

POSSIBILITY MANAGEMENT: SUCCESS STARTS IN YOUR HEAD

© Copyright 2005 By Clinton Callahan All Rights Reserved www.callahan-academy.com

A version of this article was published in Technokontakte February 2005.

Just in time, a new field of management is entering the scene. Possibility Management provides tools and techniques for using the mental resources of our organizations in new ways, ways that were not visible before. Why didn't we see them? Because of the structure of our Box. By expanding our Box we gain possibilities for managerial action steps that produce successful results where we had no options before.

THREE BATTLES

Managers today are being asked to deal with three almost insurmountable problems:

- 1) **ORDERS FOR DRASTIC COST CUTTING.** The obvious linear solution to cutting overhead expenses is to terminate staff. As obvious as it seems, this solution could be a costly blunder when the remaining staff sees that they could lose their jobs next and they commit to their own survival rather than to a thriving company.
- 2) **WILD MERGERS AND ACQUISITIONS.** Corporate moves designed from the financial perspective of increasing stockholder value may ignore heavy hidden costs. Shock, loss of identity, feeling betrayed, fear of being lost in the shuffle, and wasted time and efforts lead to a demoralized staff trying to sort out an intercultural nightmare with little preparation and few tools.
- 3) **SUPERSONIC EVOLUTION.** For fifty years modern culture has given strong positive feedback to innovation. Companies compete with each other to deliver newer, faster and better products and services. The speed of innovation has gained so much momentum that today the time-to-market for new products approaches instantaneous. From finances to information technology, markets are rapidly evolving. Not so our organizations.

ANTIQUÉ STRUCTURES

A hierarchy is structurally dependent on everyone being the same and everything staying the same. In a hierarchy a manager may spend half of his energy defending his position and protecting his territory. The chasm between the market's fluidity and our organizational rigidity is huge. What can we do to close the gap?

A manager is not authorized to redesign his company's organizational chart – yet still he must produce profitable results. How can a manager change the structural form of his team's daily interactions when the organization itself does not change policies?

Good question. Here is an interesting answer: Just because your organization is a hierarchy does not mean that your department or project cannot break protocol and function in a more freely empowered manner. These are the days where thoughtful

experimentation is in order, not blind following. Yet our education has not trained us to break the rules, but rather to follow them. Where can we obtain a new education?

POSSIBILITY MANAGEMENT

Creating options that were not visible before is the subject of the new field of Possibility Management.

Possibility Management says: "If you want to change the results and you cannot change the circumstances, you have to change the possibilities."

What does "possibility" mean in this sense? Possibility is a measurable – defined as the number of real options that an individual or an organization has to choose from: the more options, the greater the possibility.

For example, when an organization confronts a lack of profitability due to a change in market conditions, choosing the obvious linear solution of cutting overhead by firing personnel may indicate a lack of possibility. An organization with greater possibility might approach the situation with more options. For instance, leaders could choose to invent new market space for their present products. Or leaders may tap underused intelligence in their staff to reinvent the organization itself so as to deliver a new range of products or services that meet newfound market needs.

HOW DOES POSSIBILITY MANAGEMENT WORK?

Success starts in our head. To create new business results we must change our managerial behavior. If we keep doing what we have always done we will keep getting what we have always gotten. We cannot expect better results without modifying what we do.

Our behavior depends on our thinking. We act according to how we think.

But our thinking depends on our mental maps.

So the question is, what are mental maps?

Think of the first maps of the world. These first maps showed a flat world – but the maps were extremely useful, far better than having no map at all. After some hundreds of years a few people drew new maps of the world, maps that showed the world as a sphere. What was the value of the new maps? The new maps gave us new possibilities. For example, in the flat maps if we explored beyond known territory we could fall off of the world. In the new maps with a spherical world we *cannot* fall off! This is a strong invitation to explore new territory in complete safety and creates for us a totally new game.

Question: When we started using the new map of the world did our possibilities change?

Answer: Yes, our possibilities changed!

Question: When we started using the new map, did the world itself change?

Answer: No, the world itself did not change. Only our map of the world changed.

Observation: The results we produce do not depend on the actual form of the world; the results we produce depend on our mental maps of the world!

This is good news. It means that we can change our managerial effectiveness simply by changing our mental maps! This is the method of Possibility Management.

BOX TECHNOLOGY

The conglomerate assembly of our mental maps has been called by many names: worldview, belief system, mindset, defense strategy, comfort zone, identity, psychology, personality, self-image, and so on. In Possibility Management we call it the "Box."

What is the Box made out of? The Box is made of beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, expectations, conclusions, habits, opinions, decisions, projections, and so on. These are the structural components of our Box.

What is the purpose of the Box? The purpose of the Box is to protect and defend us, to guarantee our survival, comfort, and safety.

How does the Box protect us? The Box protects us through total control of what we can perceive and what we can express.

Who made our Box? To this question we can have two possible answers:

- 1) "They" made our Box (circumstances, conditions, other people, the environment).
- 2) We made our Box.

Social scientists are still debating the answer to this question, which means that we get to choose.

What is the difference between these two answers? If we make choice number one, then if we want to change the form of our Box we must petition forces outside of our control and then wait around hoping they will make the changes for us.

If we make choice number two (that we made our Box), then we can change the form of our Box at any time into any shape we want for no particular reason at all.

In Possibility Management we make choice number two.

THE FIRST MISTAKE

As a manager if we do not know that we and everyone else we work with – including bosses, colleagues, employees, clients, and vendors – has a Box, then we will make a mistake and we will assume that they *are* their Box. If we think they are their Box then we can be easily hooked into a conflict of Boxes. We will act as if the conflict is real. This is a very common mistake.

The way out of constant conflict is to realize that we have a Box, that they have a Box, and that neither we nor they *are* our Boxes. With this clarity, any conflict is *not* a conflict between people. It is *only* a conflict between Boxes. This piece of clarity opens up untold numbers of new possibilities where we previously before only had conflicts.

NEW TOOLS

In Possibility Management we explore maps for things that are difficult to quantify and difficult to define, but that are still very influential in determining what is possible or not possible for us to accomplish. Once we have new mental maps, we can use tools from Possibility Management that enable us to enter the new territories and produce more effective results.

For example, consider communication. We not only communicate when we talk; we also communicate when we are silent. We communicate the whole time. Possibility Management provides tools for being silent and tools for disturbing the silence. Here is an example for you to try:

EMPOWERED COMPLAINING

As a practical application of Possibility Management, think about complaining. Complaining is typically seen as a bother. Managers avoid complainers like horses avoid flies. Avoiding complainers does not stop the complaining. And without knowing it, by avoiding complainers we disconnect ourselves and our company from a tremendously useful resource.

We avoid complaints without knowing it because of our original mental map about complainers. The old map might be:

Old Map About Complainers:

A complainer is an irresponsible troublemaker.

We could replace the old map with a new map about complainers. Imagine you as the manager inviting complaints as a standard practice in your team - during meetings or otherwise. What would that do for your people? Your new team policy would empower your people to complain.

Why would we do this? What is the use of empowered complaining?

To answer this question, think about where complaining comes from in the first place. What is the honest motivation behind every complaint? If you think about it you can realize that *a person complains because they care*. Something feels wrong to them and they think that it could change so that it feels good and strong to them instead. This sense that something could be better is a rich resource of ideas and energy for encouraging success in the company, from customer relations to manufacturing processes to marketing schemes. If you avoid and discourage complaining, then you are wasting a valuable resource.

REINVENT THE MAP

In order to receive the benefit of all the care and concern that is encoded in complaining, a manager must learn some new skills. The first skill is to reinvent your mental map about complainers. To reinvent your mental map, take the equation apart at the "is." Then you have two parts: "A complainer..." and "...an irresponsible

troublemaker.” Throw the troublemaker part away. Find a new way to see complainers. One new map could be:

New Map About Complainers:

A complainer offers me possibilities for new effectivity.

Is this new map true? Of course it is true, if you can listen to the complaints in a new way. Try this experiment. Start saying “yes” to complaints. Arrange regularly scheduled “Complaint Shops,” or tell your people that you now have an open policy for complaints. Ask what is bothering them and then listen to the complaints with the gratitude of knowing that these people care enough to complain.

To listen to complaining with gratitude you will need to listen with a new purpose. Listen – not to defend your position, not formulating what you are going to say next, not to prove who is right or who is wrong, not even to “solve the problem.” Listen to complaining simply so that the complaints get heard. This kind of listening is a skill called Possibility Listening. With Possibility Listening you change the complaints into possibilities.

When your people experience that their complaints are heard then they are empowered to take responsibility for the success of the whole project. Why? They can take responsibility because *you* represent the project, and *you* accepted the invitation to take a look into their world. By respectfully listening to them and appreciating their perspectives you accept them as they are, including their complaints! With Possibility Listening you empower peoples’ intuitive sense of rightness and you direct their insights towards action steps that serve the company. In this way you make your first experiments in managing possibility and you prove to yourself that success for your project and your team starts in *your* head.

There is a difference between education and training. Education makes it that we have more information. Training makes it that we can take new responsibility and accomplish greater achievements. Education tells us what behavior changes we should make. Training produces perceptual clarity that results in automatic behavior change.

Clinton Callahan has had 31 years of experience navigating to exactly those blocks that impede a manager’s next developmental step in leadership. With precision, humor and simplicity he opens doors to changes that make a real difference in business relationships and leadership performance.

Mr. Callahan’s first job in Austria was in 1993. Two years later he moved from America to Europe with his wife and children. Genius Verlag published Clinton Callahan’s book “Abenteuer Denken” in 2004. Mr. Callahan has trained managers for Deutsche Bank, IBM, EADS (Daimler Chrysler), and CSC (Computer Sciences Corporation), and provides outrageous Possibility Trainer training.
www.callahan-academy.com. Tel: +49 (0) 89-74949473.