

“How might this reflect how organizations really work?”

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Please tell us a little about yourself.

I’ve been working on organizational performance issues since 1978, after a short stint as a college professor and a doctorate in psychology from UNC, Chapel Hill. I’ve always had an interest in behavior and productivity and held two senior internal jobs before starting my company in 1984. These days, I develop and sell team building games and improvement tools on the Internet and do workshops and presentations.

Can you tell our readers about Square Wheels®?

These are illustrations about communications, motivation, teamwork, and innovation that people use to engage and involve others in organizational improvement efforts. The main cartoon is used to generate involvement and ideas. It shows a wooden wagon rolling on Square Wheels with a cargo of round ones. I’ll show it to a group of people and simply ask them, “How might this reflect how organizations really work?” and give them time to discuss their ideas in small groups.

ways of doing things might already exist in their wagons.

We use this to get people thinking about what they can improve, what changes can be implemented, how communications can be improved and what we can do to better share missions and visions and other things like that. It is really about facilitating group involvement. “All of us know more than any of us” and “Nobody ever washes a rental car.” The cartoons help engage and involve people in making improvements and some ownership decreases resistance and improves implementation. It’s pretty simple, really. Another issue in a lot of organizations is illustrated in a slightly different manner (see “Managing the Mud” image).

When asked about this image, people say they are in the glop of how an organization works, with this representing the political, bureaucratic, and mission/vision stuff that simply makes forward progress more difficult. For some organizations, it is mud, but for others, it might represent grinding paste

sion of how to motivate people, we will talk about supporting their improvement initiatives and *continuous* continuous improvement and feedback and those kinds of things. Then, I show this illustration (see “Trial and Error” image) and ask them to generate as many thoughts as they can about what is going on.

Invariably, the comments we then solicit going around the room about what is happening lean heavily toward the mistakes they made and the things they should have done and those kinds of things—what we call “constructive criticism.” There is little recognition that innovation takes trial and error (the name of the cartoon) and perspective and the motivation to keep trying until it works. Constructive criticism is viewed as punishment when people are trying new things and will halt any progress being made. Can you blame the people for running over the hill when their good efforts receive blame?

So, what I try to do with these cartoons and

“A desk is a dangerous place from which to view the world.”

Amazingly, we’ve collected hundreds of different ideas from people, since they see different things and focus on their own themes. It is kind of like an organizational Rorschach Test (inkblot) where people see what they see because they project their beliefs onto it. Some people see issues of poor communications or trust while others see problems and opportunities. Some only see hard work and no improvement. So, it makes it easy to bridge to asking them about the Square Wheels in their own organization—what things thump and bump along—and to consider what round wheels or better

or even cement. The key is to look for ways to get out of the ditch and up on the road. This naturally leads into my Mud Manager exercise, which simply asks people to think of those who are best managing this glop and what they are choosing to do differently. This kind of exercise, done as a tabletop discussion, is most effective in generating “considered alternatives”—different choices to better manage the roadblocks we all face every day.

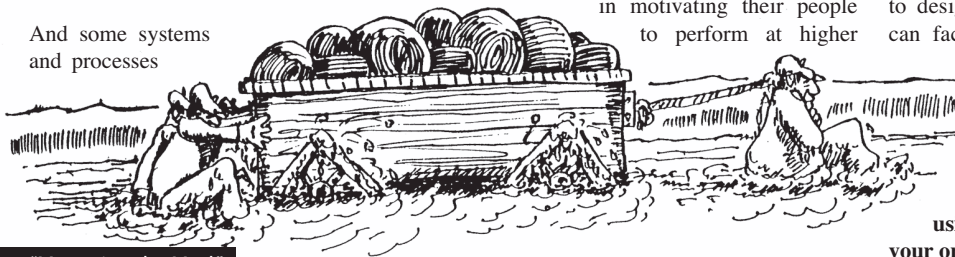
And here is another exercise I do with managers: simple and demonstrative! In a discus-

many others is use them as visual tools for verbal discussions about how people feel on issues of organizational improvement. “Nobody ever washes a rental car,” so we cannot expect them to support initiatives where they have little ownership or feel that “improvements” are being forced down on them. And the paradox is that most Wagon Pushers have ideas for change and innovation, if only those Wagon Pullers would take a moment to ask for and listen to them. That is the essence of Square Wheels and my approach to involving and engaging people for impacting profitability.

What are the benefits of performance management?

When you get people involved in making improvements, morale increases. You can see improvements in employee retention and thus improve in quality and performance while also seeing decreases in hiring and training costs. There is also the issue of “exemplary performer:” top performers, working in the same environment, get more done, better. Identifying these round wheel behaviors in the workplace can improve overall performance as an increasing amount of the average and below average individuals can choose to do things differently if they see what they are doing as “Square Wheels.”

And some systems and processes



“Managing the Mud.”

just do not work well. They need improvement, but the managers may be too busy “pulling the rope and looking ahead” to understand what might be done differently. I’ve consistently found that people doing the job routinely have great ideas for improvement; and improvements equal profitability in so many situations. Managers should be leading and facilitating these kinds of workplace improvements, supporting teams and teamwork to incent change.

How, if at all, has your business or the management industry been impacted by changes in the economy?

The economy could certainly be better, from my perspective, and the first thing that generally gets cut is the training budget. For the past 10 years though, I have focused on running a global business selling effective performance improvement tools to broaden my marketplace. While I used to do a lot of presentations and consulting, my focus for the past five years has been on selling my tools through the Internet.

We are continually developing foreign language versions of my team building exercises (Slovenian, Greek, Arabic, and Korean are current projects) in addition to others we already have. I also work with consultants in places like China and Japan with exclusive contracts. And working at home is both convenient as well as cost-effective—I’ve been selling through the Net for a long time. In fact, more than 10 years ago, I was presenting ideas on “Working Home, Selling Glob-

ally” at international training conferences.

So, my situation is pretty good. I have unique products that work effectively, a global marketplace, collaborative arrangements with consultants, low cost of sales, solid profit margins, and not a lot of direct competitors. Plus, my materials are easily used and really effective.

Managers have a tendency to look at services such as those you provide as a discretionary spend...an expense not likely to be invested in as much during down times as in up. What advice would you provide to managers on this topic?

I think managers need to be more effective in motivating their people to perform at higher

levels. There are lots of statistics that say workers do not believe their managers listen to them and are often unsupportive of their ideas. The popularity of the Dilbert cartoons illustrates some of this.

I also do not think that making workplace improvements is rocket science. Give me a group of six workers and I will generate a dozen ideas that could be cost-effective to implement, that would have positive impacts on morale and motivation, and that would impact profitability. There are lots of Square Wheels out there and hands-on workers always have realistic ideas for improvements.

Well, if I can do this with simple tools, why can’t managers? Facilitating ideas is easy. Generating teamwork from collaborative process improvement initiatives is relatively straightforward. Putting together action plans for implementation is not difficult. But it is pretty amazing how few managers see their roles as focusing on making improvements—in many organizations, this is the role of some internal consulting group, IT, training, outside

consultants, or something like that. Here’s another simple thought. Lots of workplaces used to talk about empowerment and many had mixed experiences trying to “empower” their workers. In my experience, I think most people are un-empowered, either by experiences or simply by choice. Many feel roadblocked and thus frustrated. Most would like to make improvements. So, I have a simple framework I call Dis-Empowerment. Simply put, one role of a manager is to remove the roadblocks that people perceive are getting in their way of accomplishing more. Square Wheels is one way to address this—by involving and engaging groups of people to define what needs improvement and then allowing them to design a plan for implementation. We can facilitate performance improvements that have bottom line impact. This is something more managers should do, especially in these economic times.

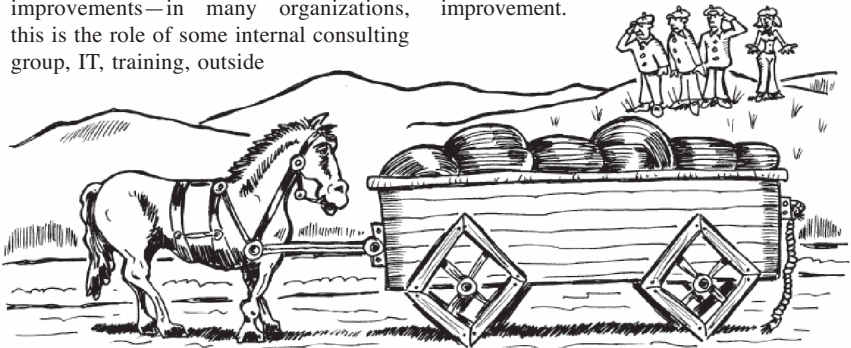
Why should managers consider using tools such as those provided by your organization?

Simply put, my stuff is straightforward, flexible, effective, and bombproof. My tools and games are fun, easy to use, and inexpensive. They really do not require any special training, licensing, or certification—and I don’t offer those things anyway.

There is also the basic approach of facilitated involvement that any manager can do with nearly any organizational development framework. The illustrations are only an example of a tool—the key is to generate active involvement and interactions to produce a discomfort with how things are, and a momentum to generate and implement new ideas. There are many ways to accomplish this and to allow your people to bask in the glow of success.

What would you say is your competitive advantage?

Fun! My products work well and generate positive energy in most any workplace. Plus, they all relate to possibilities for improvement.



“Trial and Error.”