



## Practical Systems Thinking Tactics & Strategies for Perpetual Progress



### What's Causing YOUR Organizational Stress?

Here's how to improve processes, organizations and learning ... and why it's vital for success.

#### Which of these drive you crazy?

##### Short-term problems?

- Too many fires to fight.
- Recurring problems defy solution.
- Long-term improvement doesn't get priority.
- We don't know if TQM provides the results it should.
- People go along, but don't participate wholeheartedly.
- Meetings are boring & start late.

##### Medium-term problems?

- We tried "team building" ... but it didn't seem to work.
- Conflicts drag on.
- We avoid discussing the "real" issues.
- You know what to do; it's frustrating that others remain unconvinced.
- Too many projects are either delayed or overrun budget.

##### Long-term problems?

- We try to grow, but can't seem to make it happen.
- We don't know if our strategy is effective ... we need to know sooner.
- Change is "the pits" ... we're too slow to adapt.

The problem is that organizations don't have mere problems, they have messes! We can help.

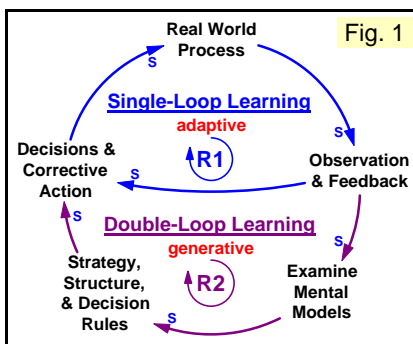
#### How can we overcome them?

Systems thinking is the appropriate approach to relieve these stresses. Figure 1 shows the feedback associated with single- and double-loop learning.

Single-loop learning (R1) is the principle behind TQM and a narrow definition of continuous improvement: observe a process, take corrective action, and then observe some more to learn and adapt. Excellent work.

#### What is systems thinking?

Seeking to understand system behavior by examining "the whole" ... instead of by analyzing the parts.



Learning is a feedback process. With single-loop learning we adapt to the way things are. With double-loop learning we create new ways of being and performing. These loops represent "doing things right" & "doing the right things," respectively.

Double-loop learning (R2) is a higher level of learning. We examine our thinking (our mental models) to learn how to make better decisions, even with the same data. We don't just adapt, we create new ways of doing things. It's *generative*, creating a new reality.

#### What organizations need for learning

Like an individual, organizations need five capacities for learning: a language, a brain, thinking skills, memory, and motivation & aspiration. They need counterparts that are suited for thinking about organizational problems; without them, organizations can't learn any better than an individual can (see [Languages, Brains & Skills](#)).

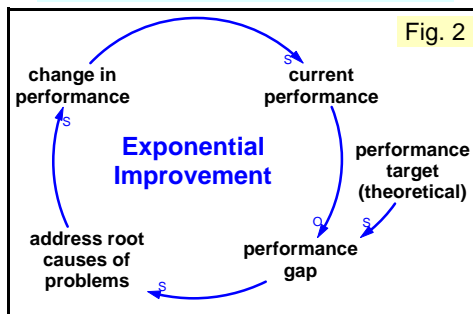
#### "Short-term" Learning

The feedback in Figure 2 is feedback for process improvement, such as provided by TQM. The principle applies with or without a full-fledged TQM initiative.

Exponential Improvement goes beyond continuous improvement to:

- Target, monitor and create truly exponential improvement ... really.
- Generate group energy and focus using a sequence of divergent and convergent processes.
- Agree on how much improvement to expect.
- Agree on how long it will take.
- Set up specialized techniques to confirm progress (semi-log plots).

It also gives management a logical rationale for creating appropriate team rewards (see [Facilitating Group Action](#) and [Exponential Improvement](#)).



Exponential Improvement is an example of single-loop learning. We adapt and improve. Reduce identified process measures by 50% every "half-life" ... one of the only "sure things" for organizational improvement.

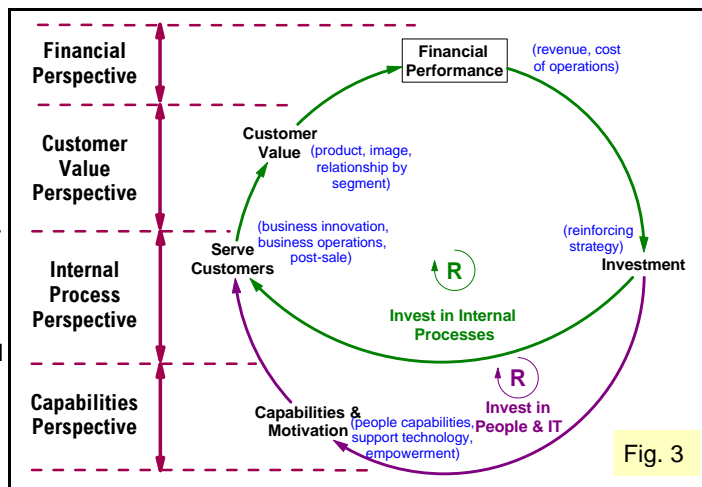
**Nothing improves, or grows, without a feedback process.**  
**Learning is a feedback process.**  
**Do you have yours?**

## “Long-term” Learning: Designing Feedback for Organizational Learning

Figure 3 shows the structure that defines the most basic feedback for success. It has two reinforcing feedback loops: “Invest in Internal Processes” and “Invest in People & IT.” It guides defining explicitly how financial performance (in new sales or reduced costs) will be achieved.

It helps us

- create strategic feedback to reinforce Values, Purpose & Strategic Themes.
- develop a shared understanding of organization dynamics ... get aligned.



These are the fundamental, high level reinforcing processes for improving performance. They define the expected financial returns, the customer value that will provide the returns, the processes that will provide the customer value, the capabilities needed to support the processes, and the investments that will be made in processes and capabilities (a strategic

- create measures to confirm your strategy is working ... or not.

We also use this explicitly to select the measures that are truly important, ones that tell us if our strategy is working. And tracking the measures tells us whether our theory about the structure is correct.

There are many other feedbacks we need to understand, but this is the most fundamental.

**With feedback and measures you'll know it's working ... short-term and long-term.**

## Client Comments on Continuous Improvement Workshops

“Your interactive approach and presentation were topnotch.”

**Randy Threet, Senior Project Leader  
ARINC, Inc.**

“Bob Powell can help organizations understand very complex problems in a way that creates a solid foundation upon which to develop solutions. He brings a priceless toolkit for organizational success, gathered and simplified from the gurus of the artistic science of systems thinking.”

**Rocky Scott, President  
Greater Colorado Springs Economic Development Corporation**

### Workshop Feedback:

- “Humor combined with positive input.”
- “I loved the cartoons to illustrate points.”
- “Group participation in activities and real world examples.”
- “Concrete business concepts.”

**Comments from an Organizational Learning Workshop  
Board of Directors, USA Table Tennis**

“Techniques we use, progress we can see.”

**Tom Stavish, President  
Crystal Specialties, Inc.**

**Organizations don't have problems, they have messes! We understand. We can help.**

### Workshops and consulting to understand & change structures for greater organizational success.

- Facilitating Group Action: engage and focus teams
- Exponential Process Improvement: achieve targeted gains
- Create Strategic Focus: design feedback for long-term progress
- Systems Thinking Leadership: acting on values, purpose & vision
- Project Management Dynamics: tailored policies for success
- Teambuilding: address the root causes of conflict; don't “manage” it
- The Crisis Syndrome: techniques to develop long-term focus
- Systems Thinking Archetypes: structures that drive behaviors
- Creating Reality: identify counterproductive strategies
- Diagnostic Workshop: consensus on improvement priorities
- The Product Life Cycle: design feedback for product success
- Organizational Evolution: recognize & prepare for limits to growth
- The Customer Service Peril: develop policies for success

### Keep it simple?

Everything should be made as simple as possible, ... but not simpler.

Albert Einstein, 1879 - 1955

### Continuous Improvement Associates

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