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No. of pages transmitted (including this cover) _2_

Jobs vs. *Roles*

If we only had a *theory*....!

When things don't work people automatically want to know why. When things work however, we seldom ask that question. And when we do, we may point to someone's *theory* as the way to explain it. But this can be a problem when actions are ahead of the "theory-makers" -- [who do their work by looking for patterns across people's actions.]

So this is a particular problem right now for me in trying to describe actions you and James have taken in one particular area -- hiring and placing key staff on your teams. I'll try to describe it by "pretending" that there is a *theory* -- one that addresses the fundamental difference between <u>jobs</u> and <u>roles</u>. And by suggesting some implications you might want to consider if such a "theory" really existed.

<u>Actions:</u>

• Some of the people you have placed in key positions seem to have been chosen based upon their personal knowledge, experiences and strengths rather than their job histories. One might conclude that they were chosen in terms of their capacities to fill "roles" rather than "jobs."

<u>Theory:</u>

This is more than a semantic issue. Until now, we haven't had ways to differentiate between the *work* of the <u>organization</u> and the *work* of the <u>individuals</u> in it. For the former, <u>roles</u> people play are more important, for the latter-- <u>job descriptions.</u> For example:

Roles get their meaning from their relationship to an organization's purposes, goals, context, etc. Two people in the same job could play different roles in the organization depending on how other people perceive each person's strengths, and the relationships they create to capitalize on them. When management theorists say leaders "manage relationships," they haven't also noted that roles are a function of relationships; that the roles we play are shaped by other's needs, and our own will. Because of *system*-blindness, we haven't been able to look at people's *roles* in the system. [i.e., in relationship to what the *system* needs.] We haven't regularly asked "What does the system need from them that they are uniquely positioned to provide?"

Jobs get all the attention. Jobs are what people are hired into, and which establish frameworks for comparable pay, and "accountability." The problem, however, is that these "jobs" are defined from a belief that they are separate, isolated, activities undertaken by *autonomous* individuals. As an example, listen to the common theme in complaints from both teachers and principals about the impossible conditions in which they work that don't allow them to do what they went into education to do. The underlying cause of both their problems -- they are trying to do "jobs," and are held accountable for their performance in those "jobs." But then they were placed in a <u>system</u> of *interdependent* "roles" intended to influence common purposes and outcomes.

"…and so these men of Indostan   Each in his own opinion   Though each was partly in the right,
    disputed loud and long.   Exceeding stiff and strong.   They all were in the wrong!"
                                                                The Parable of the Blind Men & The Elephant

People who are held accountable within that framework find it impossible to survive for long without creating ways to "beat the system." [One example that job descriptions don't connect is to have everyone "work by the book" -- the organization loses its effectiveness. Much of the creative, effective work gets done everyday by people breaking the rules of their "jobs."]

Implications

It seems to me that this "theory" supports the actions you've taken to create and fill MCPS leadership *roles*. [Some in those positions still can't "figure out" why they were chosen over others with possibly better resumes.] But if the theory is valid, then it has an additional implication that the staff is struggling with.

Unfortunately, it's another of those *Yin/Yang* or *particle/wave* conditions. That is, it is the system's job to support simultaneously both the *roles* and the *individuals* doing jobs within them. This requires being able to separate *organizational development* issues from those of *professional development.*

To support *roles*, system leaders must ask: "what are the continuing requirements and needs of that *role* regardless of who fills it?" That's an OD question.

The comparable professional development question is: "What are the requirements and needs of each specific person in each role at this time?"

The answers to each are different. The first requires a regular, *sustainable* support *infrastructure*; the second, accessible, responsive *just-in-time* support mechanisms.

As the two "halves" of the Leadership Team continue to define their interdependent *roles* it might be useful to have them also "pretend' that this was a "real" theory. Operating as if it were true might help them see some additional ways to deploy their own staffs, as well as some new operational relationships.

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