

Ignore the invisible player at your cost

We live in systems all the time – family, school, work, community, nation and so on. Yet, we rarely take any notice of how they impact us. In this issue we're going to widen our perspective to consider the organisation system. This is our 'fish' for Issue 3.

We're on a mission to get the fish on the table for leaders – diagnosing the organisation's hidden costs – using our 3D-OE Diagnostic Framework™ – so they stop festering and the organisation becomes a place where people thrive and deliver more than anyone thought possible.

To do this, it's essential that we take full account of the organisation system – because it shows up as an invisible player in the mix. We might try to ignore it – as too messy, ambiguous, uncertain and sometimes scary – yet the system remains the most powerful set of forces that we are facing when we try to effect change. If you let it – the system will stop you in your tracks.

If you're willing and able to identify and address your rotten fish to make your organisation more effective, you need to be armed with a good understanding of how your organisation system is also holding the status quo in place. It may end up being your greatest adversary as you bravely dive beneath the organisational waters.

THE FISH

You probably don't have time for a heavy download of complex theory. Here's the shortcut to understanding the impact the invisible player has on organisation effectiveness.

Picture an old pier. The wooden uprights are weathered, sun-bleached, stuck fast in the seabed. Sea birds sit on them – resting, preening, getting ready for flight. If you change or remove the uprights, then the birds have to change their behaviour. Leave the uprights exactly as they are, and the birds will continue to behave in the way they have always done.

This vignette illustrates the dynamic through which systems get established and persist over time. For organisations, the uprights are the Constructs, for example organisation structures, policies, technology, physical locations. The birds

represent Behaviours – how people actually show up, what they do, say and how they conduct themselves – shaped, guided and limited by the Constructs. This interaction between Constructs and Behaviours is the Interplay – the ongoing dance that holds them both in place and ultimately generates the unique paradigms of any organisation – its culture.

The strength of this interaction and the influence of the Interplays is the crux of what we mean by organisation effectiveness – when leaders are willing and able to optimize their organisation's Constructs and influence the Behaviours of their people to shift the Interplays and so generate the performance required to deliver their unique strategic goals.

If you think about the profusion of Interplays that result from the tangle of interactions between every Construct and every Behaviour of everyone in your organisation, it becomes very clear why organisations are so hard to change.

Organisation systems behave like living organisms: they respond and adapt to their environment, and work to maintain their own equilibrium – not through conscious will, but functionally – they behave *as if* they are seeking to survive. This is why deeply embedded paradigms (the Constructs, Behaviours and Interplays that once kept the organisation 'alive') seem to get defended long after they've stopped being useful.

This underlying dynamic shows up as everyday norms and unwritten habits – what people say and withhold; what they notice or overlook; it even shows up in what people wear. Nobody consciously decides all this; the system seeps in the longer someone stays. You only have to watch a new hire: within weeks they stop seeing things from fresh perspectives and start conforming to "how we do things here" – becoming one more person unconsciously preserving the status quo.

Treating the system as if it has agency isn't so strange – we do it all the time when we talk about "culture". We instinctively recognise there are real, invisible forces at play that are difficult to pin down. Have you ever heard someone comment, 'there were cultural issues' to explain what went wrong with a project?

The key takeaway is that understanding and accounting for your organisation system dynamics, in terms of Constructs, Behaviours and Interplays, is a significant factor to unlock organisation effectiveness.

THE STORY

Let's say there was an ambulance service that was facing significant cost issues resulting from the high turnover of paramedics. This turnover had a major impact on their ability to maintain operational staffing levels within the required clinical standards, resulting in reliance on expensive agency staff, increased over-time, as well as the associated costs of repeated recruitment.

An organisation diagnostic revealed that the main reason newly qualified paramedics were leaving was because of inadequate, inconsistent decisions, and micro-management by their superior officers. This was also resulting in hidden costs including frustration and friction between paramedics and management.

The diagnostic further revealed that in the past there had been a challenging period when a shortage of managers had a detrimental impact on the service. It was decided at the time to move some experienced paramedics, who understood the role and the environment, into leadership positions.

Fast forward a few years, and this practice had become embedded as a default 'right of passage' rather than promotion being based on required capabilities for what was now a very different and complex management role. This practice, which had become an accepted process (Construct), continued to shape promotion decisions (Behaviours). As a result, the capability of managers varied significantly. This systemic pattern (Interplay) persisted even though it was detrimental to the overall service. Many of the managers were struggling to deliver a complex public service against the backdrop of rising costs. The paramedics were working within a highly stressful and ineffective environment. There was also the possibility of patients being put at risk.

This story illustrates how a good decision devolved into an embedded Construct over time, generated Behaviours and an organisational paradigm (Interplay) that resulted in tangible, unintended consequences and outcomes. This is the invisible player – the system – at work.

& THE TIPS...

So, on 'Monday morning', here are four things worth trying:

- **Trace one 'right of passage':** pick a pathway in your organisation that's become 'just how it's done' – a promotion route, an approval chain, an onboarding ritual. Find out when it started. If the answer is a one-off fix from a few years back rather than a deliberate design choice, you've found a Construct worth re-examining – it may not be appropriate any more.

- **Separate capability from tenure:** look at your last five promotions into a role that's grown more complex over time. Were people promoted for who they'd always been, or for what the role actually needs now?
- **Debrief a recent joiner:** ask someone who started in the last few months what surprised them in week one that doesn't anymore. Their fading outside view is a live read on what your system is currently normalising – before they stop noticing it altogether.
- **Push past 'it's cultural':** next time someone uses that phrase to explain a problem, ask what Construct – policy, process, structure – is actually holding the Behaviours in place. 'Culture' is usually what stops the review in its tracks.

If something here resonated, do make sure you've signed for Fish & Tips at www.theeffectivenessedge.com. You'll get every future issue direct to your inbox, plus **exclusive access** to The Blind Spot Mirror – a short, powerful OE tool to help you surface your own fish.

Until the next catch,

Vanessa and Andrea