ARL™ NEWS

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AMBIGUITY

The Number #1 Threat to Organizational Effectiveness

By Ernie Turner

As we begin this virtual conversation I invite you to take a moment and identify something that is ambiguous in your own organization right now – a relationship, an assignment, a policy, an agreement, a priority, a role, a responsibility, etc. Okay, that was easy. Now take another couple of minutes and ponder these questions:

- *Why did 'this' become ambiguous?*
- *How can I eliminate or limit this kind of ambiguity in the future?*

Several stories came to my mind when I made this reflection. Here are the headlines.

One company I know has been **trying to become a high performing sustainable organization** for some time now. However, frustration has bubbled up throughout the company because the senior leaders have yet to define what it will look like when they are working as a high performing sustainable organization and as a consequence they are pursuing different priorities and agendas. **They lack a clear definition, alignment and common strategy.**

In another company, a senior manager was very **unhappy with the performance of one of her direct report**s but because of their close relationship she was unable to give direct feedback. Instead of sitting down and providing straight performance feedback she re-organized her department so that this particular direct report was now reporting to someone else. Her direct report was frustrated as well because he had never been told what was expected of him in the former organization. **Clear contracting and direct feedback were both missing.**

Adam's team is high performing. One of the things that Adam does well is find simple ways for everyone on his team to acknowledge and appreciate publicly the contributions that everyone

makes. Adam has discovered **what is appreciated gets repeated** not only by the individual who first demonstrated a helpful behavior but by others on the team; as a consequence he doesn't have to spend much time at all on improvements.

What can we learn from these stories as well as the ones you identified?

We can better appreciate and understand how these ambiguous situations, relationships, policies, etc. evolved. **Fuzzy definitions, poor contracts, little feedback and sporadic support** are usually at the root of most problems. If we don't first define what we expect then we can't assume we're all going to be aligned. And if we're not aligned the chances are we won't have a common strategy with clear assignments and the necessary supports in place to sustain high performance.

So if we're so bright why do ineffective patterns of behavior occur so frequently? Often we assume that the other person knows what we mean so we don't take the time to be explicit. It's always better to err on the side of being too explicit.

Another reason for these recurring patterns is the **fear of having difficult conversations**. But why are we afraid? Two reasons stand out: 1) we don't want to hurt someone's feelings because we want to be liked and 2) we don't know <u>how</u> to have difficult conversations so we avoid them. And because we avoid them we get caught up in our own mental and emotional traps. We first need help in understanding what makes these conversations difficult then we need some coaching in having them.

We also equate being 'nice' with being supportive. However, it is usually just the opposite. Providing honest feedback in a caring manner is much more productive and supportive than ignoring or whitewashing our real thoughts and feelings.

Over the last couple of months while working with different clients I've identified ***the 10 'INES'*** for limiting or eliminating ambiguity and improving organizational effectiveness.

The 10 'INES' for Improving Organizational Effectiveness

- **Define:** Before we go any further let's clearly define what it is we mean.

- **Align:** Once we have a common and shared definition let's agree that this is what we want. Reaching agreement is key to success. Having a shared purpose, understanding it and agreeing to it are vital.

- **Design:** Now that we're aligned let's develop a strategy and plan to address the problem, challenge or opportunity.

- **Assign:** Once we're in agreement on our design for change, we need to delegate clearly who will do what by when and with what resources and authority.

- **Refine:** We need to periodically review what we said we would do and ask ourselves, 'How are we doing?' 'What should we repeat?' 'What should we avoid in the future?' 'What are we learning?'

- **Shine**: Many corporate cultures have an unspoken taboo or norm around sharing successes because it can be perceived as 'tooting one's own horn'. As a consequence good news is seldom shared and the kinds of conversations that ensue are instead often filled with gossip and complaints.

- **Fine:** Difficult conversations, constructive feedback, discipline and accountability are just as important motivators as appreciative feedback. Both are vital.

- **Dine:** Without nourishment we can easily get burned out. This nourishment comes via coaching and development opportunities.

- **Wine:** We also need to be appreciated. A little appreciation and recognition can make a big difference. Celebrating big and little successes can come in many different forms both informally and formally along the journey.

- **Don't whine:** High performing organizations don't whine. They have an explicit norm stating that everyone has 100% responsibility for the success of their organization. This means that if someone has a complaint s/he should turn it into a request, offer or recommendation that will address the problem. Don't complain about others; engage them.

Getting rid of and limiting ambiguity is the work of everyone.

If each of us takes responsibility for eliminating and limiting ambiguity in our own sphere of influence, it won't be long before our organizations are much more effective and enjoyable places to work and be.

Here's a parting question to ponder – "**Where will I begin?**"

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