

The salesman responded, "If we do we'll lose 30 percent of our booking next month. In this business none of our competitors are honest when they tell a customer when a new computer system will arrive. If we tell the truth, our delivery times will be 50 percent longer than what customers believe they will get from competitors."

"I don't care," was the president's response. "I simply don't want to be part of an organization that sanctions lying, to our customers, our vendors, or anyone else. Moreover, I believe that, over time, we'll establish a reputation for reliability with our customers that will win us more customers than we'll lose."

The exchange continued for more than an hour. At the end, the group was together in support of telling the truth. The salesperson knew that if bookings dropped off in the next month or two, the other members of the team would not come screaming for his head. And he and the rest had begun to develop a vision of building a new reputation for honesty and reliability among their customers. This session took place six years ago. In the intervening period, the firm has prospered and established a preeminent position in its niche market.

Once a shared vision starts to take root, you might think that game playing and politics would take care of themselves, dissolved by the mutual commitment behind the vision. Sadly, this view often turns out to be naive. No matter how committed people are to a shared vision, they still are steeped in the habits of game playing and still are immersed in a highly politicized organizational climate. (Just because a few people start to build a shared vision, the larger organization does not immediately change.) If a vision is put into a highly political environment it can easily get ground up into a political objective: "Whose vision is this anyhow?" becomes more important than the intrinsic merit of a vision. Openness is needed to "unlearn" the habits of game playing that perpetuates internal politics.

But openness is a complex and subtle concept, which can be understood only in light of the disciplines of working with mental models and team learning.

#### PARTICIPATIVE OPENNESS AND REFLECTIVE OPENNESS

Many managers and organizations pride themselves on "being open," when in fact they are simply playing a new, more advanced

game. This is because there are two different aspects of openness—participative and reflective. Unless the two are integrated, the behavior of "being open" will not produce real openness.

Participative openness, the freedom to speak one's mind, is the most commonly recognized aspect of openness. This is because the philosophy of "participative management," involving people more in decision making, is widely espoused. In some organizations it is almost a religion; they become "participative management" companies. It becomes a norm that everyone gets to state his view. Many even institutionalize formal procedures for "open communication."<sup>3</sup> I state my view. You state your view. We all *appear* to be contributing to collaborative learning—yet, little real learning takes place. Why?

For one thing, people only feel safe sharing their views to a degree. As O'Brien says, "How many managers describe an issue the same way at a work team meeting at 10 A.M. as they do when they are home or having a drink with friends that same evening?"

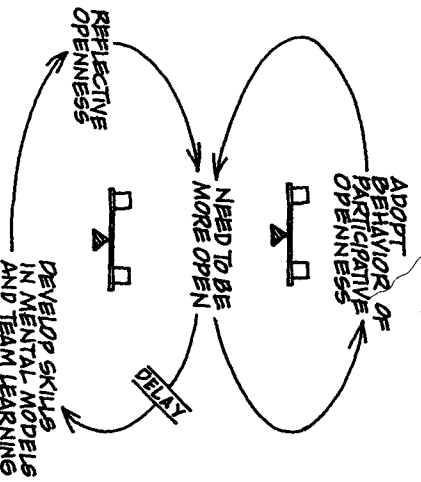
Secondly, on a deeper level, no one's view is changing or being affected. After stating our opinions, if we don't agree, we simply conclude that "people are different" and go our separate ways. If one decision representing the group must be made, it either represents a watered-down "consensus" or the preference of the one or two whose opinion counts most. Participative openness may lead to more "buy-in" on certain decisions, but by itself it will rarely lead to better quality decisions because it does not influence the thinking behind people's positions. In the terms of personal mastery, it focuses purely on the "means" or process of interacting, not on the "results" of that interaction. For example, people might say, "That was a great meeting. Everybody got to express his views," instead of judging the quality of decisions and actions taken over time. This is why many managers find participative management wanting. As one disgruntled executive in a "participative management" company told me recently, "The implicit assumption around here is that the solution to all problems is sharing our views."

While participative openness leads to people speaking out, "reflective openness" leads to people looking inward. Reflective openness starts with the willingness to challenge our own thinking, to recognize that any certainty we ever have is, at best, a hypothesis about the world. No matter how compelling it may be, no matter how fond we are of "our idea," it is always subject to test and improvement. Reflective openness lives in the attitude, "I may be

wrong and the other person may be right." It involves not just examining our own ideas, but mutually examining others' thinking.

Reflective openness is based on skills, not just good intentions. There are the skills of reflection and inquiry, first presented in the mental models chapter. These include recognizing "leaps of abstraction," distinguishing espoused theory from theory-in-use, and becoming more aware of and responsible for what we are thinking and not saying. There are also the skills of dialogue and dealing with defensive routines, discussed in the team learning chapter. Organizations that are serious about openness support their members in developing these learning skills.

But these skills take time and persistence to develop, and most managers are completely unaware of them. Thus a "shifting the burden" structure often develops. We feel a need to be more open, to which we respond with the behaviors of participative openness—expressing our views more forthrightly, soliciting others' inputs, and talking more with everyone about our problems. When this happens, participative openness can become a "symptomatic solution." Then it shifts the burden away from the "fundamental solution"—reflective openness: developing the skills of inquiry, reflection, and dialogue.



The insidiousness of the shifting the burden structure, as always, stems from the way the symptomatic solution weakens the fundamental solution. The more we talk to one another, the more we encourage workers to express their views, the more we may feel that

we have dealt with the need to be more open. We never know the extent to which we are undermining any movement toward a deeper type of openness. The end result is the curious phenomenon of "open closedness," when everyone feels he has a right to air his views, yet no one really listens and reflects. "Talking at" one another substitutes for genuine communication and dialogue.

On the other hand, there also can be a positive synergy between participative and reflective openness. When this synergy develops it is a powerful force to undermine politics and game playing. The key, in my experience, is both making it safe to speak openly *and* developing the skills to productively challenge one's own and others' thinking.

To see how this can work, consider the case of a member of a senior team in a company noted for its "openness." The officer found himself, over time, being more and more criticized for specific decisions he made. But no one ever mentioned that a more general opinion was forming about his attitude. To the other managers, he was a "free spender" who "cared more about looking good and about his function than about the corporation as a whole." Behind his back, people discussed their opinion of him, but no one brought it up publicly. They felt that such "personal" views were inappropriate for business meetings. No one asked him directly about it. Instead, they continued to be "open" and forthright, bluntly criticizing his individual decisions. But, they never shared the reasoning behind their views.

The manager felt himself slipping into a position which the others all privately called "being in the barrel." It was a general ostracism which others had endured in the past. Moreover, he had no idea why he was in the barrel. Feeling isolated and attacked, he spent more and more time explaining and justifying each individual action—which in turn was seen as further evidence that he cared only about his own department. In fact, he was in a "no win" bind. Whether he vigorously defended his views, or kept silent, it mattered not. Both reinforced the other managers' negative impression of him.

Why didn't the other officers tell this person how they felt about him? It wasn't because of personal antipathy. Most said that they were his friends. But they were afraid of creating an upsetting argument (or, more charitably, they didn't see how to communicate their view constructively). There was also a more subtle reason, one which gets to the heart of reflective openness. Most of the other executives never saw the point of bringing the matter up. They had

concluded that their mental model of this man was true—he *did* care more about looking good and making his function look good than about the corporation. They never thought to question it. It was a given.

Meanwhile, the “manager in the barrel” also never probed more deeply; he never asked, in a meeting, “Wait a minute. Is there a pattern here?” Despite the purported “openness” at every meeting, that would have felt inappropriate. In effect, both sides were still playing games; he was playing “Defend that decision,” and they were playing, “Name that fault.” The games blocked any efforts they might have made to probe the causes of his decisions, or the causes of their perception of him.

In other words, the managers formed a generalization based on specific observations, but they had never tested it. The more they talked to others behind his back about the generalization, the more they validated it in their own minds. It was a classic “leap of abstraction,” as described in Chapter 10. This “vicious circle” might have gone on forever had not some of the managers (with a consultant’s help) finally realized what they were doing. They sat down at a meeting with the “man in the barrel” and cited the specific things he had said and done that had prompted their generalizations. “It’s led us to wonder whether you cared more about your domain or about the corporation.”

He protested that he did, at least in his own mind, care a great deal about the corporation. Yes, he was prone to boasting. Yes, he did feel free to spend money for the programs he believed in. Yes, when a program was threatened he felt compelled to jump to its defense. But did that make him a traitor to the entire organization?

Once a few people at that meeting were willing to break the vicious circle, things began to change. The officer saw more deeply the nature of his colleagues’ concerns. They, in turn, saw that they had misinterpreted his actions. Eventually, more and more of the mutual game playing began to wind down. The team had realized how subtle openness could be, and how they had inadvertently created new games in the name of “being open.” They saw the tragic consequences of putting one of their members “in the barrel,” and resolved that it would never happen again. They had learned a powerful lesson about the distinction between speaking out and real openness.

In my experience, a breakthrough of sorts often happens when managers realize that reflective openness is based in skills, not just

good intentions. For example, being able to distinguish “facts” (direct observations) from generalizations based on those facts would have helped the executives with the “officer in the barrel.” Such leaps of abstraction are particularly dangerous in seemingly “open” organizations, where people discuss their views freely and opinions can gain agreement rapidly, thereby quickly assuming the status of unassailable fact.

#### OPENNESS AND COMPLEXITY

Nothing undermines openness more surely than certainty. Once we feel as if we have “the answer,” all motivation to question our thinking disappears. But the discipline of systems thinking shows that there simply is “no right answer” when dealing with complexity. For this reason, openness and systems thinking are closely linked.

A simple exercise we have used in our leadership workshops for many years gets at the central point.<sup>4</sup> We cover a large wall with blank paper, and then ask the group to work together to map out all the feedback relationships in a particular problem with which they are wrestling. “For instance,” we might say, “let’s create a systems diagram to figure out how to balance our work and family responsibilities.” We usually start by identifying key variables and writing them on different parts of the large paper: time pressures; expectations of oneself; responsibilities; personal interests; career goals; distance between work and home; and so on. Then we begin suggesting feedback links: expectations influence career goals; distance between work and home influences time available for family; personal income influences independence, as well as budget. Within a half hour, we’ve covered the wall with circles and arrows. Everyone in the room feels overwhelmed, and yet we know that we’ve just begun to show the hundreds of interrelationships that exist in the real system. People gradually come to realize that no one could possibly come to figure out all these interactions.

This realization has a remarkable impact on people. Some try to rationalize it away: “Well, this is so obvious it’s meaningless,” they say. “What’s the point?” Others insist that, given enough time, they could eventually figure it out. Some diehards keep trying to add links and loops. But those who can face the “un-figure-out-able-ness” of it all will often sit back in their chairs, laugh, and realize some spring has sprung.

The first time I saw the "Wall," it emerged accidentally. In the late 1970s, Donella Meadows led a three-hour workshop on Third World malnutrition with respected international experts, trying to build a comprehensive model, based on all their knowledge, of the causes of global hunger. Before long, the chart included everything from economic factors to politics to cultural values to international trade. In the audience, an experienced lobbyist on food and peace issues began moaning and shaking her head. Finally, Donella stopped the session to ask if she was ill. "My God," said the lobbyist. "All my life, I assumed that somebody, somewhere, knew the answer to this problem. I thought politicians knew what had to be done, but refused to do it out of politics and greed. But now I realize that nobody knows the answer. Not us, not them, not anybody."

The "Wall" reveals some fascinating insights into the roots of authoritarianism in our own thinking. Most people have grown up in an authoritarian environment. As children, their parents had "the answers." As students, their teachers had the answers. Naturally, when they enter organizations, they assume that "the boss" must have the answers. They are convinced deep down that people above them know what is going on, or at least they ought to know if they are competent. This mentality weakens them as individuals, and the organization as a whole. At some level it absolves them of responsibility in the organization's learning. It also predisposes them to cynicism when events eventually reveal that the people at the top did not have all the answers.

Conversely, when people in an organization come collectively to recognize that nobody has the answers, it liberates the organization in a remarkable way. I heard the reason articulated soon after we incorporated the "Wall" exercise into the workshop. One participant was a vice president of a Boston-based high-tech company. He had studied Zen Buddhism for ten years and was a very successful and creative engineer. After the exercise he remarked, "Many people will say that once you recognize that you can never figure life out, you have denied rationality. But that's not true. You have simply recontextualized rationality. To search for understanding, knowing that there is no ultimate answer, becomes a creative process—one which involves rationality but also something more."

This, of course, is the state of being open. You realize, as the "Wall" experience shows, that any "answer" you have is at best an approximation—always subject to improvement, never final. You may hone your rational ability to solve problems, and use that ability

as best you can, all the while recognizing that it will never be enough. Then curiosity, previously buried under the belief that "I know the answer," is free to surface. The fear that "I don't know, but perhaps he or she does," or, "I don't know but I should," dissolves. We come to peace with knowing that we do not know, or as Einstein said, that "the most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science."<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, the way knowledge is organized and structured in contemporary society destroys this sense of mystery. The "compartmentalization of knowledge" creates a false sense of confidence. For example, the traditional disciplines that influence management—such disciplines as economics, accounting, marketing, and psychology—divide the world into neat subdivisions within which one can often say, "This is the problem and here is its solution." But the boundaries that make the subdivisions are fundamentally arbitrary—as any manager finds out who attempts to treat an important problem as if it is purely "an economic problem," or "an accounting problem," or "a personnel problem." Life comes to us whole. It is only the analytic lens we impose that makes it seem as if problems can be isolated and solved. When we forget that it is "only a lens," we lose the spirit of openness.

This does not mean that all problems are unsolvable. Some problems *do* have "correct solutions," such as finding the best sitings for oil refineries *once* production and final distribution points, volume of demand, and costs of transport have been identified; or determining the optimal mix of debt and equity financing *once* a new investment project has been chosen and interest and dividend rates are established. These are problems where nearly all the dynamic complexity can be ignored with minimal side effects. Unfortunately, these are often not the most important problems that managers confront.

The British economist E. F. Schumacher, best known for writing *Small is Beautiful*, argued (in his book *A Guide for the Perplexed*) that there are two fundamentally different types of problems: "convergent problems" and "divergent problems."<sup>6</sup> Convergent problems have a solution: "the more intelligently you study them, the more the answers converge." Divergent problems have no "correct" solution. The more they are studied by people with knowledge and intelligence the more they "come up with answers which contradict one another." The difficulty lies not with the experts, but in the nature of the problem itself. If you are in Boston and want to travel by car to Albany, there is a right answer to the question, "What is

