



See the Unseen, Say the Unspeakable: The BigPicture Story

Everyone has had the experience of working in a team or department where things just didn't seem to work as well as they should. When asked about these situations, people describe them in detail: "There was very little communication and people didn't follow through," "Our manager didn't listen, and we ran into trouble we could have avoided," "Other groups didn't coordinate well with our group," "We were always playing catch-up," "We couldn't get everyone to align around a common vision."

These complaints are in sharp contrast to remembrances of teams or organizations that consistently performed well: "We all worked hard together and knew what was expected, we were reliable," "I felt heard and could see the contribution my ideas made to the team," "We were exciting; everyone was committed to the same outcomes and we proactively helped each other," "We consistently delivered on time and budget."

One of the fundamental differences between dysfunctional teams and high performance teams is the ability of a group to self-reflect and, over time, make course corrections. There is no such thing as a perfect team or a consistently high-performing team. Even high-performing teams need to change and adapt in order to respond to workplace demands that change rapidly, creating the need for new solutions and relationships. Teams, departments, and divisions must be able to consistently look at *what* they are doing and *how* they are doing it. They must make continuous incremental—and sometimes complete—changes in structure, relationships, and processes. How the group reflects together and reframes their thinking in the context of their changing environment is a critical skill, one that can enable them to adapt and to act flexibly.

In order to self-reflect and correct their course, people must be able to do two things: see themselves, others and the

situation in ways that they normally do not in their day-to-day work life; and reflect and talk honestly about what is happening that prevents them from accomplishing the results they want.

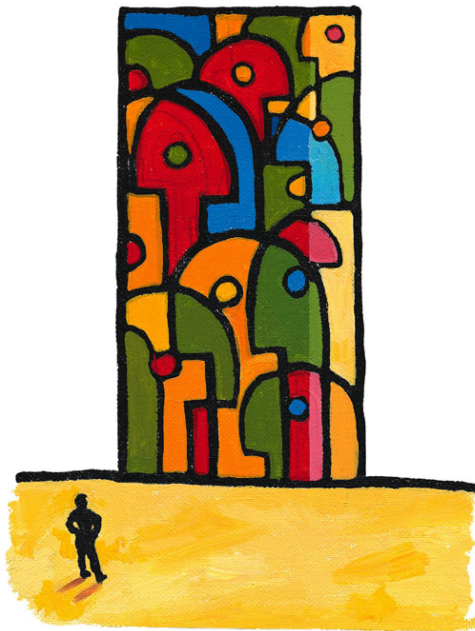
Seeing in New Ways

To see in new ways, using productive reflection, is work. We are so used to "the way things are" that we do not readily inquire *why* things are that way. Common biases and erroneous thinking impede the quality of our reflection and inquiry. We rely on our past experiences and, over time, give more weight to what worked in the past. Our experience base reinforces mental models about "how things work." Frequently, the rationale for keeping things the same is coupled with belief

that the company's current methods are the only way things could be done.

Everyone forms "mental models" about their work world that explain why things must be the ways they are, and why people behave the way they do. The challenge in improving teamwork is that these models are rarely discussed or held in common. Each person forms their own models, which may or may not be congruent with those held by fellow workers. The value of these models is that they allow people go about their work without needing to constantly relearn operating principles, thus increasing their efficiency. The downside is that people can get stuck in one perspective and lose the ability to see with fresh eyes.

Shaking up these mental models is no easy task; people tend to hold on to them and often resist examination. *Experiential learning* is one of the best ways to move people to examine the way they see things. Experiential learning methodology can be a powerful first step in allowing people to reflect and course-correct, to see what was previously unclear and to speak what most needs to be said, as the following case illustrates.



One of the fundamental differences between dysfunctional teams and high-performance teams is **THE ABILITY TO SELF-REFLECT WHILE IN ACTION.**

Organized Disorganization - a BigPicture Story

A group of managers from a telecommunications equipment manufacturer attends a management course for newly promoted directors and VPs. In this course they learn about team development theory, effective communication, decision theory, and feedback skills. For two days, they learn and practice these skills. On the third day, they participate in an organizational simulation called BigPicture™.

In the BigPicture™ simulation, participants form an organization much like their own. There are senior executives, middle managers or team leaders and work teams arranged in different regions; the organization has resource dilemmas, time constraints, budgetary problems, demanding customers and constrained communication.

The organization has a job to do: Each work team must design, color, and assemble a mural to customer specifications. Unbeknownst to them, each team has only part of the puzzle. Team leaders organize their teams to coordinate work orders and determine the requirements of the customers. Senior managers are busy managing the wider organization's communication and vision and are distracted by competing demands. Without clear communication and teamwork, it is impossible to succeed.

As the group works on the puzzle, things become confused quickly. It appears that there is not enough time to do it right, and pressures increase; there are not enough resources to do everything, customer requirements shift, and tension rises. People realize they are facing failure. The learnings from previous days begin to slip away and old management behaviors come to the fore.

Midway, the simulation takes a debrief timeout and people are asked to reflect on their experience. The group recognizes that the dilemmas they face in the simulation mirror their problems at work, and identify the ways they are thinking and feeling about each other as similar to how they feel at work.

Work teams blame middle managers for the lack of resources and attention. Middle managers feel they're just a conduit for transferring information, caught between senior managers and work teams. Senior managers feel out of touch with the organization and helpless to align the group around a common vision.

People recognize that the behaviors emerging under the stress of the simulation are the same ones they habitually use on the job, though they are out of their normal work environment and playing different roles than their normal work functions. At this moment they realize that the cause is not the organization, nor is it the type of work they do; they are left to reflect on themselves. It becomes dramatically clear that they will not get the results they want using their current operating style; therefore, the change must come from each person.

The senior managers, team leaders and work teams begin to see that the ways in which they view their roles and others' limits how effectively they act. Using their current mental models, they are unable to generate effective options to fit the situation. Work team members gain a greater appreciation for the complexity of the task and the demands on their managers. Middle managers see that they need to collaborate horizontally

with other teams rather than focusing solely on channeling information to their team and senior execs. Senior managers see the need to be proactive about how communication happens, and the efficacy of trusting team leaders to propose solutions.

The group begins to grapple with questions: *How do we want our "organization" to work? How will we need to view each other so that we empathize with each other's situation? and How does this change how we behave?* Unspoken issues can be looked at, discussed, and understood by the group. They think of new ways to conceptualize their task and begin to

negotiate with each other on information, communication, and priorities. The task moves along and is accomplished

successfully in the end. In the concluding debrief session, people enthusiastically relate learnings about how effective leadership turned the difficult situation around.

The Power of Experiential Learning

Experiential learning effectively reinforces the learnings of traditional classroom methods. In the BigPicture™ case above, participants who think they have mastered certain management skills find that employing them in a situation with dynamics similar to their own is more difficult than expected, and that more planning, reflection and thoughtfulness is required than anticipated. They also understand, perhaps for the first time, just how much their mental models adversely affect their ability to be good managers.

Participants in experiential simulations learn to reconsider how they see themselves, others, and their situation; they uncover limiting beliefs and mental models that were previously unseen. In exploring these frames, they can readily discover how to become more effective in their organization. Personal significance and emotional resonance allow deep absorption of this learning and increase openness to new behaviors. The likelihood of applying newly learned behaviors is increased with the awareness of how these behaviors feel in a lived experience.

Experiential learning is quick, self-paced, and persistent. Feedback is instantaneous; people often have significant personal experiences in which they recognize how their behavior impacts others. Experiential learning leads to self-awareness and precipitates real and long-lasting change.



Resources

Diana McLain Smith, *Divide or Conquer: How Great Teams Turn Conflict Into Strength*, Penguin, 2008.

James G Marsh, "Exploration and exploitation in organizational learning," *Organization Science*, Vol 2, Number 1, 1991.

John H. Holland, Keith Holyoak, Richard Nisbett, Paul Thagard, *Induction: Processes of Inference, Learning, and Discovery*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986.

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About Catalyst Consulting

Catalyst Consulting Team focuses on improving the quality of human interaction by providing tools and processes that help an organization achieve their goals. Our passion is to discover, develop and deliver the most useful processes, models and leadership thinking tools available today. Our core team of experienced practitioners draw from a wide range of experience, including work with companies such as Autodesk, Cisco, NetApp and Oracle.

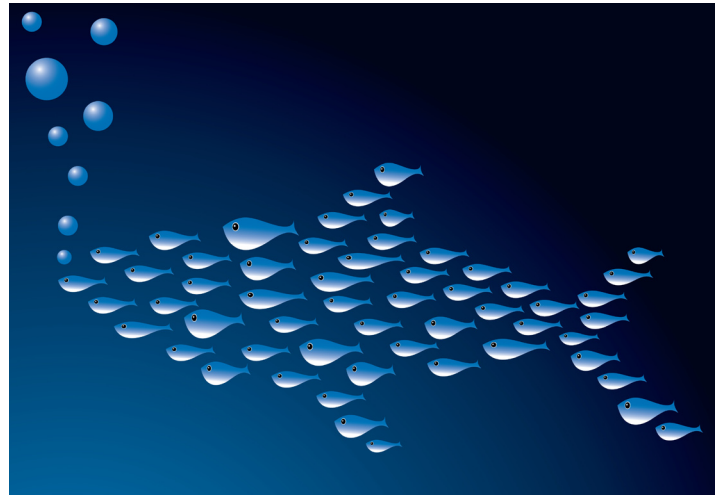
The ability to achieve aggressive goals requires more than the smartest technology or strategy—it demands individual involvement, internal commitment and shared accountability. We coach leaders and teams to build shared responsibility, cross-functional collaboration and open, productive dialogue on crucial issues. Our work enables teams to achieve goals, manage company dilemmas, make informed decisions and cultivate collaborative relationships. Through improving the quality of a team's interaction, teams can build on strengths and dare to act with courage.

Catalyst's Consulting Services provide a unique blend of strategic planning tools and processes for reaching high levels of teamwork. We focus on behaviors, matching intentions to outcomes. We coach leadership teams to form strong working relationships to weather the demands of stressful times. Our practice encourages making tough calls and generating the support for effective execution. Teams coached by Catalyst learn to be agile by openly testing their strategic ideas in a forum of inquiry.

Consultations may include:

- assessing and improving on team processes and management practices
- conducting corporate-wide strategic meetings
- coaching executives on improving communication, listening and presentation skills
- training on hiring to performance management

During training programs, people need intelligent information ... and they need practice to apply it. Our leadership and team development programs engage the learner intellectually, emotionally and physically. Training blends lecture, discussion sessions, experiential design, role plays and 360° feedback to create a rich learning environment.



Catalyst Consulting Team delivers solutions that contribute individual and organizational success. Benefits for your team and company:

- Increase your ability to adapt to a change and adopt new business models and mindsets
- Improve on and scale up your leadership talent; foster the highest potential in teams and individuals
- Accelerate resolution of internal contention and increase momentum toward solutions and action
- Create long-term relationships with critical players to support strategic direction

Clients appreciate our ability to create highly satisfying and productive partnerships and to develop solutions for successful change. We make complex notions of human and organizational processes understandable—and doable. Clients value our integrity, openness and belief in learning through action and reflection.