



# The Effective Organization

January 2009

## Yankee Swap Rorschach

The holidays are the season for Yankee Swaps. Now, a Yankee Swap would seem to be a fairly simple and straightforward activity: each person either chooses a wrapped gift or steals an opened gift from someone else. This latter activity can, of course, trigger a chain reaction, but that's part of the fun. At the end, everyone feels like they had at least some measure of control over the outcome. One would think it difficult, if not impossible, to mess up a Yankee Swap.

However, all things are possible. In this case, one company held a Yankee Swap with incredibly detailed and complicated rules which had as its most salient feature that no gifts were opened until the very end. In other words, the experience was transformed into the equivalent of a very slow grab bag: a long, frustrating, totally random process at the end of which people felt that they had no control over the outcome. Ironically, the most common complaint from employees at this company is that many of the rules are complex, time consuming, and leave them feeling like they have very little control over how they get their work done.

Now, a Yankee Swap is a pretty insignificant event, little more

than an amusing party game. However, how a business goes about designing a small process says a lot about how it goes about designing larger, more significant processes: process design is strongly influenced by institutional habits and beliefs. With a small process, it's easy to see the results of that belief in action because the entire event can be seen at one time; with larger processes, cause and effect may be separated by weeks or months, and the process is often so big that no one ever views it as a whole. The company ends up wondering why their results are poor, but can't figure out the reasons. Those small processes can provide valuable insights into the company's methodology and assumptions; recognizing consistent causes of small problems can enable you to avoid large ones. Ultimately, more important than improving one process is improving how the company designs all its processes.

In designing a process, it helps to clearly understand what you are trying to accomplish. Why did this particular company choose to redesign the Yankee Swap? Was there an actual problem that someone was trying to solve? Clearly, someone felt a need to come up with something,

## Upcoming Events

*Learning through entertainment*  
January 30th at the [New England Society for Applied Psychology](#)

*Corporate Culture and Innovation: A Two-Edged Sword* April 15th at the [Infotec Technology Conference](#).

For more information, please visit [www.7stepsahead.com](http://www.7stepsahead.com).

## Publications

[Talent Magnet: The key to attracting the right staff is to look inward](#)

[The Five-step process to making change work](#)

[A good leader shines under pressure](#)



Subscribe

although their motives are impossible to fathom. As a result, they got a process that rather missed the point, but did end up reflective of the organization as a whole. However, it's more useful to focus on results:

- Clearly define the objective. If the objective is to solve a problem, take the time to look at the symp-

toms and consider what they mean. When do they come up? Under what circumstances? Remember, the symptoms are not the problem, they're just the symptoms. Generate a list of hypotheses and then test them to see if they lead to the observed symptoms. Solving the wrong problem will generally make things worse, not better.

- Describe what a successful outcome will look like. What will have changed? What behaviors will be different? Make this concrete. If success is, "people will have more fun," how will you know? If the picture isn't clear, identify the questions you need to answer to bring clarity. This may be an iterative process.
- Identify what you can change and what you can't. You probably can't change the economy, but you can change how you deal with it. Tom Watson Sr., founder of IBM, used the Great Depression as an opportunity to build up a highly trained, extremely loyal workforce and a stockpile

of equipment. When WWII started, IBM was in an excellent position to capitalize on the reawakening economy. If everything falls into the "can't change" category, you need to revisit your goal or problem formulation.

- Brainstorm possible solutions or approaches. Record ideas and do not evaluate any of them until you have a significant number of possibilities. Don't worry if some ideas are silly or off-the-wall: innovative solutions come from the most unlikely sources.
- Will your solutions really get you where you want to go? Do research. Don't rely on opinion and conjecture.
- Define your action steps.
- Execute and evaluate. Did it work? If not, check your problem formulation and try again.

If you're not getting the results you want, what steps are you missing?

## About 7 Steps Ahead



Stephen R. Balzac is a professional speaker and president of 7 Steps Ahead, a consulting firm specializing in helping businesses increase revenue and grow their client base.

Steve has over twenty years of experience in the high tech industry and is the former Director of Operations for Silicon Genetics, in Redwood City, CA.

He serves on the boards of the New England Society of Applied Psychology (NESAP) and the Society of Professional Consultants (SPC). Steve is a member of the Operations Committee of the American Judo & Jujitsu Federation. No stranger to the challenges of achieving peak performance under competitive and stressful conditions, he holds a fourth degree black belt in jujitsu and is a former nationally ranked competitive fencer. Steve is an adjunct professor of Industrial/Organizational Psychology and has been a guest lecturer at MIT and WPI.

Building effective development organizations, improving team morale, focus, and enthusiasm, developing effective communications between team members, reducing employee turnover, helping businesses identify and attain strategic targets, and applying sport psychology techniques to business have been some of his most successful projects.

**If you're thinking continuous improvement, you're thinking...**

