

The Mansis Update

The Developmentally Delayed Organization

Robert H. Kent, Ph.D.

Borrowing the name from Developmental Psychology, the "Developmentally Delayed" Organization is a common syndrome found in many organizations, which is frequently misdiagnosed as a need for management and supervisory skill training. The real problem is an incomplete organization design, likely caused by the initial disjointed development of the organization. Essentially, a critical piece of the organization is missing.

Let me introduce this concept by using an analogy. Suppose you're responsible for managing a building, like an office tower. What do you manage when you manage such a building? Not the building per se, but rather a set of systems including electrical, plumbing and water, air conditioning, elevators and escalators, communication, heating, etc.

Even the outer shell of the building is a system of rivets, sheets of steel and glass, steel beams, and concrete which require monitoring and managing.

All of these systems are designed before the building is constructed, and together (since many of the systems are interrelated) they are built into the edifice. The goal of the building manager is to maintain these systems. Note that it is rare one would conduct a needs analysis of the tenants after the building is completed to identify their accommodation needs. Who wants air conditioning? Who wants elevator service? Who wants toilets? To do so, and then to build these systems into the already functioning building would be overly expensive, impractical, confusing, and inefficient. Rather, in advance we would determine what systems were required to make a fully functioning office complex, design these systems, build them into the structure, and then maintain the systems.

Consider now an organization such as a business — essentially an organized set of resources which functions to achieve some common purpose or mission. What do you manage when you manage an organization? As with the building, you don't manage this thing called an organization, but instead what you manage are processes (or systems) for managing the resources which make up the organization.

All organizations have three sets of key resources: finances and other tangible assets; people; and technology (technology includes processes, techniques, knowledge and/or skills at production, service, marketing, planning, professional specialties, research, etc. — typically what makes the organization unique).

My experience is that the processes for managing an organization's technology are where the senior management feel most comfortable. This is likely their specialty, and especially if the owner-operator developed the business. The organization's technology is its strength and identity. Because of this comfort level, this is also the area where management typically retreats when major problems arise. They roll up their sleeves and get back to their roots. Classic examples are the senior production manager working on the line instead of resolving a problem through the supervisors; or the restaurant owner back in the kitchen interfering with the cooking staff, or the sales manager handling customer problems for a poorly trained clerk.

The processes for managing assets and finances are probably the most developed. The science of accounting has been around for a long time and there are many sophisticated financial management systems available for any business.

However the processes for managing people in organizations are the least developed, and for many organizations are primitive. Consequently, this is the area where management, especially senior management feel least comfortable, not necessarily because they don't care about managing this critical resource but because adequate processes in their organizations for managing people don't exist.

Similar to the building analogy above, when an organization is developed, it should be known that it will require processes for managing its key resources. We should develop these processes

(or systems), build them into an organization, and then maintain (monitor and manage) these systems thereafter. As with the building, we shouldn't conduct a needs analysis of the organization's members after the organization is functioning to see if they need processes to manage these resources. That should have been taken care of in the design of the organization. And as will be shown later, these needs analyses more often identify symptoms of a much larger problem, not resolved by satisfying the needs perceived by individuals.

All fully developed organizations ought to have processes for managing people. This being so, then any perceived deficiency in people management skills such as coaching employees, conducting performance appraisals, or administering official discipline could be resolved by training on the organization's in-house processes. For example, if supervisors aren't coaching employees properly or in a timely fashion, there would be no need to send them away for supervisory training. Simply re-train them on the organization's in-house process for coaching employees. Or if discipline is not being conducted correctly by a manager, teach the manager the company's discipline process. Typically, however, when I ask a senior manager what his or her organization's processes are for coaching or developing employees, I'm greeted with looks of puzzlement.

In essence, an organization's identified need for management or supervisory training may be symptomatic of an incomplete, un-enforced or non-existent people management system, rather than the more obviously assumed skill deficiency in the individual supervisor or manager. The real problem is with the organization's design. The organization is actually incomplete; it is a

premature organization; it is an underdeveloped organization. I call this syndrome a developmentally-delayed organization.

The Developmentally Delayed Organization (DDO) Syndrome

When an organization is being created, its founders typically start putting together the necessities — sufficient capital, perhaps machinery, materials, hire some employees and develop initial plans. Because it's so commonly accepted, some simple accounting process is put in place (even just a shoe box for receipts, a record book of some sort and a cheque book), the necessary legal papers are prepared and a production process established. But before much thought is given to the processes required for managing people (and there may only be a few people anyway), priorities change from developing the organization to delivering the product and generating revenue. The proper development of the organization is delayed and the business begins to function prematurely. As with a premature infant, something intervened, the baby's full term development was curtailed and it "got born" prematurely. But the infant's life as a result was jeopardized, its premature state put undue pressures on the rest of its body, and unless incubated, and with skilled care and nurturing allowed to develop fully, it would likely die.

Every organization needs an integrated process for managing people and for controlling this management process. But this is missing in a developmentally delayed organization. There is a hole in the design of the organization — a major part is missing!

Specifically, what is most often missing are processes to ensure:

- ◆ how employees get communication regarding their job direction and performance;
- ◆ how employees are coached;
- ◆ how employees are trained;
- ◆ how employees are motivated; and
- ◆ how employees are developed.

In short, what is missing is a system to control how people are managed!

These processes are too crucial to be left to chance, yet in a developmentally delayed organization their existence and use is dependent upon the goodwill of knowledgeable individuals, and if present at all, are usually in uncoordinated, suboptimal bits and pieces.

For example job descriptions and performance reviews are inconsistently used or enforced; employee job orientation is infrequent or incomplete, coaching practices are simplistic or unknown, performance records are incomplete or invalid, employee selection is last minute and reactive; and the personnel officer is forever running after line management to get them to adhere to policies which line management feel slow them down.

Poor people management practices are the most common symptom of the DDO syndrome, and historically mis-diagnosed as personal training needs for individual managers or supervisors. In addition, here are other symptoms which together are indications of the DDO Syndrome:

- ◆ over-defensiveness because direction and accountabilities are ambiguous;
- ◆ confusion over exactly what people are expected to do;

- ◆ low morale from ambiguity, no performance recognition and inequitable management practices;
- ◆ intolerance of others and self preservation;
- ◆ fear of change in part because even the status quo is uncertain
- ◆ departmental silos and other forms of protectionism;
- ◆ political infighting because measures of performance are unclear or invalid ;
- ◆ errors because direction is inconsistent or unclear;
- ◆ wastage and rework caused by unnecessary errors;
- ◆ low trust in management because organizational direction and rewards are inconsistent;
- ◆ employee turnover is high from low morale and individual failure;
- ◆ inconsistent performance from inconsistent, unreliable direction; and
- ◆ stress everywhere

Treating these symptoms as problems, and for example implementing training for coping with stress or teaching people to be more tolerant or cooperative misses the real organizational design problem.

The end result of not resolving the developmentally delayed organization's core problem will be:

- ◆ higher costs;
- ◆ lower service / product quality;
- ◆ lower revenue;
- ◆ client / stakeholder conflict; and eventual
- ◆ organizational collapse.

The solution to the DDO Syndrome is similar to the premature infant.

But stopping operations altogether and returning the organization to an incubator is likely impractical. What is necessary is a momentary shift in priority back to the development of the organization, and to implement the missing people management processes.

One might ask "doesn't this simply mean a management training program?" And although management training is likely part of the implementation process, the solution, conceptually, must not be seen as simply management training.

The solution is:

- ◆ to implement a people management (performance management) system into the organization (procedures, forms, activities, policies, etc.);
- ◆ to make the use of the system a matter of policy;
- ◆ to teach organizational members how the system works; and then
- ◆ to monitor and enforce compliance with the system.

In short, the solution to the DDO Syndrome is to institutionalize the way people are to be managed, so that good management practices aren't dependent on individual managers, but are a feature (and strength) of the organization itself. Then the way an organization manages people won't become a temporary add-on, but an asset and a permanent part of its culture.

© Copyright / Mansis 2011



***The Mansis Centre for
Management Training and
Organizational Development***

Telephone: (204) 770-2184

e-mail: information@mansis.com

See our Web Site: <http://www.mansis.com>