Benefits of Open Systems View of Organizations

Today, consultants and clients are learning to more clearly recognize the various parts and processes of an organization, and, in particular, their inter-relationships and alignment, for example, the coordination between the Board and the Chief Executive Officer, or integration between the Strategic Plan and other plans. Understanding of inter-relationships and alignment is not only about parts and processes within the system, but also to the system and its environment – an "open systems" approach.

Consultants and clients now focus much more attention on the feedback among the various major parts and processes in the organization and between the organization and its environment. Consultants examine problems, not just by focusing on what appears to be separate parts, but on the larger patterns of interactions within the parts. They focus on structures that provoke behaviors that determine events – rather than reacting to events as was done in the past. They maintain perspective on performance by focusing on the outcomes that the organization wants to achieve, particularly in its external environment.

The following paragraphs itemize some of the major benefits when looking at your clients' organizations from an open systems perspective.

More Effective Problem Solving

Without clear understanding of the "big picture" of an organization, consultants and leaders tend to focus only on the behaviors and events associated with problems in the workplace, rather than on the systems and structures that caused the problems to occur in the first place. To effectively solve problems in any type of organization, it is critical to be able to identify the real causes of the problems and how to address those causes. A systems view provides clear understanding of the "big picture."

More Effective Leadership

The most important responsibilities of a leader are to set direction and to influence others to follow that direction. It is difficult to establish direction for an organization and to keep that organization on its course if you do not understand how the organization works in the first place. Without a clear understanding of the overall nature and needs of an organization, the leader can get lost in the day-to-day activities, never really giving attention to the more important activities, such as planning the organization's overall direction and organizing their resources. As a result, the leader "cannot see the forest for the trees." The leader ends up working harder, rather than smarter. A systems view helps the leader to really understand the overall structures and dynamics of the organization and what must be done to guide the organization towards it strategic vision and goals.

More Effective Communication

One of the most important ingredients for the success of any system is ongoing feedback, or communication, among all the parts of the organization. Some of the first symptoms that an organization or consulting project is in trouble are sporadic and insufficient communications. In these situations, people often struggle to see beyond their own roles in the organization or project. Consequently, people are much less effective than they could be otherwise. Without a clear understanding of the parts of an organization or project and how they relate to each other, it is difficult to know what to communicate and to whom.

More Effective Planning

The planning process is basically working one's way backwards through the system of an organization or project. It includes identifying desired results (goals and outcomes), what measures or outputs (tangible results) will indicate that those results have been achieved, what processes will produce those outputs, and what inputs are required to conduct those processes in the system. A systems view often makes the planning process much more clear and orderly to planners.

More Effective Design of Projects, Products and Services

An advantage for designers who have a systems view is that they have stronger knowledge of the primary parts of their project, product or service and how they should be aligned to more effectively reach desired goals. A systems view also promotes focus on achieving overall results, so the day-to-day details of managing the project, product or service do not become the most important activities for people to address – so people do not become focused in matters that are urgent, rather than important.

More Effective Organizational Results

The most successful projects and organizations often use a variety of methods to achieve results. In projects, methods can include, for example, coaching, facilitating, training or provision of resources. In organizations, methods can include strategic planning, business planning, management and leadership development, team building, supervisory development, organizational and employee performance management, and principles of organizational change. Any consultant or leader would be hard-pressed to employ these various methods in an effective fashion without a good understanding of the overall systems of their project or organization. Consequently, having a systems view is critical to accomplishing successful results.

Avoid Founder's Syndrome

Founder's Syndrome occurs when an organization operates primarily according to the personality of one of the members of the organization (usually the founder), rather than according to the mission (purpose) of the organization. When first starting their organizations, founders often have to do whatever it takes to get the organizations off the ground, including making seat-of-the-pants decisions to deal with frequent crises that suddenly arise in the workplace. As a result, founders often struggle to see the larger picture and are unable to suitably plan to make more proactive decisions. Consequently, the organization gets stalled in a highly reactive mode characterized by lack of funds and having to deal with one major crisis after another. The best "cure" for this syndrome is developing broader understanding of the structures and processes of an organization, with an appreciation for the importance of planning.