forests' provide stable and complex patterns of thinking about the business, its operation, how 'business' is done, what's expected, what's possible and not possible here, and so on.

To impact the possibility of an enterprise beyond what is accessible within the existing paradigm requires a paradigm shift. For this to occur requires some form of interruption to the established paradigms, a loosening in the rigidity of prevailing patterns and habits, and the development of new thinking. In so far as 'culture' may be defined as the "*pattern of shared attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and expectations which shape the way people act and interact in an organisation, and underpin the way things get done*", then a significant paradigm shift suggests some form of culture change.

This gets at much more than dabbling in technique. As Pascale says: "*The ultimate, and largely ignored task of management is one of creating and breaking paradigms ... the trouble is that 99% of managerial attention today is devoted to the techniques that squeeze more out of the existing paradigm - and its killing us.*"

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Cause In The Matter

We often place cause for any limited performance to external sources. In so ascribing cause, we empower external agents - whether events or people - over our own capacity. There is a significant payoff from this. For, when we are not cause, we can be neither blamed, nor is there much for us to do. By ascribing cause to external agents it is as though we exclude ourselves from any possibility to impact upon the situation.

There is a powerful paradigm shift when we stop thinking from the 'outside-in' and think instead from the 'inside-out'. When we put ourselves as part of the pattern which gave rise to the performance result, then we, at the same time, can make ourselves cause in the matter of making a difference.

The Essential Difference: Putting 'I' in the Picture

Much of our speaking, and thus thinking, is like a commentary upon events. It is as though we are observers upon our worlds. We are generally adept at describing, explaining, and evaluating what has happened, at being observers upon a scene, rather than actors or agents in action.

Conversational exchanges which 'put the world to rights' are an exercise in consensual superiority and make little or no difference in terms of action. When we dare to put ourselves in the frame, when we put our 'I' in the picture, when we speak for ourselves in a context of action, then our orientation changes from that of observer to actor.

Caught in a Web?

The difficulty with established patterns is the habit that arises. Breaking free from habits isn't easy. We are often blind. Yet merely trying harder within established patterns will not necessarily lead to a different result. We may need to step back in order to leap forward, to unlearn, before we practice something different.

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People may be busy, enormously busy, for long periods of time, for what seems like ages, without creating the results they want. Busy-ness, then, does not equate to effectiveness. It may even suggest that what we start with, our starting place, is itself limiting - *"We can't get there from here!"*

Yet there is often difficulty in leaving behind what is familiar for that which is unknown.

The Power of N: Creating Context

How do we help people put their 'I' in the picture, particularly when significant personal change may be involved?

Much is achieved through the communicative power of a context for action. The challenge that is communicated creates the opening and space for potential contribution. For example, consider the different 'invitations' extended by the following:

"What's wrong, and who will fix it?"
"What's possible, and who's committed?"

The neat thing is that people tend to play a great game when there is a great game to play.

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Which Way Forward? Beyond Formulas, Recipes, and Acronyms

In an urgent world the temptation to look for quick answers, recipes, and formulas is high. Business people are bombarded with new approaches, tools, and disciplines, or at least new labels!

Which, of this huge array of 'help' works best? And there's the difficulty. For workability is a function not just of the tool in its design and purpose, but also of the user and the context of application. Even the best of carpenters cannot use a saw to join pieces of wood! In addition, *"Which works best?"* has a tendency to throw us into seeking an answer as though the world is static

Which way forward then? Perhaps the best framework to consider is less that of *"problem to be solved"* or even *"program to be implemented"* but, rather, *"journey to be taken"*. A journey for which different items of kit - tools, philosophies, approaches, etc. - will be required at different times. If so, then the best advice is to select those tools that best reflect the nature and stage of the journey you are on.

The Power of N: Releasing Creativity and Self-Generated Performance

Though perhaps well-schooled in adaptive capacity - in our ability to react and cope with changes in the external environment - a wholly different dimension of performance is opened when we release and build upon our latent creative capacity. The ability to create a world - to make something happen that would not otherwise happen, to invent, to innovate, to generate, is a wholly different dynamic. A dynamic which puts people at the source of action. Action then taken is less as agent - acting on behalf of another or according to a.n. other's script - and more as author. *"We choose to"* replaces *"We have to"*. Power of choice is enlivened and a self-generated dynamic set in motion.

"So what?" you may ask. Well, can you imagine 'managing' a team in the Olympic games, a team who does not *choose* to perform but *has* to perform? Mere pawns to someone else's will? Excellence in performance suggests the power of choice is at work. For performance to be sustained, to be carried over the hurdles of setbacks and crises, has always required the power of the internal dynamic, whether that be called a clear sense of shared purpose, the power of vision, or personal and collective aspiration.

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Performance and Patterns

Performance reflects patterns. These patterns create a confluence. The potential to perform, and actual results, reflect the confluence - the 'coming together' - that permits such performance. Breakthroughs (step

changes) in performance, that is, breakthroughs in external worlds, have their origin in breakthroughs in internal worlds.

To achieve new performance levels suggest a new confluence - a new coming together - that raises and releases potential and overcomes the limitations of existing patterns. Thus breakthroughs in performance often necessitate breakdowns of existing patterns. Such 'breakdowns' may arise from external source - the crises referred to earlier - and/or they may be self-generated by, for example, thinking the unthinkable and entertaining possibilities that explode the confines of such patterns.

Are we to adopt the reactive or the creative stance? And how do each of these play in the context of the inexorable pressure to increase value and reduce costs?

On the one hand, we may find that we are simply squeezed much harder to achieve the same or similar result. On the other, when we release the creative and generative powers of people and technologies, we may discover that less can mean more, much more - the power of *N!*

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