

ODEA E-BOOK SERIES

# THINKING ABOUT THE BOX

Why Structure and Design  
Matter So Much



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# INTRODUCTION

**S**tructure drives behavior.

There you have it; the predominant theme of this e-book.

Whether you have realized it or not, you've bumped up against this concept if you've spent any time at all working in organizations. You may not have realized it, because it is pretty deep below the surface of our workplace experiences. But, like gravity, structure-drives-behavior is always and everywhere exerting its considerable influence.

As a result of my OD master's work and subsequent years immersed in OD theory and practice --- and some natural gifts that I was late in discovering --- I now am keenly aware of the gravity of structure. I see the dynamic in action in a myriad of organizational problems as my business partners and colleagues only grapple with its powerful effects.

One example: An accomplished, well-respected leader resigns a few months after accepting an assignment to turn around a key underperforming function. It is a regrettable loss; and the priority temporarily shifts to finding another strong leader to accept the challenge. Over their monthly breakfast meeting the CHRO reminds her C-level peers that this is the third leader in three years to opt out of that role after being placed in to lead the fix... A clear pattern emerges, a classic sign that there is some structural flaw that is driving not only those strong leaders to abandon ship but also the intractable functional underperformance. Finding another strong leader --- even an out-of-the-box thinker --- to tackle the challenge will no doubt be yet another "fix" that fails...

What is really needed is to think ABOUT the box!

*Structure drives behavior* is the foundational insight of my work. I started blogging in 2012 --- [johnponders.com](http://johnponders.com), *about life at work*

## THINKING ABOUT THE BOX

*mostly*. Some of my most impactful posts explored this structure-drives-behavior dynamic.

These eight curated posts all orbit around that central point. Three were inspired by workplace experiences (*Grasping, Sprinkling the Pixie Dust, Stricken*) while another uses a work experience to give a practical application of a more esoteric citation (“*Close Cover Before Striking*”). Other posts attempt to pull lessons through thought experiments (*Fighting the Physics, Thinking ABOUT the Box, Pieces/Parts,*). Rounding out this grouping is a post that simply spins a pretty compelling quote into an organizational context (*Practice*).

I feel it important to explicitly note that this is *not* a how-to book on organization structure and design. My intention here is for you to ponder the structural dynamics when considering current problems, dilemmas, and opportunities. Instead of how-to, it really is about the critically important *why* that explains the struggles we experience when the structure is not right and the frustrating fixes-that-fail cycle that churns when we don't think ABOUT the box when crafting solutions...

To get us started thinking ABOUT the box we'll fly some paper airplanes...

# FIGHTING THE PHYSICS

Originally published April 9, 2012



*“Grab a piece of paper. Make your best paper airplane.”*

And the management workshop immediately takes off!

*“Okay, let ‘em fly!”*

Some take flight spectacularly. Others not so much. This usually causes some guffaws, and some good natured ribbing. I generally pick one of the more “flight-challenged” ones ---

*“Okay, Bill, come on up to the front of the room. Here’s what I want you to do. I want you to fly your plane right down the center of the room. Aim right for Debbie, right at her! and have it land on the table right in front of her. Can you picture that? Be positive. You can do it! Okay, keep the vision of that flight in your mind, and let it fly.”*

The airplane generally goes anywhere but down the center of the room. Debbie is momentarily relieved.

*"Bill; let's try again. You can do this! I believe in you. Remember the vision? Right down the center of the room, right at Debbie. But this time, let me give you a quick training lesson. Hold your airplane a third of the way from the point, between your thumb and forefinger. Flex your elbow, pull it back, envision the flight, and then advance your arm and release. Okay, try it."*

The airplane again goes anywhere but down the center of the room. Debbie starts to realize she has nothing to fear.

*"Okay, Bill, let's get serious. I've got twenty dollars here (as I pull a twenty out of my pocket) and it is all yours if you simply fly your plane down the center of the room, right at Debbie, and have it land right in front of her. Envision the flight, use the technique I showed you, and think of that twenty. Okay, go!"*

The airplane now goes ... not down the center. And not by Debbie; she's pretty relaxed and smiling now...

*"Alright Bill. (My tone has changed.) "Bill, I told you I believe in you, and still do, but this is your plane to fly. I asked you to envision your plane flying down the center, to Debbie. I trained you. I even motivated you with a twenty in cash. I'm running out of patience. I need you to fly your plane down the center of the room at Debbie. Or else. Do it."*

Nothing different; no improvement whatsoever.

*"I don't understand. I believed in you Bill. I helped you envision success. I trained you. I motivated you. And then I threatened you. And now I need to fire you..."*

Often in these sessions, after one or two unsuccessful flights I see the "pilot" start adjusting the paper plane: a different fold there, a bending of the wings, sharper folds at the point... When I see this, I react --- "Whoa!" What are you doing?"

*Fighting the physics is what we do when we expect results from a system that has not been designed to produce those results.*



## FIGHTING THE PHYSICS

*“Adjusting the plane so it will fly better.”*

Hmmm. Yes indeed. Adjusting the plane to fly better.

Paper planes --- and organizations --- fly as they are designed. Their performance is fundamentally by design.

And when we want a certain type or level of performance from a paper plane or organization that is not designed to produce that performance, we are in fact “fighting the physics.”

Fighting the physics is what we do when we expect results from a system that has not been designed to produce those results. It reflects an ignorance of cause and effect; it points fingers and places blame on the people in the system instead of the design of the system.

- We fight the physics when we expect teamwork while rewarding individual achievement.
- We fight the physics when we encourage innovation while emphasizing sacred cows, third rails, and CLMs (career-limiting moves).
- We fight the physics when we expect speed and responsiveness in customer service while structuring multiple layers, enforcing centralized decision making and requiring formal communication channels.
- We fight the physics when we expect efficiency while not investing in repeatable processes and enabling technology.

Now; there’s nothing wrong with positive thinking; research supports the benefits of a positive mental attitude. Research also supports how envisioning an outcome can help actualize the vision. No doubt that when we have a skill or knowledge gap, training makes a difference. Incentives, be they monetary or otherwise, certainly do get our attention. As do threats.

But if the ~~organization~~ plane was not designed to fly down the center of the room and land in front of Debbie, no amount of positive thinking, envisioning, training, motivation, and threats will fundamentally and substantially improve its performance.

## THINKING ABOUT THE BOX

Fighting the physics always results in the physics winning.

Debbie is safe.

We are not.

# “CLOSE COVER BEFORE STRIKING”

*Originally published March 11, 2012*



**G**ot a match?

Matches aren't quite so prevalent these days, but back in the day, they were; and back in the day, they were a problem.

The way that problem was solved provides a spectacular lesson for leaders of organizations.

The matchbook was widely used in the early 1900s. People would detach a single match, put the match head in between

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the cover and the striking surface, and pull the match out; the friction thus igniting the match head. A problem started to become apparent: with alarming frequency, the spark igniting the one match inadvertently lit all the other matches in the book. Yikes! Clearly, this was not good!

Eventually, a corrective action was implemented; the “close cover before striking” phrase was printed on the matchbook cover, educating the user and raising the awareness of the potential issue.

Problem solved.

Not so fast ... this corrective action did reduce the frequency of the entire matchbook going up in flames in people’s hands, but, as usage continued to grow, there remained an unacceptably high number of incidents.

*Any solution that requires understanding and compliance will inevitably have an error rate. Often, a better answer can be found.*

Why? Because this “solution” assumed that the user was able to read and understand the instruction; furthermore, it required the user to act in response to the instruction.

Any solution that requires understanding and compliance will inevitably have an error rate. Some people will not understand; some people, while understanding, will not comply. While sometimes unavoidable, often, a better answer can be found. A *dissolution*; an elegant answer that dissolves the problem.

An elegant dissolution was eventually found.

Do you have a book of matches lying around? Or just scroll back up to that matchbook picture; do you see the elegant dissolution?

The matchbook was redesigned by moving the abrasive striking surface to the back of the matchbook instead of the front.

That simple redesign did the trick! The redesigned matchbook did not require the user to read, understand, or comply to any-

“CLOSE COVER BEFORE STRIKING”

thing. The problem went away, completely, entirely. Problem *dissolved*.

I can hear your SO WHAT? ringing in my ears ... Perhaps a real live business example is in order.

During an executive culture-building session with associates several years back, one hourly participant related the situation of store associates needing to clock out for lunch by using the cash register on the sales floor. After clocking out and while walking through the store to the lunch room, customers often ask these associates for assistance, which takes time away from their lunch break. This was a problem, since many associates did not want to give up even a minute or two of their earned break; they often were not very helpful to the customer asking for assistance.

The executive emphasized the cultural value of *Focus on the Customer*, and talked about staying committed, true and consistent with that value, and therefore helping the customer regardless of the fact that the associate had already clocked out.

“Close cover before striking.”

Requires compliance to be effective. And self-sacrifice to boot! We would expect far less than 100% compliance... implying poor customer service...

I suspect you already know what the elegant dissolution would have been --- relocate the clock out computer off the sales floor!

Future posts will drive more into this dynamic, so to not extend this post too much further, the spectacular lesson is that structure drives behavior.

It is in leaders' DNA to attribute performance problems to people, with the resulting corrective actions revolving around training and performance management.

“Close cover before striking.”

## THINKING ABOUT THE BOX

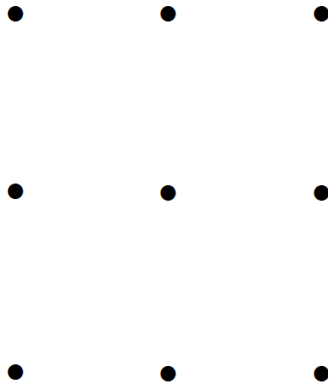
Instead, leaders would be much better served by asking: “What factors are causing people to have that problem?” Which will lead to ...

... elegant dissolutions!

And no one getting burned.

# THINKING ABOUT THE BOX

*Originally published September 10, 2012*



*The exhortation to think outside the box has become ubiquitous in business. [But] the advice is backwards. You cannot possibly think outside the box unless you understand the nature of the box that bounds your current thinking. You must come to know that nature deeply. You must have real insight into it. You must accept it, and embrace it at some level, before it will ever release you.*

*--- Dan Pallotta, Stop Thinking Outside the Box*

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**R**emember the nine dot challenge? Using four straight lines and without lifting your pencil off the paper, connect all nine dots.

## THINKING ABOUT THE BOX

On the off chance that you haven't run into this before (or have forgot!) give it a go and see if you can solve it before we continue.

If you're stuck, here's a tip --- your lines can begin and end anywhere. Now try it.

To solve this problem, we need to think outside the box, literally.

But to think outside of the next box, we need to understand that our struggle with this one came from the assumption that we made.

We need to think about that. There was no box! There was only the assumption of one...

Business leaders create boxes --- strategy; business model; organizational structure; policy; work processes; culture. In fact, we might extend the metaphor and consider each of these a corrugated wall...

*Exhortations to think outside the box are clear indications that the box is constraining.*

But those walls are corrugated assumptions! Assumptions about customer needs and wants; about competitor strengths and weaknesses; about technologies; about human behavior...

Leaders go to significant lengths to create a box that holds the promise of profit. And they are highly skilled at it; there is often impressive growth, significant profit, and engagement.

Until there isn't. Something changes. Something always does. Then they exasperatingly demand that we think outside the box!

These exhortations to think outside the box are clear indications that the box is constraining. Assumptions need to be challenged.

It's time to think ABOUT the box.

This, to some of you, might be reminiscent of the paper airplane post; asking people to think outside the box while they're in it



## THINKING ABOUT THE BOX

is fighting the physics. It's also akin to the matchbook; thinking outside the box might be able to solve a problem, but it won't dissolve it..

So here's what I really think (!) ---

Leaders really do want people to stay inside the box 95% of the time. And, truth be known, we want the same thing, because that's where we do our best work.

The crux of the matter is when staying inside the box is no longer working like it did ... when leaders need their people to shift and think differently and get creative and innovate... they need to invest in building another box; a different box; a box that will allow people to once again be effective inside it, together.

And it's not just up to leaders. They don't always feel our bumping up against all those different corrugated walls.

Which is why I would absolutely love to hear leaders exhort: "People! Let's think ABOUT the box!"

I'll retire a happy OD consultant when *that* exhortation becomes ubiquitous.



# PRACTICE

*Originally published September 9, 2013*



*Amateurs practice until they get it right; professionals practice until they can't get it wrong.*

*[Originating source unknown]*

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**L**OVE this!

Simple and straightforward, yet; ponderable...

Amateurs practice to learn how to do something. So they can do it correctly. So they can get it right.

An amateur's practice is about expanding possibility. Building capability. So they can do that thing that they want to do.

But a professional's practice is quite different! Professionals practice so they can get it right ... every. single. time.

## THINKING ABOUT THE BOX

They practice until they're confident they can't get it wrong.

For professionals, it's not enough to know that they can do something. They practice so they can know they can always do it!

*Are there amateur organizations and professional organizations?*

We might say that a professional's practice is all about building exceptional capability; the capability to always perform, despite the myriad factors that can inhibit, or constrain.

To perform without exception.

\* \* \* \* \*

Up to now, I've stayed within the framing of the quote. By that I mean I've explored the concept from the point of view of the individual. Amateurs, and professionals.

But my pondering leads me to expand the application.

Are there amateur organizations and professional organizations?

And when considering "practice" within an organizational context, some killer questions pop:

- Are there amateur organizations that design, staff, train, and invest in developing the organization to enable meeting business goals ... and professional organizations that design, staff, train, and invest in developing the organization to enable exceptional and sustained business performance?
- Are there organizations that at one time were "professional", actually committing to investing in developing capabilities that would lead to exceptional performance, but somewhere along the way began operating in a way we might now describe as amateurish, wanting to simply be able to meet current performance expectations?

## PRACTICE

- Are there amateur organizations that invest just enough to get it right and professional organizations that invest to insure they can perform without exception?

For me?

Yes, yes, and yes.

For you?



# GRASPING

*Originally published August 27, 2012*



*“Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, else  
what’s a heaven for?”*

*--- Robert Browning*

---

I ran across this quote many, many years ago. It was a curious quote to me back then; I wasn’t sure what to make of it. You could say I couldn’t quite grasp its meaning ...

But, over the years, I’ve made sense of it. I’ve got it now. In fact, since I’ve gotten it, I’ve flipped it into something more meaningful, for me, in my work.

## THINKING ABOUT THE BOX

I was recently sitting in on an executive session kicking off the strategic planning cycle. I used the quote as I was making a point in the meeting. I am not at all sure I should have used it, because when I used it I used my flipped meaning and not the standard, widespread meaning.

(I also doubt that I should have used it because, well, strategic planning meetings aren't exactly forums for poetry readings... but, alas, I'm always seeking to be impactful when making my points...)

Back to the quote, and the strategic planning meeting.

By most accounts, Robert Browning was talking about the notion of aspirations. Reach for the stars! He was advocating for setting challenging goals.

He goes on to note --- with an astonishing economy of words --- that we should not expect to achieve those lofty goals; but never fear, there's always the afterlife...

So conversationally it might be no, go for it, just don't expect to get everything you go for! Heaven is where we get everything we want... If we accomplish everything we set out to accomplish, what is heaven for then?

Now you might be thinking how in the world that notion would be relevant to share in a business strategic planning meeting. I don't blame you, I would be thinking that too, if I intended to use that meaning.

But of course my application wasn't drawing on that meaning.

For me, the crux of the matter is to focus --- and work hard --- on minimizing the difference between our reach and our grasp.

*Strategic visions need to incorporate comprehensive strategic plans that emphasize building the requisite organizational capability.*

Now I'm not suggesting we necessarily not reach for the stars. This to me isn't an automatic we need to manage our expectations play, although that's where it could land. No; for me, it



## GRASPING

is way more about increasing our capabilities, i.e. improving our grasp. In more business / OD-speak, it is about tweaking and syncing up the structure, policies, work processes, culture, talent... the plane will fly based on how it's designed; shouldn't we redesign when we want it to fly differently?

<sigh>

I really don't lose my patience that often. Really, I don't. But there are times that test me, and one of those times is when I repeatedly see goals that are set with only perfunctory attention given to investing in building the organizational capability to reach them.

This is a particularly acute hot button because I really can't stand the predominant result of this --- leaders pointing fingers and placing blame at people, and not owning the root cause of the underperformance --- insufficient organizational design.

And there's an insidious reinforcing loop that's often in play --- when we set aggressive targets, but begin falling short because we haven't redesigned to enable the performance, leaders will react, make short-term decisions to reach the short-term targets (to get those year-end bonuses) but which weaken the organization's capability and leaders' decision-making ability to break the cycle and accomplish the longer-term strategic vision...

So there's this annual business strategy cycle that is my version of Bill Murray's groundhog day; please, please let me wake up to a new day and a strategic planning process that is different than the last several...

Please don't misunderstand; the strategic vision should be a stretch, it should challenge the organization to accomplish bigger and better in order to stay strong and competitive. Because it is the result of strategic thinking, a strategic vision can inspire, and energize. It can motivate to reach.

But strategic visions need to incorporate comprehensive strategic plans that emphasize building the requisite organizational capability.

## THINKING ABOUT THE BOX

These plans raise confidence that the strategic vision is realizable. These plans strengthen our grasp.

What do you think?

But wait, one last thing. Let's look one more time at that quote.

*Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, else what's a heaven for?*

What could that "Ah" mean?

I imagine Browning is saying but consider this or look at it this way ...

Ah, indeed. That's all I'm asking too...

# PIECES/PARTS

*Originally published July 16, 2012*



**W**herever you are at when reading this, your car is likely in the vicinity. I'm obviously playing the odds; most of us own cars, and most of us are almost always just a few steps away from it, or perhaps a short elevator ride from it.

And, for the minority of you that either don't own a car or are not around your car, let's assume for this exercise that there is at least some car in the neighborhood for you to have in mind...

Okay, let's get started. Let's take apart your car.

Literally; let's imagine that you and I and perhaps a friend or two go out to your car and disassemble it. Completely. And

## THINKING ABOUT THE BOX

then we carry all the pieces/parts to where you are right now reading this.

So you are now reading this with all of your car's pieces/parts around you.

Do you have your car with you now?

Of course, you would say no; you would say you have your car's pieces/parts all around you, but not your car. And of course you would be absolutely correct.

So now let's say we take all those pieces/parts and put them all back together again. Would you now say you have your car with you?

*The problem is not the pieces/parts, it is the interaction of the pieces/parts.*

You might say, well, yeah, I now have my car with me, if, of course, we put the pieces/parts together just the way they were before. Big if, I suspect, for most of you, and most of our friends, and, most certainly me.

You might further say that you have what looks like your car with you, but you'd have to be convinced that the pieces/parts were all put together properly.

How might you do that? You would, of course, need to drive your car.

So now we might add that you could only say that you have your car with you if in fact it works like a car should work.

Good god, John; get to the point please!

We're not quite there yet.

It's not about the pieces/parts; it is what the pieces/parts *do*. In fact, more specifically, it is what the pieces/parts do *together*.

It's about the whole. It's about the precision interactions; the information flow; the information processing; the outcome ... the result ... the performance.

SO WHAT! Criminy, John; why does this matter? Are we there *yet?*

## PIECES/PARTS

Let's think about fixing your car in an attempt to make the point of why this matters.

Other than in this exercise, when your car doesn't work right, what do you do? Depending on your knowledge of the car and how one works, you might throw your hands up immediately, have it towed to your local mechanic, and just say something like it just doesn't start!

Or you might say it doesn't start, and I think it's either the battery or the alternator ... and the mechanic will start testing the parts, starting with the first ones you've mentioned, unless of course they were preposterous suggestions *my car doesn't start and I think it's the suspension system...*

With our blog post scenario though, we know that all the pieces/parts worked perfectly fine before we took them apart and then reassembled them. (Let's just go with this assumption!) It is of course not the failure of one or multiple individual pieces/parts. All the individual pieces/parts are entirely capable of performing their unique function upon reassembly as they were before disassembly (assuming of course, that we didn't damage them in that process. Let's assume this as well please!).

So if the problem is not in the pieces/parts, it must be in the *interaction* of the pieces/parts.

We've been taught to analyze tough problems. Analyze means to separate into constituent elements, or parts. Break it down; take it a piece at a time; see what works and what doesn't work; isolate the cause of the problem, and then fix --- repair or replace --- it.

Often --- in fact, increasingly often, given the increasing complexity of things like technology and communication networks and such --- analysis is not quite what we need. What we need is to see the system of parts, to map the quality of the interaction of the parts, to find what is off, insufficient, or missing in the network of to and from, give and take; the input/process/output cycles that flow into other input/process/output cycles, to really diagnose the problem.

## THINKING ABOUT THE BOX

We need the opposite of analysis; we need synthesis. We need systems thinking.

I apologize; for in this post I have intentionally belabored. I have because I feel compelled to make the point that to think effectively systemically --- to holistically diagnose problems to get a solid read on cause and effect --- is not obvious, not straightforward, and most definitely not easy.

Hence, it is not common practice.

And when you do run across someone who thinks systemically, it can be irritating (like this blog post?) because it is long, comprehensive; it considers many factors, some entirely non obvious, and it is difficult to keep them all in scope and see them all together. I know from experience, being the irritator...

Systems thinkers tend to come off as know-it-alls. We actually do tend to know it all, just not in the way you think!

Speaking of irritation --- sorry about your car ... call your mechanic.

I would bet that if you have a great mechanic, he is a great systems thinker. He knows it's really not so much about the pieces/parts.

If he isn't a systems thinking mechanic; you'll know he isn't when you get the bill for a new battery and a new alternator and a new suspension. Ouch.

And therein lies the last point in this already too long post --- solving problems by analyzing, repairing and/or replacing the constituent pieces/parts is costly. Especially when the system in question is not a mechanical system like a car, but a social system like an organization.

Because there, the pieces/parts are people.

# STRICKEN

*Originally published January 31, 2013*



*When experience with uncontrollable events leads to the expectation that future events will elude control, disruptions in motivation, emotion, and learning may occur...*

*- Learned Helplessness: A Theory for the Age of Personal Control. Christopher Peterson, Steven F. Maier, Martin E. P. Seligman*

---

**T**his post is about the phenomenon of learned helplessness.

We *learn* to be helpless? Preposterous!

Not really. This is not some esoteric psychobabble. Yes, it does attempt to explain the curious behavior of otherwise normal and intelligent human beings by extrapolating from Pavlovian dogs in the laboratory ...

## THINKING ABOUT THE BOX

Yet, I can assure you, it is very real. I've seen it in my work. Past and present.

Here's the scenario, in three strikes.

### STRIKE ONE ---

*When experience with uncontrollable events...*

Let's start with imagining that we begin to experience events beyond our control. The nature of these events could be almost anything. The key point here is that they really are out of our control.

For example, let's say that, in your organization, a reorganization produces a series of promotions that all go to people from a particular division of the company. Unfortunately, not your division; soon the decisions coming out of the newly promoted leaders seem to give more weight and importance to their former people and projects, and not to you and your associates.

### STRIKE TWO ---

*...leads to the expectation that future events will elude control...*

You and your associates feel left out, ignored, disregarded. You feel marginalized. You no longer see opportunity for growth, for influence, for making a difference. You don't see a way that this situation will change.

### STRIKE THREE ---

*...disruptions in motivation, emotion, and learning may occur...*

You believe there's nothing to be done. About anything. You "learn" that you can no longer control any action, any decision, any direction. Your perception has shrunk your circle of influence, to nothing.

*Management team subcultures of learned helplessness very much exist. Maybe right now, in your organization.*

While you were once active and engaged; you are now passive and disaffected. There is no light; there is only shadow. This is not true, of course; but you can't see that, the shadow is all encompassing. There is nothing you can do. About anything.



## STRICKEN

Strike three, you're out.

Learned helplessness. You're stricken.

\* \* \* \* \*

Oh come on John; really?

Really. I wish it were not so. But management team subcultures of learned helplessness very much exist. Maybe right now, in your organization.

Let's be clear though. They don't shout it from the rooftops that they're helpless, much less that they've learned to be helpless. They put up a good front; they carry on.

But you can hear it in their language.

*Doesn't matter ... can't do anything about that ... it is what it is ... what are we going to do? ... If that's what they want us to do, so be it; we'll do it ...*

You can see it in their dispositions. There is no drive. No incentive. No response. What's the point?

They are boxed in.



# SPRINKLING THE PIXIE DUST

Originally published March 25, 2012



“What if we don’t change at all ...  
and something magical just happens?”

I was very new to the company.

I was in a meeting with the regional vice president and the regional staff. The region was underperforming. We were a few months into the new fiscal year, and we were already trending far short of our productivity target. It was time to act, to get back on track.

And then I heard the action that I immediately knew had absolutely, positively no leverage.

“We’ll just have to raise everybody’s goal then!” the RVP spouted.

## THINKING ABOUT THE BOX

Huh? I thought I had misheard. Raising a goal will help improve performance when performance is already short of the goal?

Inexplicable.

How can we make sense of this? I only have one theory ---the RVP and staff must believe that his management team and perhaps his associates are not putting forth their best effort. Somehow raising the goal to increase the gap between actual and expected will kick everyone in gear, and boost performance. It would be the increased dissonance that would provoke improved productivity.

I wouldn't bet on it, would you?

What I think was really going on (I didn't have this insight then) is that that RVP and his staff didn't have any idea how

to improve performance. They felt helpless; powerless. But they did have the power to set the bar. So they did what they could.

So, when on the national conference call he was asked about the disturbing early trend, he could confidently say: "Yes, I'm on top of that; I've already taken action."

Action without any leverage. Might as well sprinkle a little pixie dust!

But, beyond the fact that there's no way that action will prove effective, there's another consequence, a more insidious, more harmful, consequence.

This kind of leadership produces a loss of confidence; it produces a loss of hope by employees in the ability of their leaders to make decisions and take actions that make a difference.

So, if you're with me, what started as a leader and his staff being helpless to correct underperformance led to an action that actually produced helplessness in his people.

*What starts as a leader and his staff being helpless to correct underperformance leads to actions that produce helplessness in people.*

## SPRINKLING THE PIXIE DUST

Less than zero leverage. Not no effect; *negative* effect.

Absolutely, positively.

Pass the pixie dust please?



# CLOSING THOUGHTS

The way an organization is structured and designed matters a whole bunch to enable sustained success.

It must be fit for purpose.

The organization's strategic intent must be supported by resources --- capital and human --- that are strategically allocated, organized, and aligned. Down line decision rights and responsibilities must be clear and understood. Measurements must be translated, transparent, and timely.

And, of course, the organization needs to execute on its priorities. Quite unfortunately, when an organization is *not* fit for purpose, execution produces pain and underperformance.

When addressing organizational pain points, leaders' answers are almost always defined in terms of talent and culture. *Our people need to step up. They need to be more engaged, more creative; they need to innovate. And we need more A-players! Yes, and more/better training. And more accountability...*

Here's the thing: People are not the problem when organizations underperform.

Given a reasonably sound strategy, when organizations fall short, the effective solves are almost always in terms of structure, policy, process, and technology. Structure, policy, process, and technology create the context within which people work. Change the context and you'll change the performance.

Structure (broadly defined) drives behavior.

Leaders are productively powerful when they intervene on the organization's technical system — structure, policy, process, technology. When their improvement efforts target their people, they are ineffectual. And sometimes even *counterproduc-*

## THINKING ABOUT THE BOX

tive; when people are blamed for the inevitable result of an organization not fit for purpose, there are serious impacts on culture.

My signature OD contribution is influencing leaders to “think *about* the box” when seeking to make organizational changes to improve performance. Their pivot away from taking action on people (the symptomatic solutions) to acting on structure, policy, process and technology promises game-changing results.

Structure drives behavior. Thinking about the box holds the promise of continually staying fit for purpose.

What do you think? Would love to hear from you...

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Odea is an organization development practice that helps leaders, teams, and HR professionals enable change, build organizational capability, and drive results.

Our different thinking is a mash up of strategic thinking and systems thinking with a healthy helping of behavioral science added into the mix. We focus on identifying systemic conditions that constrain performance potential, helping clients see beyond symptoms to structural causes, leading to enduring solutions.

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Inspired by the intrigue and ever-flowing lessons he experienced while working within diverse organizational cultures, John began blogging his work and life insights in 2012, creating [johnponders.com](http://johnponders.com).

John has been practicing his unique principled commitment to excellence as an organizational consultant for over thirty-five years. He is the founder of ODEA; an organization development consultancy that he hopes will continue his life's work into semi-retirement.

John has earned a Master of Science in Organization Development from Loyola University Chicago and holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration from the University of Illinois.

John is married to wife Jamie and has one adult son (Jesse). Living in Elgin Illinois USA, John is a life-long Cubs fan still basking in the glory of their epic 2016 World Series win...