



Performance Matters

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Newsletter

Understanding Limits

There are natural constraints in Nature – how tall a tree will grow, whether a tiny seedling will grow into a flower. Humans are no different but we think that we are, based on the belief that we can be everything we want and the sky is the limit to our capability. But is that really true? Can you or I achieve anything we want in life? To really answer that question, we need to understand limits. All development in nature arises out of the interchange between growth and limiting processes. Organisms grow for awhile and then stop growing, working groups get better for awhile, but stop getting better. Individuals improve themselves for awhile and then plateau. Many sudden but well-intentioned efforts for improvement bump up against limits for growth.

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Robin has facilitated presentations with groups of 150 or more, and has been a guest speaker for several well-known organizations, including the New York State Conference of Mayors, The Governor's Office of Employee Relations, and the New York State Society of Medical Assistants Annual Convention.

She co-authored the book *Maximize Your Mind; Peak Your Potential* available on her web site.

Her article "Ethics in Sales" was published in the HRDQ Press.

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Understand and Appreciate Constraints

Leaders should focus on understanding the limiting processes that could slow or detain change. When planting a garden, we must understand the constrictions that can limit growth and attend to those constraints. Imagine planting a garden and ignoring things like soil, light, water etc. To have flowers come up would be more a matter of chance than anything else. But in today's world we want and need better odds than just pure luck. So how does one use an understanding of limits to an advantage?

“All motion is cyclic. It circulates to the limits of its possibilities and then returns to its starting point.”

■ *Robert Collier*

Where appreciation is alive and generations are re-connected through inquiry, hope grows.

■ *David Cooperrider*

“Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

■ *James Arthur Baldwin*

Force is Never the Answer

Every organization and individual has natural limits they run up against at different times. An organization has a change initiative that works for a period and then seems to lose its thunder. An individual is trying to change an aspect of his or her behavior and for a period of time might do really well and then seem to start falling back into the old habits. The natural reaction is to push harder: If sales are flattening we need to push harder; if a change initiative is stalling we need to push it through. Yet force is never the answer because we are working against another force either internal or external that is ultimately more powerful by the very fact that we are not aware of it. What creates the breakthrough is knowledge and understanding of the limiting force. When we plant a garden we know that there are natural limits that we need to work with so we carefully choose which plants to use in different locations, depending on the amount of light, soil etc. Yet in life and business, we tend not to think about the constrictions. We think more about where we want to go and what we have to achieve. Both are certainly important, but without looking at the natural internal and external restraints, we will run up against the failure of our initiatives to achieve all that we hoped.

Viewing Change as a Process of Nature

Understanding limits involves approaching a goal or a change process with a sense of curiosity and being aware of what is happening around us. If a colleague sets up a goal to change an unwanted behavior, the first step in this is always awareness of how the behavior shows up for us and an understanding of what triggers the actions that they want to change. All of this involves an acceptance and a natural inquiry about why one falls into old traps. With this inquiry, behavioral changes occur more naturally and without force. The more we try to force ourselves to be different or do things differently, the more we set ourselves up for failure. Change is ultimately a dance between awareness of the now and curiosity about the future and what else may be possible. As leaders, it is time to start thinking of change, less as something mechanical and more and more as a process of nature which can only occur through patience and understanding.

“In limits to growth situations leverage lies in the balancing loop – not the reinforcing loop. To change the behavior of the system you must identify and change the limiting factor.”

■ Peter Senge

Messages, Lessons, Problems and Crisis

When we think about understanding limits we also have to pay attention to the environment around us and what messages we may be getting but not giving our full attention. Ignored signals often turn into a crisis. These warning signs can come in the form of Messages, Lessons, Problems or Pains.

Message: Subtle clues from the environment can come in the form of nudges and intuitive hunches. If we are unaware, failed to act or do anything to change the course of events the message comes back in other forms.

Lessons: If we fail to respond we are given a lesson. At this point, the intensity of the issue and its impact is greater. These are the learning experiences and opportunities that we are presented with at different times. If we are unaware or over-look the opportunity, history repeats itself.

Problems: The ignored lesson will become a problem and once again the intensity is greater. We often tend to treat these events as singular issues and not look at causes that may have attributed to the situation. If the problem is ignored, the level of urgency intensifies to the point where it has to be handled and cannot be swept aside. It becomes a full blown crisis.

Crisis: The level of intensity is such that it can feel like a fire storm has hit. This can feel like being hit over the head with a sledge hammer to make sure that we got the message.

Force Field Analysis (Kurt Lewin)

The Force Field Analysis is a tool used to identify limits or as Lewin calls restraining forces. According to Kurt Lewin an issue is held in balance by the interaction of two opposing sets of forces - those seeking to promote change (*driving forces*) and those attempting to maintain the status quo (*restraining forces*). In order for any change to occur, the driving forces must exceed the restraining forces, thus shifting the equilibrium.

How to conduct a Force Field Analysis?

1. Describe the current situation
2. Describe the desired situation
3. List all the forces driving change toward the desired situation
5. List all the forces resisting change toward the desired situation
6. Analyze and understand all of the forces: are they valid? Can they be changed? Which are the critical ones?
7. Allocate a score to each of the forces using a numerical scale e.g. 1=extremely weak and 10=extremely strong
8. Chart the forces by listing (to strength scale) the driving forces on the left and restraining forces on the right.
9. Understand how the change can be affected by decreasing the strength of the restraining forces or by increasing the strength of driving forces.
10. Keep in mind that increasing the driving forces or decreasing the restraining forces may increase or decrease other forces or even create new ones.

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