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## **TOTAL SYSTEM MANAGEMENT: The Leader as Convoy Commander**

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### Here's the situation:

- 1- You are commander of an 100 merchant ship convoy of desperately needed supplies and troops that must go from Norfolk, VA to Southhampton, England. Because the best crews and captains have all joined the navy, the crews and staffs of your ships include a lot of recent merchant marine academy graduates, and a lot of retirees who have re-upped.
- 2- It's Winter 1942. This means lots of wind, high waves, and unanticipated storms.
- 3- Its *WWII*; German U-boats can be expected, you just don't know where.

### Your Job:

"Lead" the convoy to England.

As leader of a diverse grouping of 100 individual ships and crews, what do you need to *know* and *do* to be successful? First, "know": In order to have a manageable leadership process, what do you need to know about the nature of the work in which the convoy is involved, and what do you need to know about the people doing that work?

Let's start with the people. You're already aware of the external conditions, above, in which you must work. Now, you'd better know specifically who you are leading, what they do, and whether or not you trust them to do it. Then, depending on your answers to those questions, you better have a leadership process that addresses both the general external and specific internal realities that provide the context for your work as leader.

But with 100 captains of varying skills and experience -- in 100 ships of varying seaworthiness -- how can you possibly answer those questions? Let's look first at trust.

### **Can you trust them?**

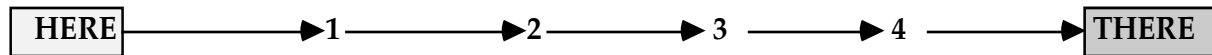
This is not the right question. "Do you have any choice but to trust them?" is. The real choices then come once you realize trust is not a choice. For example, now you can operate in one of two modes: Trust, but Verify or Trust, and Inform.

If you choose the former you will require frequent reporting of status and position from each of the 100 ships, and a large staff to help you monitor and understand the information received so you can provide them with new directions and courses. If you choose Trust, and Inform you will spend

your resources making sure they have information that they need for their work in accomplishing the convoy's mission. This information may come from you and from the tools and processes you provide them for gathering and using it.

### But what is their work?

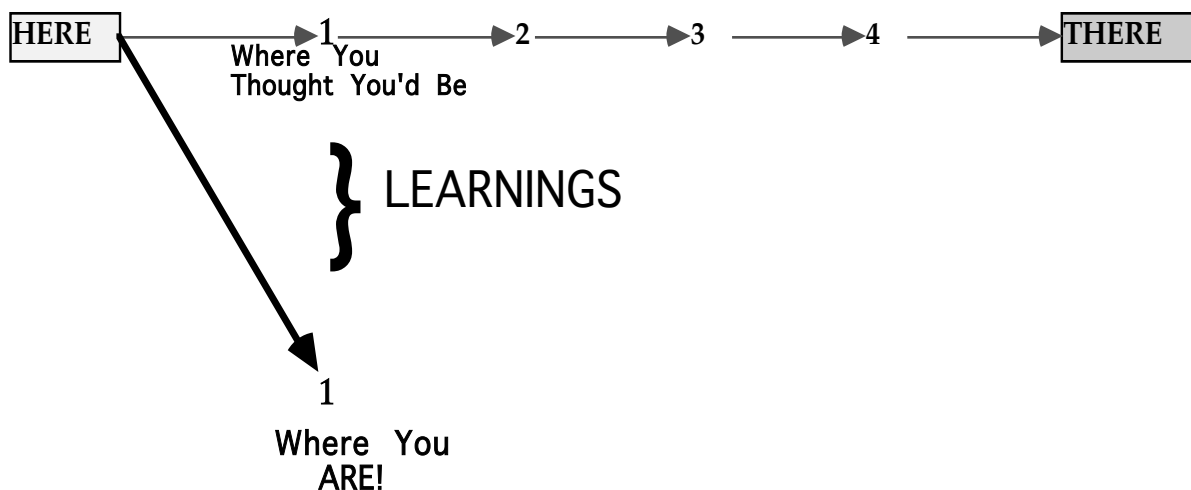
In it's simplest form, as an organization or system, the convoy's, and each ship's, *work* is getting from "here" to "there." In fact, initial plans usually look like that - a straight line connecting "here" to "there" with some intermediate check points along the way so one can assess progress.



But, you, and everyone else, know that in an ocean of dynamic changing forces [few of which you control] the captain is not accountable for maintaining that exact, pre-planned course; only for getting "there." Actually, the planned course has little meaning beyond serving as an initial direction setter.

Acknowledging reality [that is, that best intentions will be affected by forces beyond ones control] changes the nature of the *core management process*, of *leadership*, and of *accountability*. "Getting There," for each ship, now involves two simultaneous problem-solving processes: one short-term and situational, the other long-term and final.

So what does reality dictate as the core work of management for each ship? Because one can assume that when check point 1 is reached there is a good chance the ship won't be where the plan indicated it would be . . . it now is more important to know where one is and why; then, in light of that data, to predict a best new course toward the ultimate goal. The discrepancy between "planned" and "actual," which in Management-by-Objectives serves as a negative indicator of performance, now becomes the source for continual learning and prediction. Accountability for the unit shifts to knowing where it is, rather than where it said it thought it would be, for the journey ahead is continually re-plotted, with each decision, from the point where it is.



The nature of the front-line unit's "decisions" informed by this continual learning process require a different form of support than do those of the Convoy Commander back in port. Standing on the bridge, the individual ship's leader is involved in a flow of *reactive*, situational decisions, each influenced by results of previous ones. Their "decisions" are best judgments informed by current status data, understanding of capabilities, and expectations. As Convoy Commander, you are accountable for the ongoing generation of, access to, and use of that information and knowledge.

To fulfill that accountability, you have built into the fundamental work routines of each unit the tools and processes to continuously monitor and analyze three critical pieces of knowledge that are

criteria for continuing decision-making . . . to *know where its going*, to *know where it is*, and to continually understand it's present *capacity for getting there*.

For example, each unit must have as part of its fundamental work routines tools and processes that continuously monitor, analyze, and use those three critical pieces of knowledge as criteria for on-going situational decision-making. With the knowledge developed from these tools and processes each unit can continuously connect *where it is* to *where it is going*, understand its present *capacity for getting there*, and have *access to experiences* of those who have gone before.

### **Leadership Tools**

What tools and processes do you control that enable you to fulfill your accountability for support of each of those outcomes?

- *Knowing where to go* -- You ensure that on each bridge, and more importantly, in each captain's head, is a common map - or *vision* - that provides a perspective within which they can simultaneously sense where they are, where they are going, and their relationships to the known conditions they'll encounter along the way. It would not be effective to have some ships with maps based on Mercator projections of the Atlantic [on which the shortest distance is a curve] and some with Polar projections [on which the same route shows as a straight line.] It would be practically impossible to communicate across "visions." Thus your common map facilitates use of a common language for management.

Additionally, the work of each component of the convey is directly influenced by two criteria: a common goal -- Southampton -- and to a common mission - *getting there safely*. Together with the reality data from continuing internal and external monitoring, these three serve as the primary criteria for the continuous flow of situational judgments that drive the work of "getting there."

- *Knowing where you are* and *why* you are there -- Because they are, first and foremost, accountable for knowing where they are, the ship's captains' continual judgments require ways to take in and process information that can support understanding of present status and capabilities.

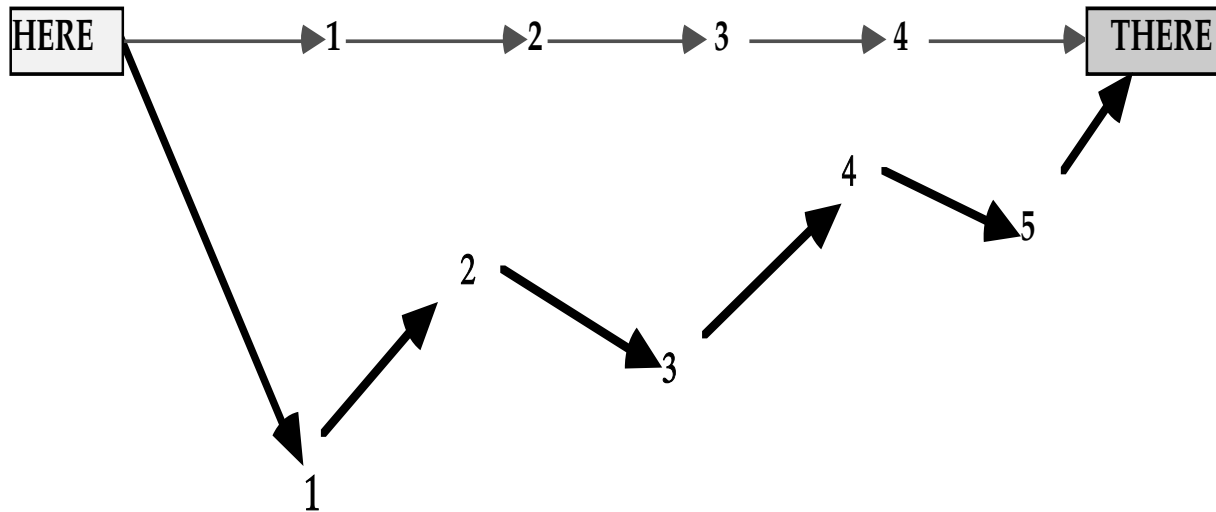
But unfortunately one cannot predict a new course from just knowing where one is and where one wants to go. There are too many other variables that can influence the journey. Some are external forces such as wind or currents. So individual units need ways to scan their immediate environment, such as radar, sonar, along with wind and current monitors. These provide data that can help anticipate their influence. Your accountability as Convoy Commander, is to ensure they have the tools and processes to do that.

- *Knowing one's capacities* to act - -Some of these variables are internal processes that can affect speed and navigability. Each ship is, in itself, a system of these processes or connected acts that accomplish a purpose. The captain needs to know what they are capable of accomplishing and have the dials and gauges that provide continuing data to monitor these processes thus allowing their use in prediction.

- *Tapping experiences of others* -- You must also provide access to information they cannot generate or gather themselves. Telecommunications provides access to information from peers sharing similar experiences throughout the convoy; and serves as the source of continuing intelligence and early warning information from the Convoy Commander's staff who have access to a wider perspective [the "Big Picture"] and other sources of data beyond the capability of individual units to gather.

- *Putting it all together and using it* -- In providing means to continually generate and access data and information, you also require that each have processes that can help it use that information to inform its understanding. For example, you require that each ship has someone accountable for *listening and learning* -- a navigator -- who regularly uses the incoming external and internal information to support learning and prediction. Since information is being used for these positive purposes, rather than judgment and blame, the more frequent the assessment, the better. In such a process, continuous learning is a basic requirement for survival, not an improvement strategy.

With the common, convoy-wide information infrastructure created by the tools and processes you have provided, each ship's work -- "getting there" -- now appears as a continuous series of best judgments that home-in on a desired goal. . . progress based on continuous assessment of short term results in a long term direction.



### **Back to the Future**

In this trip to the past, you have been a leader accountable for *Total System Management* of a learning system... or more appropriately, a *system of learners*. You have managed a diverse group of units as a *system* to ensure that achieve common survival-related goals to which they are individually and collectively committed.

As your convoy fulfilled its mission, you dealt successfully with the four "problems" that Ackoff suggested are at the core of all of today's management concerns.

- First, *problems were addressed interactively, not independently.*
- Second, your organization was designed to *learn and adapt effectively, under conditions of increasingly rapid change.*
- Third, you managed the convoy so as to *serve the purposes of its parts and, in so doing, the organization.*
- Fourth, in better serving the purposes of the organization [the convoy], you *helped serve the purposes of the society of which the organization was part* [you helped win the war!]

Now, the question is to what extent would *Total System Management* of this type work for the institutional journeys upon which today's schools must navigate?

- Is not survival a growing issue, not just for public education, but increasingly, for individuals -- both students and staffs -- within it?

- While we may define "getting there" slightly differently, we all share a common map or vision that has at its core a commitment to the fact that every child can learn.

- And isn't a school district just a convoy of convoys: a system of sub-systems? For example, isn't the classroom a convoy [system] of students? The building, a convoy [system] of teachers? And the district, a convoy [system] of schools?

## **Systems Leadership Requirements**

Although *systems* leadership and management build on *natural* individual and collective survival behavior, accepting this for schools may not be easy. This becomes clearer once one is willing to compare the assumptions underlying the human work in both systems - the convoy and the schools.

First, note what beliefs or assumptions your leadership actions seemed to accept about the convoy:

- The roles and actions played by everyone in the convoy reflected natural (purposeful, goal-seeking) human behavior. These were just the ways people working together would *naturally* accomplish their mutual purposes . . . if given the *Trust, Time* and *Tools* to act on their intrinsic beliefs and drives. . . and if their lives depended on it!

- Because you were involved in a situation driven by critical, life-threatening conditions, this eliminated a lot of "choices" you might have had for managing differently. For example,

-you had no choice but to "let" each captain run his own ship within a larger framework you provided;

-you had no choice but to play a complementary role that would link the parts of the convoy into a whole -- a system with capabilities for survival beyond what any one component could develop for itself.

**Sometimes having *no choice* leads us to do the *right things*.**

- Each unit's accountabilities were to their own survival and security, and at the same time, sharing responsibility for the successful accomplishment of their (and the system's) mission. Your choice as leader was to inform and empower these intrinsic motivations since their fulfillment was a vital prerequisite for accomplishing your overall purposes. As Peter Senge notes: to control things in complex, dynamic situations, each must have contextual knowledge of how things *fit*; and power to make decisions within their own "box."

- You also have accepted that not everything can be anticipated nor controlled. Thus the core management process of each unit had to have the capacity to adjust to the needs of continuously changing situations. Your *system* management must support this continuous process of awareness (information intake,) learning (analysis and prediction,) and continuous adjustment. To reinforce everyone's understanding that this is *the-way-we-do-business*, you hold each unit accountable for that learning process.

How do these assumptions compare to those that underlie many leadership acts in schools?

- We have assumed that because each teacher and principal is accountable for total navigation of his/her "ship," that meant they could function *alone*.

- We have expected that, without continuous interaction with support systems, somehow they could respond to the dynamic complexities impacting the flow of daily situational decisions they must make; and at the same time stay on course towards accomplishing society's larger systemic objectives.

- We have assumed that a coherent system of education required aligning the *intended* curriculum, the *taught* curriculum and the *tested* curriculum -- an assumption apparently based on another -- that instruction is the delivery or presentation of curriculum. This misunderstanding of the *work process* of schools is comparable to assuming that ships reach their destinations by traveling in straight lines.

Remember, the convoy's goals and plans for achieving them were in alignment, but these two important elements were just the two poles for a *continual, local, goal-driven problem-solving management process* -- a process of planning and acting that required continuous, situational choices based on knowing where one is and what one's options are for acting - always in the direction of the larger system's goals. Accepting the reality of that process "drove" the convoy's systemic support for continuous learning and improvement.

Similarly, schools *systems* require *instructionally*-driven systemic support and alignment, as opposed to *curriculum*-driven. How is this different?

The core work process [instruction] requires knowing and continually starting from where students are. In connecting district and building support processes to this need curriculum goals still play an important direction-setting role, but do not serve as the primary criterion for judgment.

- And, finally, we have assumed that the learning required for continuous improvement of professional practice was an "after-work," in-service activity rather than a survival requirement that had to be a natural consequence of the daily work process.

### **A manageable choice, when we have no choice**

Assumptions like these have been questioned by many reformers, but seldom accompanied by a comprehensive, manageable answer. We now do have a manageable choice. District-wide, *total system management* can provide a process that can:

- build on the context and direction-setting provided by system-wide agreement on outcomes;
- focus the total system's daily attention on the common mission;
- bring to the instructional work setting the trust and time to empower more natural forms of collaborative work;
- provide the tools and strategies necessary to continually generate information required to maintain a journey of incremental improvement; and
- transform "site-based management" into *learner*-based management.

Tom Peters has said that "Today, loving change and even chaos is a prerequisite for survival, let alone success." He was not quite right. We don't have to love change, only acknowledge and deal with it through total system management processes that we already know work in environments of constant change.

In a school system totally managed for quality outcomes, we can keep our focus on where students are; maintain commitment to where they must be; and sustain *total management* of the processes for getting there.

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(For an example of how these principles play out in actual systemic practice, see [The Convoy Revisited: How did it Steer and Develop its capacity at the same time?](#))