

Managing High Performance: Quality on the Edge of Chaos

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High performance management is a continuous process of balancing different definitions of quality between four distinct sets of interests. Human resources, products and services, external stakeholders, and the infra-structure of management and information systems. Natural tensions exist between these interests which push and pull organizations in different directions. Under managed or over managed, this creative energy of diversity in organizational needs and interests can lead to organizational chaos resulting in poor performance . . . low morale, low productivity, non-responsiveness to environmental pressures, and inefficient internal systems. The actions and practices of balancing these tensions naturally place an effective leader/manager in a position of being on the edge of the unknown. Balancing divergent meanings of quality towards complimentary goals characterizes high performance management in the complex organizations in which we find ourselves today.

This paper is intended to present a series of propositions offered as a structured approach to exploring three empirically derived theoretical models to better understand their efficacy in application toward high performance in organizations. Three conceptual models for understanding organizations, their culture, behavior, and management are offered as tools for understanding the complexity facing managers as they attempt to determine appropriate strategic choices short, mid-range, and long term. The definition of quality in the context of managing performance, understanding both theoretical and behavioral aspects, individually and collectively is an important leadership competence.

An integrated view from three different fields of study enables a perspective that has direct and immediate potential for application in today's volatile and seemingly chaotic organizational environments. It is apparent from recent literature in action research and leadership that tangible and intangible elements of the human experience in relationship with others around a common task, goal or theme has been all too often lost. Attention has been focused on the products or services resulting from the collective action of the "organization." To deal with the

dilemmas of managers driven by performance expectations toward quality approaches, it is timely to follow the guidance of current day philosopher Ken Wilber (1998). It is time to take a deeper, higher, and wider look at what it means to manage for quality in the environments of today's globalized organizations.

In a continual search for meaning in the field of organizational development, theories that can capture the complexity of human and organizational dynamics, manage their inherent polarities, offer insight into hidden potential, in an environment of change, serve both theory and praxis. Whether a diamond or theoretical model is "in the rough" or cut with great care and precision showing many facets, using different models to study and analyze a particular challenge provides multiple lenses through which one can gain new perspectives.

The Competing Values Model (Quinn 1990) today still stands as an elegant empirically derived model. The comprehensiveness of the model allows application as a management tool in providing a comprehensive approach to organizational analysis, design, strategic planning and decision-making. In their most recent work, Cameron and Quinn (1999), extend the work of organizational analysis in considering cultural attributes. The model serves in providing a robust starting point for empirical organizational self-reflection and theoretical research. The explanatory value has been essential in helping thousands of individuals, groups, teams, organizations, and systems assess and analyze historic trends, current conditions, and future critical developmental paths. Figure 1. depicts an overview of this model with a focus on managing for organizational effectiveness, which is a key defining variable of organizational high performance or quality.

Effectiveness is defined in the Competing Values approach is based on high performance in each of the four quadrants, which are domains of managerial attention. The model was developed and expanded in research of and work with several thousand organizations in multiple contexts by the authors and others who use the model as part of their day-to-day practice. The model has been applied in organizations with attributes extending from a mechanistic paradigm in highly stable and predictable environments to more organic, virtual and adaptive organizations operating in great uncertainty and turbulence. The Competing Values Model draws its framework from the four different histori-

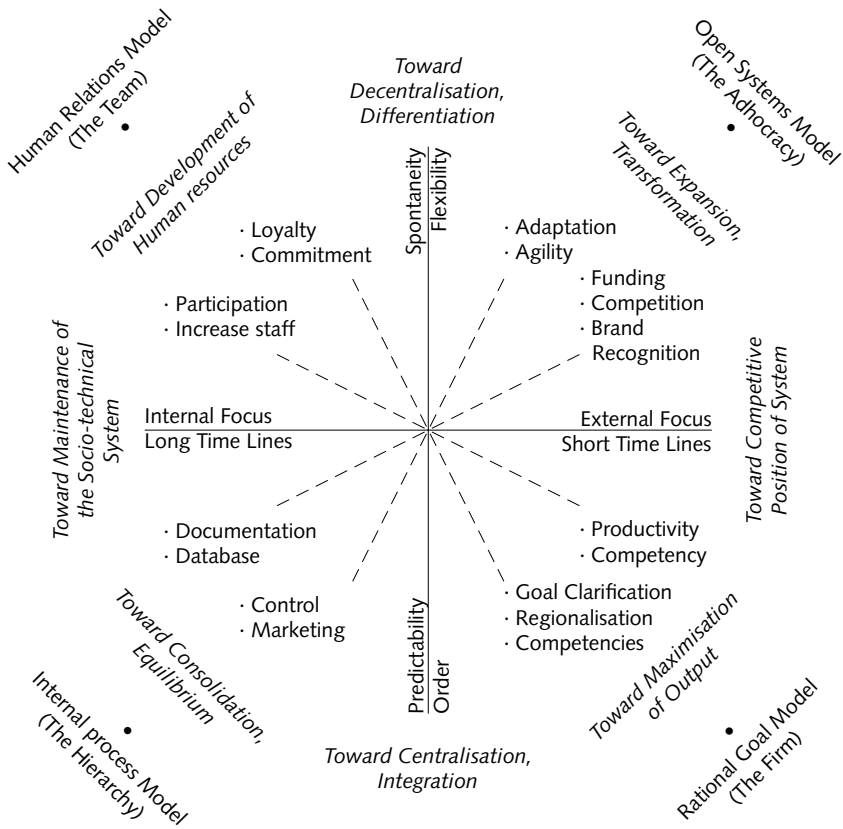


Figure 1: Competing Values Model (adapted from Quinn 1990)

cally described organizational paradigms, clearly articulated in the literature (Daft 1983). These four components are described in the model as rational goal, internal process, human resources, and open systems. These components represent the evolution of organizations and our understanding of when, how and why they do or do not work well. The inherent complexity of organizations is apparent in the model. All organizations can be characterized as having attributes of each of the four quadrants and can be situated somewhere along the mechanistic – organic, complexity, change, and other continuums of contingency theory. The model provides a quick visual reference and potential for immediate

appreciation of the different definitions of quality and high performance in a single organization, network or system. Additionally the approach and model provide prescriptive guidance for improving performance in each of the quadrants (Quinn et al. 1996). Development of a broad portfolio of choices for action is based on building skills and competence of a manager or team of managers and employees. The model is effective in providing strategic development directions, assessment of current conditions, and guidance on strengths-based and balance-seeking development for individuals and organizations of all types, contexts and forms. The following propositions are offered in setting an agenda of research that addresses high quality performance in management.

Proposition 1: High Performance Managers actively surface diverse definitions of quality, measured by the degree to which comprehensive analysis tools are applied in the organization.

Proposition 2: High Performance Managers articulate possible behavioral, competency, or values outcomes that actualize the organization's potential for high performance, measured by the degree to which strategic plans and actions are developed as results of comprehensive analysis.

As one of the most widely researched and accepted tools for organizational and management analysis, the Competing Values Model will be used to test these propositions, the efficacy of other analysis tools being applied in select public and non-profit sector organizations of Slovenia, and their current status of organizational and management effectiveness.

Even as Cameron and Quinn (1999) are deepening the application usefulness of the model with continuing research on diagnosing and designing organizational culture, there is an interplay between the structural, production, humanistic, and visionary interests and deeper structures that are not expressed in the model. These deeper structures which give rise to values, competencies and behaviors expressed in the model create friction as they co-exist and vie for managerial attention. Nutt and Backoff (1992) have applied the use of paradox and tension as an approach to understanding the dynamic interplay between the quadrants suggested by the Competing Values model. The role of the effective leader/manager, in light of these conflicts, is to manage the push and

pull of these tensions as they emerge in the evolutionary and continuous learning process of change in an organization network, or system.

Their Tension Model was derived empirically in the study of public agencies, validating its usefulness in praxis. The model has been applied in hundreds of strategic planning processes at organization and operational unit levels. A core premise of the model is that there are eight inherent tensions between the different organizing values and managerial roles that are defined by the Competing Values approach. In the high performing organization, these tensions are highlighted, prioritized, defined, and deconstructed to reveal core underlying driving forces that create the tension. Higher order values are then sought and articulated. These become the platform from which new strategies and actions are created. Each tension is understood to hold creative potential for organizational growth and development, if managed appropriately. Appropriate management of the tension is defined as bringing into alignment mission, vision and values with strategies and actions in order to enable movement in a particular strategic direction and produce specific outcomes.

In applying this model, planning is amplified using a process that includes definition, analysis, and planning from an issue agenda. The issue agenda is a prioritized listing of the polarizations or tensions to be managed in order for the organization to move forward. The tension model is employed in concert with strategic planning based on envisioning a future best case scenario or reality. The organization can move toward a desired future that maximizes opportunities taking advantage of strengths while simultaneously managing forward from tensions which could be barriers to success. Using both visioning and issue agenda strategic planning processes taps the two core human motivational strategies. Tendencies to move toward (attraction – fight) desirable outcomes or away from (avoidance – flight) undesirable conditions become motivational levers on which ideas become reality and plans become actions.

With the assumption of tensions as natural conflicts, the managerial act of capturing and channeling the creative energy transforms that conflict or tension into generative energy. This stimulates the organization forward on a selected critical path of high performance. The process of engaging these tensions has proven useful in fostering understanding, motivating collaborative solution generation, and serving as a motivat-

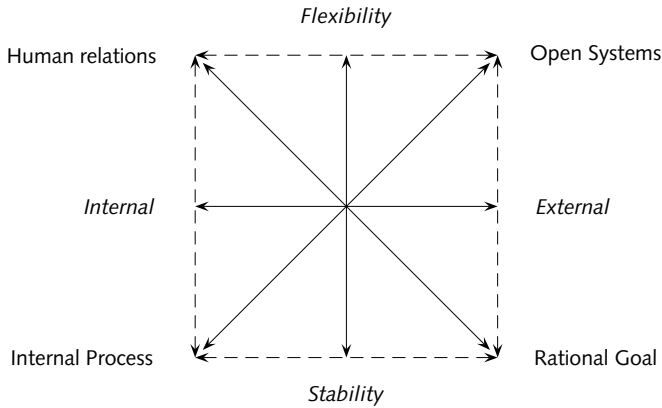


Figure 2: Tension Model (adapted from Nutt and Backoff 1992)

ing force for positive change. Tensions surfaced or underneath the surface in the back hallways of organizations, left unmanaged, can result in vicious cycles (Senge 1999) which drain individuals and organizations of creative and productive energy.

Proposition 3: High Performance Managers surface and explore with stakeholders the inherent tensions in the organization measured by the frequency and content of stakeholder meetings.

Proposition 4: High Performance Managers perceive potential causal factors for organizational issues in the form of paradox, measured by the extent to which organizational issues are defined as polarities.

Proposition 5: High Performance Managers use tension management processing as a strategy to generate higher order values and strategic actions, measured by the degree to which tension management processes are used.

Using a well researched and theoretically grounded explanatory framework and a process that reveals the dynamic tension between normative offers wider and higher orientations from which to examine and strategically position organizations and managers in a continuum of high performance. A third orientation, which has been extensively used and expressed as organizational vision and mission, adds a deepening

quality to the awareness, intelligence, and motivation of an organization. This deepening aspect can be understood by examining some attributes of the human psyche and holistic experience which are now being embraced in leadership and organizational development domains. Stan Davis (1996), in rewriting his perspectives of organizational futures, predicts success will be based on managing the quality of intangibles. These intangibles are qualitative elements, which we use to define what is of value, meaningful, just, or safe. These deeper human needs from which emerge our values, beliefs, patterns of behavior and specific actions in the world have not been explored in the context of organizational effectiveness and high quality performance. The emotional, physical, spiritual, and unconscious patterns of behavior of organizations are drawing increased attention in the corporate world. There is significant research indicating the positive effects of dealing with these organizational attributes.

Emotional intelligence (Goleman 1995) is an example of a management competence which currently being explored by the theorists and practitioners alike. Research has demonstrated remarkable shifts in absenteeism, health benefits claims, and stress reduction which collectively reduce costs and increase productivity. Examination of multiple intelligences (Gardner 1993) demonstrates the viability of fundamental differences in normative processes of learning, understanding and knowing. Given these innate differences in dealing with information, processing that information for decision-making, and ways of interacting with others, much can be gained from exploring not only the roots of difference but also the core of commonality. Explorations in organizational management in these previously intangible and untouchable domains present the potential for maximizing and leveraging yet untapped resources of our human organizational assets. In recent literature reviews of new publications in the field of leadership and in the popular literature, there is a growing mountain of reference to spirit, spiritual, soul, love, the wisdom of intuition, and the deeper meaning of work. Managers are being asked to manage for the quality of the work experience for organizational stakeholders. How does a manager begin to locate, access and measure these presumed nebulous, fleeting and non-rational concepts?

These intangible, qualitative elements of organizations are found be-

neath the action, in the deep sources of patterned behavior, in the instinctual responses of individuals in organizations. Automatic individual and organizational responses are flowing in the ravines of well-worn neural pathways of enculturated and personally engrained habits, beliefs or values. One only needs to have experienced a failed reorganization, downsizing, or reinventing process to recognize how seemingly unchangeable and deeply these patterns are embedded. Faced with environments and personnel that demand change to sustain viability, vibrancy and health, managers are seeking ways to understand and implement change processes beyond the historic strategic planning approaches of incremental or catastrophic change. Managers are seeking high performance developmental processes that sustain current valued organizational characteristics while engaging a desired future and resolving present conflicts. They value methods that allow the continuation of productivity while prioritizing, streamlining, and downsizing in the face of constrained corporate profits and international economies.

As demanded by practitioners and applied by countless consultants addressing organizational complexity driven by rapid change, increasing technology, shifting and shrinking financial resources, and information overload, new approaches are being sought which enable the activation of the energy and commitment of employees that are intrinsically derived. Stability is no longer being sought from organizational infrastructure or corporate loyalty, it is being sought in deeper core values and support of human and organizational potential. These can only be found in the deep roots of the human and organizational experience. The creative aspiration of being valued, a sense of belonging, and an altruistic sense of making a contribution which gives meaning to life, whether its personal or professional. The creative potential of individuals and collectively in organizations is being tapped to inspire and motivate people as they are being involved in dialogues and formalized visioning processes associated with strategic planning. These dialogues bring into the open the intangible, hidden aspects which represent our desire to perform at the highest level of quality, regardless of how that is expressed and what our particular pattern of expression might be. These processes are resulting in the design of work and generation of actions that draw on individual, collective and organizational strengths and aspirations.

These processes allow for sufficient divergence in perspective to pro-

vide convergent purpose and actions that are robust and sustainable. It has become accepted that diversity in both competence and perspective provides the greatest potential for success in highly turbulent environments (Daft 1983). Morgan (1986) suggests that high performance organizations require degrees of complexity that match or mirror the complexity of their environment. In recent physics research it has become clear that we enact our environment (Weick 1979; Wheatley 1994). If the definition of quality is determined by the degree of customer satisfaction, it must also include self-satisfaction, as well as competence in meeting diverse expectations of multiple stakeholders. There is a need to tap the creative and motivational energy and commitment of internal and external stakeholders in uncertain times. Tapping that energy and commitment means finding complementary senses of purpose from individuals and organizations to draw forth continuous peak performance.

Companies, government agencies and non-profit organizations are being guided by purposeful planning toward complementary, mutually beneficial goals. The processes used value the contributions of all individuals with a stake in the organization and its work (Bryson 1995). The collective energy of purpose and expressing an identity as an individual, team, organization, network or system is being drawn upon to produce high quality, high performance outcomes. This energy is generated by creating a community of practice (Wenger 1999) in the process of engaging in creative dialogue while forming organizational strategic plans. The shared experience of the dialogue creates a virtual, in-the-moment sense of belonging that is formed through the act of being present and sharing personal missions, visions, aspirations, values, and issues as valued contributions to the organizational strategic plan. The greater the alignment of purpose an individual has with the goals of the organization, the greater the commitment to those goals. (Quinn 1998; Jawarski 1996). The use of dialogue-based strategic planning processes that have the intent of creating community to engage creative and motivational energy would not be effective without the use of action research and learning (Dotlich and Noel 1998) as tools.

Action research provides an accepted technology and methodology for reflective processes for feedback on performance, exploration of possible decisions, and mental models in use. In the moment of decision-making, real-time, on-line, management is dealing with complexity, un-

certainty and change as lived experiences. Thus, action research and learning models are becoming part of the high performance tool kit (Senge 1994). Popular management literature, best selling leadership books and futurists are focusing on managing in-the-moment of the experience. That is, what is going on in between and behind the hard lines of theory in the world of relationships, meaning making, values, and beliefs. Inquiry into the holistic nature of individual experience as well as organizational experience provides a rich set of data and potential for effective management, high performance and sustainable development.

Models offered by practitioners that bridge the disciplinary gap between psychology, sociology, organization theory, and management provide an important set of resources and tools for direct and immediate use. Action research provides us with the protocols, methodology, and evidence to test assumptions about “What’s going on here?” in the moment-to-moment, lived experience, in the action world of managers and leaders. Without an understanding of the complex human dynamics at play in those moments, attempts at achieving and sustaining quality high performance are based on historic trends and probabilities from generalized theory. Theoretical and empirically tested theories can be enhanced in application real-time when processes are used which engage the multifaceted dimensions of the human experience.

A model that provides safe exploration of deeper purpose, can engender a sense of belonging. When an individual experiences connection to something greater than him/herself, he/she gains deeper insight into the fundamental and driving motivations for change, contribution, commitment, and collaboration. Effective models of purposeful inquiry suggest moving beyond the environment, behavior, and values of organizational consciousness into the realm of intuition, emotion, subconscious and often the unconscious.

Robert Dilts (1996) offers a very powerful empirical model as an example. His model of the levels of human experience can be used as an explanatory tool and experiential learning process. It helps managers understand why dysfunctional organizational patterns persist, why there is apparent resistance to change, why quality, until it is defined at deeper levels of human experience is a matter of preference rather than a profound driving force. The recent shift in strategic planning literature and implementation processes to include visioning and values orientations

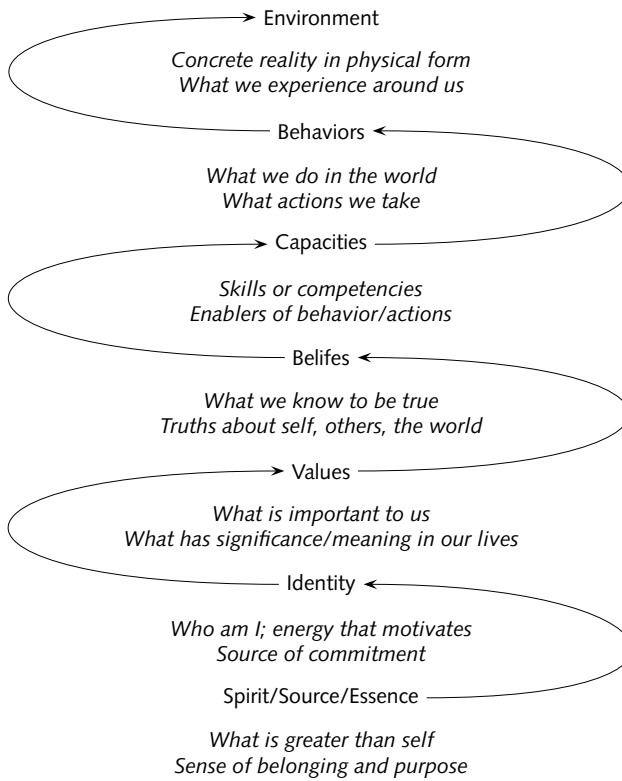


Figure 3: Logical Levels of Expertise (adapted from Dilts 1996)

(Nutt and Backoff 1992; Bryson 1995; Catana 2001) are examples of processes that recognize that the human psyche of employees and stakeholders must be acknowledged and aligned. As a subjective experience, team building and strategic planning processes can evoke personal inspiration and passion for collaborative action when drawing deeply from a sense of purpose, identity and values. The collective result is the expression of an objectified statement of mission, vision, and values of the organization that embody and express that passion, enabling enduring high performance arising from deeper human needs. Figure 3 is an adapted representation of the Dilts model.

Proposition 6: High Performance Managers facilitate co-

created stakeholder definition of mission, vision and values of the organization, measured by the frequency and degree of diverse stakeholder involvement in mission/vision/values elements of strategic planning processes.

Proposition 7: High Performance Managers create opportunities for continuous stakeholder dialogue around implementation of strategic directions, goals, outcomes and plans, measured by the degree and frequency of diverse stakeholder involvement in strategic feedback process.

Inquiry using the logical levels model can be used to explore the extent to which double loop learning (Argyris 1994) occurs in an organization or at the personal level. Creating a new identity from which hope and potential emerge into realization is also a possible outcome to the extent that significant and meaningful metaphors surface and are used in the process.

Proposition 8: High Performance Managers facilitate and aid in the translation of mission and vision into inspirational and aspirational metaphors, measured by the extent to which the metaphors are used in explaining and expressing organizational mission and vision, and are expressed in organizational stories, artifacts and cultural norms.

In response to Wilber's (1998) call for higher, wider, deeper exploration, what is the value added in theory and praxis of exploring the models presented? If evolutionary progress in organizations and effective management of them is to be realized, it is imperative that managers and leaders explore the depth, breadth, and height of the subjective and objective unknowns. They must become competent at recognizing, interpreting and managing the intangibles, to operate in the present, to integrate the separate, to blend and align the intelligence of different disciplines into a more encompassing embrace of a new holon (Wilber 1998). Exploration into what is higher, wider, and deeper invites a leap of faith into the chaos of the unknown of theory, allowing patterns to become apparent out of seeming disorder. Exploring differences until order emerges, allowing the natural patterns of order to emerge as one accustoms the eyes to see it.

What power does a model have that integrates concepts of apparent discordant theoretical domains and dynamics of organizational change, psychoanalytical levels of experience, and working empirical models of organizational effectiveness and high performance? The integration of the models provides diverse sets of information from which to make informed strategic decisions. As managers move closer to being in that moment of chaos where and when organizations approach the unknown and unknowable, tools that can guide them are in high demand. In guiding managers and leaders in organizational change and development, the wider, higher, and deeper perspectives allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the subjective and objective meaning of experience in and as organizations. As the definition of quality finds relative meaning based on the diverse preferences of stakeholders with different interests, so too do definitions of high performance run the spectrum of the diversity of organizational membership. Explorations of these broad ranging preferences, seeking higher values through examination of the apparent conflicts, and inquiry into deeper human potential when undertaken as a process for organizational planning and development have the power to profoundly change purpose, identity and strategic directions of organizations with the full awareness, support and motivational energy of its stakeholders. Only in the common experience of being human in a community of common purpose while recognizing and seeking to fulfill deeply seeded human needs, can organizations find enduring safety, unique value, and sustainable development toward ever evolving and vibrant futures.

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