



The Effective Organization

May 2010

Put the Candle Back

In the classic comedy, “*Young Frankenstein*,” Frederick Frankenstein and Inga, played respectively by Gene Wilder and Teri Garr, are seeking the hidden entrance to a secret passage. As Frankenstein checks out a bookcase, he asks Inga to hand him a candle. As she lifts the candle, the bookcase spins around, trapping Dr. Frankenstein behind it. Attempts to put the candle back only cause the bookcase to spin wildly, first pinning Dr. Frankenstein and eventually trapping Inga.

There is, of course, absolutely no logical reason why moving a candle should cause the bookcase to spin. There is also no apparent connection between the candle and the mysterious mechanism that moves the bookcase. There is, however, a very real connection between these events and comedy. It is the utter absurdity of the scene, to say nothing of its parodying hundreds of horror movies, that makes it so hilarious.

Unfortunately, when the same thing happens in a business, the feelings are more like the horror films rather than the parody.

Okay, there are rarely candles in an office and even more rarely does moving a candle cause a bookcase to start spinning wildly. However, the experience of changing something in one part of the business causing an apparently

unpredictable reaction in another part of the business is, sadly, far too common.

At one company, the engineering department made an apparently minor change to the way they were formatting specifications for certain jobs. Suddenly, a whole raft of errors cropped up. The people following the specifications were convinced they were doing the job exactly as instructed. No one could figure out how the two things could be connected. Upon outside investigation, it turned out that the people who were actually doing the production had made some assumptions about the relative importance of tasks based on certain specific formatting used in the specs. Quite by coincidence, they had been right thus far. The minor change, though, happened to affect the relevant formatting. Suddenly people were running off in the wrong direction while utterly convinced they were reading the map correctly.

At another organization, it became possible to deduce the positions different vice-presidents had on various issues by observing the behavior of people in offices hundreds of miles away.

In both of these examples, and others like them, the assumption is that the metaphorical candle and bookcase are not and cannot possibly be connected. However,

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as the results demonstrated, that was simply not correct. They were connected: because the people involved were all part of the same organization, changes in one part of the organization were manifesting in different parts of the organization. The team is a system and the organization as a whole is a system. The system responds to information and events like any living organism or, if you prefer, like a very complex computer program. How information moves through the system varies according to the roles people play, the way communication is handled, and the unwritten, implicit assumptions that people make.

I'm frequently told that communications can't be a problem because, "We all email one another." That may be true, but it's not particularly relevant.

What matters is the informal communications: with whom do you chat? Who talks to whom? What assumptions do people make about what they hear and from whom they hear it? Do people take news more seriously from one person than from another? Oddly enough, even in groups where everyone emails everyone else, these patterns of communication still emerge: some people will follow up the emails with a phone call or an instant message, others will not. Some will only follow up with certain people, and so forth. Thus the system takes shape and takes on a life of its own: in one company, it turned out that the board of directors could be mapped as a collection of dyads. As soon as one member of a dyad decided how to vote on an issue, the other member would follow. Thus was sense made of an apparently random voting pattern.

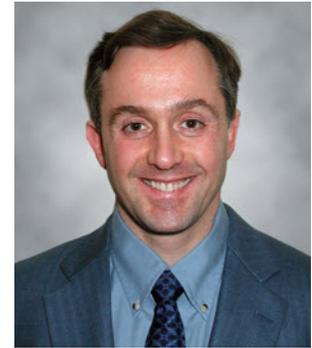
The key to dealing with these systemic effects is twofold: first, like Gene Wilder, you must recognize that there is a connection to be found. No matter what you do, different parts of the organization will interact in unexpected ways, which brings us to the second point: the secret to minimizing unexpected and apparently random interactions is to intentionally build connections between the different parts of the company. In other words, you have to not only build strong teams, but strong teams of teams. The more connections there are, and the stronger those connections, the less likely it is that you will have apparently random systemic effects.

You build those connections first by helping the different members of the company clearly see how they fit in, second by building a sense of community throughout the organization. Each department needs to understand the role it plays in the overall business: that doesn't mean job titles and descriptions. It means taking the time to articulate the vision of what you are doing and the place each group has in that vision. They also need to understand how information travels and how communications can break down: for example, error-correcting methods are often taken as personal criticism or viewed as an attack on a department's competence instead of as an opportunity for effective feedback. When errors are viewed as punishable offenses instead of as feedback, error correction becomes increasingly difficult, official communication channels are blocked, and systemic effects become more random.

The sense of community comes not through the official channels, but through finding ways of bringing people together and helping them create common ground and common interests. A well-defined and articulated vision should be the nucleus of that commonality, but you should not limit yourself to work-related interests. Helping people find areas of similarity will build the structure of your company and make the interactions more manageable. While random systemic effects will never quite disappear, you can certainly become better at identifying them before they become a problem.

In other words, remember to put the candle back.

About 7 Steps Ahead



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