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When Bright People Don't Perform (Part 2)

By Adrian W. Savage, President of PNA, Inc.

Earlier this year, I wrote a paper that seemed to strike a chord throughout the business world. "When Bright People Don't Perform" asked managers and leaders to consider alternatives to the old fashioned view that non-performing subordinates must be lazy, incompetent or lacking in commitment. Instead, I tried to look at the problem from the employee's point of view, citing differences in personal values, reactions to the prevailing organizational culture and mutual miscommunication as major constituents in the problem.

Dysfunctional Roles

The CEO of a pharmaceutical company asked us to find out why his whole top management team was such a disappointment to him. Of course, when one person feels right and sees the rest of the world is out of line you have to be suspicious, but this man had a great track record and enjoyed the trust of the shareholders. It was also clear that his top team contained some extremely bright and hard-working people.

What we found showed that the problem was real enough and both sides felt it. The CEO was intensely frustrated and so were his reports. Everyone was doing his or her best to sort out the issues. In most cases, that best was very good indeed. Yet something in the situation continually undermined their joint efforts to create an effective team at the top of the organization. That something was the presence of some highly dysfunctional roles.

A dysfunctional role is one where two or more elements in the role are in such violent opposition that they cannot both be achieved. The one will undermine the other. For example, suppose you have a top executive role where the role holder is expected to spend 50% of his or her time and attention on long-term strategic issues, 50% on implementing corporate policy and a final 50% on making sure that all the detailed demands under his or her responsibility are met to the full and

reported on every week. Now, setting aside that no one can apply 150% of attention and time to anything - 100% is all we ever have - these demands require such different actions and mindsets that it would be a miracle if anyone could handle them all effectively. The close attention to detail required to be "on top of everything" is flatly inconsistent with the broad, sweeping viewpoint required for effective strategic thinking.

That was the problem at the pharmaceutical company. Like so many other corporations, its roles had been designed on paper by a committee. Then each role was expressed in terms of accountabilities and responsibilities. Handled like this, a dysfunctional role - one that simply cannot work in practice - is almost impossible to spot. The most egregious examples of mutually exclusive demands can be put together into a role that virtually guarantees that the eventual role holder will fail - however able and committed.

The mischief lies in the view of a role as a bundle of tasks, accountabilities and responsibilities. While this is correct, it is only a small part of the truth, especially in senior roles. The major determinant of performance in a role is *how* things are to get done, not *what* is to be accomplished. Nearly always, everyone is pretty much in agreement on what has to be done. But how the role holder is expected to operate is rarely set down clearly enough. The boss may be looking for initiative,

creativity and dynamism (or carefulness, close adherence to precedent and continual building of consensus). The role holder may see the right way forward as strong action, tight attention to deadlines and a no-nonsense attitude to others. Regardless of who is "right," the result will be suspicion and missed expectations. If the organization sees the role as essentially tactical and the role holder sees it as strategic, the stage is set for failure and upset.

The pharmaceutical company had a whole bundle of senior roles that demanded continual oscillation between obsessive attention to detailed reporting and the most strategic of strategic thinking. In the middle of a project aimed at long-term strategic goals, everyone would have to drop what they were doing and get involved in chasing some problem at the micro level. To delegate such issues was seen as falling down on your job. Of course, by the time the micro problem was resolved, precious time had been lost on the strategic issue, so now the managers concerned were berated for missing deadlines and failing to see the wood for the trees. It was no wonder that some people left in despair and others were fired after a career that had been spotless to that point.

Until you can see organizational roles for what they are - not just bundles of tasks but patterns of required thinking and action - you have little hope of avoiding creating your own problem of dysfunctional role demands. Of course, since the individual in the role is usually blamed for the resulting mess, you have little chance either of putting things right when problems arise. The solution is elegantly simple: alongside the traditional analysis of accountabilities and responsibilities, you need a means to focus on the essential nature of the role's challenge in the key areas of thinking and action. When this is made clear, obvious dysfunctional designs will stand out clearly and the problem will have been traced to its true source.

Dysfunctional Structure

Every role has a primary focus. It may be a "thinking" role or an "action" role. "Thinking" roles are there to provide analysis, creativity or the exercise of informed judgment. "Action" roles are there to get things done, handle problems and build relationships. Of course, most roles contain demands in all of these areas, but there is almost always some bias in one direction or another. A "thinking" role may be primarily analysis based (like a scientific researcher or an accountant) or creativity based (like a marketing specialist or a writer). An "action" role may need to focus more on building and maintaining relationships than simply getting things done.

This is all part of understanding the essential nature of the role, as described in the previous section. But it also has an important bearing on how the role should fit into the organizational structure to be most effective. "Thinking" roles need to report to other "thinking" roles, and "action" to "action." While the two broad types of role are complementary, and both are essential, they do not easily mesh together. A manager charged with producing strategic plans and new initiatives may find it hard to appreciate the needs of someone who spends nearly all of his or her time on implementing past policies. The archetypal "tough, action-oriented go-getter" will have neither the interest nor the sensitivity needed to motivate and supervise someone whose role may demand lots of slow relationship building, or the production of creative ideas.

Sadly, when organizations are under pressure - as many are today - the temptation to assume that the action-oriented role should always supervise the thinking-oriented one - to bring a sense of "practicality" to bear - is almost universal. The result tends to be the creation of unnecessary conflict, confusion and delay.

Matching "scale"

Roles are also operated at a characteristic "scale." By "scale," I mean the perspective taken on events and information, from the most detailed, close-up and short-term to the broadest, least detailed and most future-based. In our work, we have distinguished six such "scales" that are sufficiently different from one another to demand their own styles of thinking and action. The six are:

1. Immediate Tasks (doing what is needed today)
2. Current Goals (coordinating tasks to achieve short-term goals)
3. Management Systems (managing linked goals within an overall system)
4. Leadership Tactics (implementing agreed strategy)
5. Leadership Strategy (forming new strategy)
6. Corporate Vision (seeing the longest-term path ahead)

These "scales" lie in an obvious sequence from short-term and detailed to very long-term and broad brush. This should not be seen as a hierarchy of worth. All are necessary and missing any one tends to cripple the enterprise - as some companies have discovered with great pain and upset.

In terms of corporate structure, the ideal would be that every role would report to a role whose primary "scale" of operation is next in the sequence. Task-based roles would report to goal-based ones, so tasks would always be properly coordinated in pursuit of an agreed set of goals. Tactical leadership roles would implement the decisions made by roles and people whose main task is the formulation of long-term strategy.

Reporting to the "next but one" in the sequence (an "Immediate Tasks" role reporting to a role at the "Management Systems") scale can also work pretty well. But a larger jump in scale between the two roles is a recipe for problems. A "Current Goals" role reporting to a "Leadership Strategy" role is

too great a gap in outlook and type of attention to bridge. The subordinate will be looking primarily at the short-term and the boss's attention will be all on the long-term. Neither will have an adequate appreciation of the other's needs or point of view. The more junior role needs to be linked into the organization's existing management systems, but the more senior role will already be formulating changes to those systems reaching years ahead.

Scale Inversion

To set up a structure where roles report to others **behind** them in the sequence is a recipe for disaster, yet it often happens. Strategic roles are placed lower in the hierarchy than tactical ones, so their ideas are never heard and the tactical roles go on implementing policies long after their sell-by dates. Roles required to build and maintain effective systems are subordinated to others whose focus is on short-term goals, so the systems are biased to immediate needs and often starved of resources in favor of dealing with some immediate crisis. Managers charged with implementing new strategies are subordinated to those whose whole purpose in life is to maintain current systems unchanged.

Such scale inversions are often at the root of problems around change. Once again, it is the individuals who tend to carry the blame. They are dismissed as "dinosaurs" or criticized for impractical, "blue skies" attitudes. Yet it may well be the roles they are filling - and their relationships to the roles above and below them in the hierarchy - that are the true problem. Until this is understood, and the structural issues are dealt with, the difficulties will remain, however often the individual players are moved between the positions.

When The Cure Only Makes Things Worse

Because most managers are conscientious and motivated, they try to deal with these problems using whatever means are available to them. The trouble is that they too often

misattribute the causes, assuming that the difficulty lies with the individual holding the role, not the role itself. We have also been brought up with a set of management ideas that is guaranteed in this situation to make things worse: closer supervision of supposed poor performers.

Bright, hitherto successful people tend to value success and achievement. Most of them, in our research, also value independence and the opportunity to do work that is exciting and stimulating. What happens when their loss of performance is attributed to them personally and not in trying to cope with a dysfunctional role in a dysfunctional structure? Their supervisor responds in the way most of us have been taught: by increasing his or her supervision.

As the supervisor becomes more concerned with performance and increases close supervision, the subordinates core values tend to be violated. Close supervision is seen as a sign of poor achievement - often rightly. The scope for independence is lessened, as the supervisor becomes more closely involved, perhaps requiring most important decisions to be discussed in advance or referred upwards. Work becomes more stressful and less exciting.

The subordinate's response may vary from nervous compliance to outright rebellion. Either way, this is usually seen as a further symptom of "their" performance problem and supervision is tightened again. So the spiral continues, until either the subordinate leaves, gets fired or becomes so nervous about doing anything other than what the boss has pre-approved that he or she is now labeled as "lacking in commitment" or "low on initiative." The cure has compounded the problem to the point where it has become intractable to further treatment in any traditional sense.

Of course situations do occur where subordinates are lacking in commitment or initiative, or are just plain lazy or disaffected,

but these are typically quickly understood and handled. The complications arise when the subordinate is neither lacking in competence nor commitment. This is when our traditional ideas on how to react break down.

The answer lies in taking the time to find out what is the true cause of the situation: individual values, uncoordinated expectations, poorly designed roles or dysfunctional structures. Until it becomes routine for managers to investigate fully before jumping into actions - however traditional or approved by conventional thinking - that inflame the problem rather than curing it, we will continue to waste valuable talent through using organizational "truths" and structural systems that are both outmoded and ineffective.

About the Author

Adrian Savage is president of PNA, Incorporated, which provides solutions that enable corporations to manage succession management, employee retention and talent utilization. He is also the author of "A Spark from Heaven?," a radical new look at the nature and development of potential in organizations, teams and individuals. Author and management guru Beverley Kaye says the book is "...a must read for senior leaders and HR professionals who want to understand and send a message about the importance of having a potential-friendly culture...a guide book for managers and supervisors who want to learn how to unlock the potential of the talent on their teams...a users manual for employees who want to take charge of their own lives and careers by exploring and unleashing their potential."

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Founded by Camille Smith, Work In Progress Coaching specializes in increasing the performance and productivity of executives, managers and teams. Her approach enables people to achieve organizational goals while maximizing personal and corporate resources. "When people access their potential and produce results that they thought were impossible, two powerful things happen: the bottom line benefits and people's view of what they can accomplish together is expanded. This gives the individual and the organization more options for the future."

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