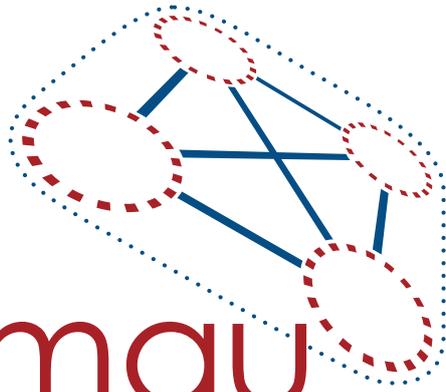


will It make the boat go faster?



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In December of 1998 there appeared on New Zealand television for the first time an advertisement that subsequently captured the imagination throughout that nation for months to come. It was only broadcast for two weeks, was only about 45 seconds in duration, but captured had a profound impact in boardrooms and managers' offices throughout the land. Its message was equally relevant to those in business as well as those in the public sector and community work.

The advertisement was the first in a series related to New Zealand's defense in the year 2000 of the America's Cup, one of the greatest, if not the greatest, sailing competition in the world.

The advertisement starts with the view looking through the lens of the camera as if s/he is there fully present. The camera (that is the viewer) moves to a foyer area and a young female worker walks up to the camera and says "Welcome to Team New Zealand – would you like to meet the crew?". She then turns away from the camera and walks ahead. The camera (i.e. the viewer) follows just behind her left shoulder. And as she proceeds, two large doors swing open to reveal a scene of vibrant activity and connectivity.

Like a scene from a television series such as ER, Hill Street Blues or Third Watch there followed a series of very short shots, moving and diverse camera angles, unstable and moving camera position – this all gives an air of vibrancy, activity, energy, vitality and connection.

Throughout this panoply of energy there appear different and contradictory images – a for placing itself in a hole in a ragged carpet, a whiteboard on which some one is writing that has seen better days and should be thrown in the dump, a desk that is old and scratched, a filing cabinet that is obviously rusted stuck from old age. So we have two very different experiences being merged into one: vibrancy and relationship and connection in an environment of second-rate equipment.

Through this scene walks some one important. Indeed, it is Sir Peter Blake followed by his assistants. The viewer knows is it someone important for the heads of the people the previous camera shots stay still but their eyes tend to move and follow this person as he walks through the field of activity and energy. He sits down in the middle of a long trestle table and his assistants sit either side. He places his bag on the floor beside him.

The camera then shoots back to a person at the whiteboard arguing for some new piece of equipment to be placed on the Team New Zealand. Across this field, Sir Peter says "Before we spend another cent, I want us all to ask 'Will it make the boat go faster?'".

The camera then cuts out to the foyer again the young woman who first met the "viewer" as s/he arrived. She looks at the camera and says "Coffee, you want coffee? There is a great café next door, they sell great coffee and they look after us".

The screen then fades to black and up on the screen in white text come the words "Will it make the boat go faster?"

meaning for leaders and organizations

This advertisement captured the imagination of all who saw it and still does today when the story is told to someone. There is something almost archetypal in the story and something at that most managers in large corporations can relate closely to. The metaphor contains a number of messages and levels to which these line managers and executives can relate quite easily. It seems to have a universal appeal in those corporations where line management and service functions, such as HR, share an espoused and real partnership. Unfortunately in those corporations where the service functions are more traditional and bound by ideology, the advertisement does not seem to have as much appeal to these people as it does for line executives.

Now to the messages - let's start with the coffee. Team New Zealand does not sell coffee. Cafes sell coffee. It is important for each corporation to get clear that which is its core com-

petency. This is particularly relevant in the time since the 1987 Stock Market crash that has scene waves of downsizing and outsourcing.

Moreover, we are now in a period where there is less permission for deeply confrontational intrapersonal interventions into the lives of employees. Not only are there new legal provisions in recent years to protect employees against the potential oppression of intrusive organizational interventions, but we have witnessed a sea change in which it is now recognized that the primary relationship between employer and employee is a social contract in the pursuit of effectiveness for the owners of the "company" – be they shareholders, Partners, Ministers or Heads of government departments, or the heads of community and non-government organizations. The rights and wrongs of this might be debated, but it is an undeniable and seemingly inevitable trend.

This advertisement creates the metaphor of the boat as the shared purpose around which endeavor is organized. For some this may be market share, for others shareholder value add, for others profitability per partner if they happen to be in a partnership, for others quality of service to the public – whatever the measures of performance, the advertisement suggests bottom line is that the corporation/firm and the individual are joined in a shared social contract of better corporate performance.

Development of the crew into a harmonious and effective team is done in this context. There is little place for the development of a crew that remains in the boat shed – a crew that never gets out on the water on the boat and races in a real race. Equally, there is little scope for those who would enjoy a safe twilight cruise with champagne in a safe harbor.

Similarly those who confuse culture as something that can be defined, measured or engineered and as an input into the organizational process may often miss the point. Culture¹ is essentially untouchable and unmanageable. Work on the crew's culture (per se) may be often misguided effort, sometimes at the behest of consultants with barrows to push. There

are values and perspectives, behaviors and norms to instill in people that will make the boat go faster, and these need to be engendered in the context of the boat, the race, the weather and the competition, not as ends in their own right?

There is a need to take the crew off the boat and work with them as a group – time in the boat shed is necessary from time to time. It occurs when you need to build enough relationship and connection among the people for them to have confidence, goodwill and predictability in their working relationships with one another on the boat. It also occurs when you need to build a shared understanding in the crew of race strategy and tactics, i.e. business strategy and plans – this is not a once off need, it tends to occur at regular intervals, in many organizations about every six months.

On the other hand, some of the best crew development occurs on the boat in the race. There are times, however, when there is no need to take the crew off the boat and work with them in the boat shed – indeed, it can become an excuse for not solving the operational problems in racing the boat in real time. I have noticed some groups where the executive or lead person hires the consultant or facilitator to work with the group off-site and solve some problem and does so with an unseemly frequency. It tends to appear like an avoidance pattern. I can't help wondering what is at stake when this pattern occurs – is it the competence level of the executive or lead person, or do the crew not have sufficient good problem solving and coaching skills. If team members can coach one another, if they have good problem solving and process skills then there are many problems and difficulties that can be solved on the boat in the race in real time.

conversations for organizations

Some fascinating discussions can emerge in corporations based on this advertisement –

- What is the race in which we compete?
- Do we have the right people as crew?

- How well trained is the crew?
- How well do they function with one another?
- Are they filling the best positions on the boat?
- Do they have enough functional connection with one another to operate with goodwill and confidence?
- How well do they understand the overall race strategy and tactics?
- How skilled are they in solving problems together in real time?
- How competent are they to coach one another to improvement in real time?
- How functional is the boat itself?
- Who is competition?
- What is the weather through which we have to sail?
- How do we stay alert to changes in the weather or the competition?
- Are we still seeking the same destination as when we left dock?
- Are we one boat or an armada?

These questions and many others arise from the metaphors and can supply a group of people with a rich and fruitful conversation.

In the case of mergers, acquisitions or takeovers the metaphor can also instruct us about some things to which we might attend. For example there is the immediate question of whether there will have one boat or two? In other words, are we to run the integrated entity as two separate units (a conglomerate) or do we intend to truly integrate the two separate companies into a new one?

Having answered this, other questions begin to emerge. For example, whose boat we might use in the race? In other words, which of systems, procedures, practices and approaches of the two companies shall become the way forward? Information technology, finance, human resources, production, performance measurement - these and many other areas require decisions as to which way will become the norm. Then the question of whether the race is still the same arises ... what will be the fundamental purpose of the new entity. Are sailing conditions and the waters through which it will travel still the same - the integrated entity needs to review and create again (in some way) its fundamental understanding of the market, the competition and how they both position the entity in the market

place and how they go to market.

The integration of two crews represents the biggest challenge. A crew develops habits, norms and cultures that become quite embedded through the shared experience of common endeavor, particularly when some of that experience has involved adversity. Giving up these habits and ways of seeing the world is not easy at the best of time, least of all in a merger or acquisition.

It is a reality that in any merger or acquisition there will be a dominant group emerge over time, even if it wasn't obvious from the start. Most people understand and accept this fact. But the fact itself, does not prevent some other equally significant questions arising.

For example, the dominant "crew" can either consciously or unconsciously say to the other crew

- Do it our way "Just do as we tell you"
- We've bought you, now we'll fix you up. "Let's give them the tools so their management can fix this thing up"
- We've bought you, we'll fix you up and get everything we can out of the deal. "Let's give them the tools so their management can fix this thing up and get everything we can out of it"
- We going to leave you alone but get as much as we can out of you. "Let's leave it alone and just take the cash"
- We want what you have. "Let's learn and acquire their technology or skills and make ourselves better in the process"
- Together we will create the future. "Let's go for win-win and become best of breed together"

It needs to be said that intended or not, one of these messages will become the one received to the non-dominant crew. Thus, mergers and acquisitions do require time in the boat shed for both crews to form a new crew.

Indeed in the first year or two, the frequency of boat shed activities might end comparatively high – there will be feelings resentments, hopes, fears, losses to be articulated and negotiated; trust, confidence and goodwill with new colleagues need to be established.

These things are all legitimate boatshed activities. But, as noted before, they do need to be undertaken in the context of a shared understanding and commitment to the new race, weather, competition, and especially the new boat. Indeed, if such gatherings do not have a clear focus related to creating the added value that lay as the core reason for merger or acquisition in the first place, they will quickly lose both value and legitimacy as crew meetings.

conclusion

The boat metaphor also suggests some principles for consultants and executives to bear in mind when deciding interventions – their scope and style, but these lie outside the scope of this short paper.

I have become increasingly convinced in recent years that an effective executive keeps his or her eye on the race, the weather, the competition the boat and the crew – all are equally important and a focus on one at the expense of the others can bring the boat and its crew into peril. That is, a leader needs to be clear about business purpose and goals, environment and competition, the corporation's systems and technology and its people – it is their responsibility to hold all of these simultaneously in their gaze and act on any one of them in the context of the others.



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¹ Culture is woefully misunderstood and misused as a concept among line managers and HR personnel in many organizations. They generally use it when they would be much better off using concepts such as artefacts, normative behavioral patterns, organizational climate or espoused corporate values.



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