

It's the Culture, Smarty: Overcoming Resistance to Managerial Performance Improvement

by William R. Daniels

Like many of you, I've worked for many years to create training for management development. Role plays, simulations, case studies, video-interaction modeling, and feedback have been some of the more sophisticated classroom methods. Pre- and post-evaluation have clearly demonstrated a successful transfer of the intended skills at the end of the training process. But the great disappointment has always been that little more than 30% of these skills or key concepts are retained on the job 90 days later.

Exploring the problem of poor learning retention has pointed to many blind alleys, all of which eventually seem to wind up at the mysterious wall called *cultural resistance*. The organization's formal values statement almost always espouses respect for continuous improvement, but the organization's actual response to efforts in management improvement can usually be summed up as, "We will continue to manage in our familiar and, admittedly, less-effective

ways." To deal with the reality of cultural resistance to management improvement, I've found it helpful to pay attention to the work of those who have taken a systems approach to exploring how cultures maintain their stability. By working with the social systems that control cultural stability, it is possible to get a culture to change and actually support new management behavior.

The Systems That Control Cultural Stability

A system is a concept, a mental construct for understanding how things operate. When we view something as a system we look for the following generic components: "inputs, a processing system, processing system feedback, outputs, a receiving system, and receiving system feedback" (Brethower, 1982, p. 355). According to the systems perspective, every system controls itself by evaluating its outputs against the receiving system requirements and making adjustments to its inputs and processes. As it does so, we say the system is performing.

To alter any system's performance all you have to do is change the requirements by which that system controls itself. For instance, when driving your car in cruise-control mode, all you have to do to change the speed at which your car moves is to reset the speed requirement. Why isn't improving a human performance system (HPS) just as easy? The difference is that the human in an HPS is fundamentally autonomous and decides whether or not to commit to the change in the requirements. The car doesn't complain about or reject the adjustment you make—if it did, few people would tolerate such a machine. But everyone has to find a way to deal with this autonomy as an inherent feature of any HPS.

Human autonomy can be a problem when trying to change performance. Parents experience it when they tell their child to stop playing in the street, and the child chooses to ignore them. Or when you ask your neighbors to stop parking their motor home on the street in front of your house and they inform you that they have a right to park on the street. History is a long record of our struggles to deal with our neighbors' autonomy. The positive side of recognizing this is that our species is thriving in spite of the problem. The species has already evolved reliable ways of getting people to stabilize their own behavior in conformity to the community's values and norms.

One of the most useful models of how people get each other to stabilize their own behavior is called role-set theory (Merton, 1949, 1957; Katz & Kahn, 1978). Role sets are very simple social systems. They can be observed in action among children at play and in primitive societies. They are one of the most ancient of our social structures, and they are still at work beneath the radar of organizations' formal systems of role definition.

The role-set model begins by picking an individual in the organization and asking the question, "Why is that person acting that way?" The answer, after many years of working with the model, goes as follows: Every person's behavior expresses the choices being made to satisfy the performance requirements of the immediate role set.

The individual whose behavior is being explored is called *focal person*. Somewhere in most organizations there are three to eight people who perceive themselves as having strong dependencies on the performance of the focal person. For these reasons they pay attention to the focal person and attempt to influence the frequency with which their requirements are satisfied. These people are called *role senders*. Collectively, all the focal person's role senders are called the *role set*.

The only thing this set of role senders has in common is its focal person. Unfortunately for the focal person, the role senders rarely act as a group with a common set of require-

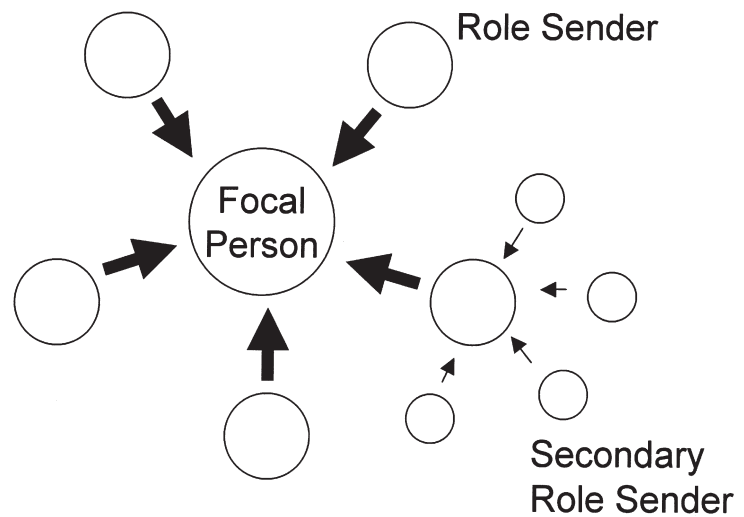


Figure 1. A Role Set.

ments. Typically, the role senders do not even know each other. The role set is an informal system, and many of the requirements of the role senders are quite personal, sometimes ambiguous, and even unconscious. Often, the sum of all the role senders' requirements far exceeds the time, energy, or abilities of the focal person.

This leaves the focal person surrounded by a small group of people whose expectations are ambiguous, conflicting, and often unrealistic. The focal person is set up to fail in satisfying all these requirements, and the role senders frequently express their disappointment and act in other ways to annoy and punish the focal person. To diminish the punishment, the focal person experiments and discovers the behaviors that at least partially and temporarily satisfy one role sender at a time. But when any one member of the role set tries to dominate the focal person's attention, other members intensify their threats and punishments until the focal person turns to take care of them. The focal person keeps turning from one member of the role set to another, depending on whose message is most threatening. Eventually, the focal person learns to anticipate when and how to turn, and the behavior takes on a fairly predictable pattern.

Over time, members of the role set come to accept this pattern of behavior as the best they can get. They hone the efficiency with which they influence the focal person to an even more subtle set of signals. At this point, the focal person is in control and has complete responsibility for the pattern of behavior!

Anyone or anything that tries to change the focal person's role reactivates the resisting forces of the whole role set. The focal person learns that change equates to more pain, and the best way to avoid that pain is to ignore suggestions for improvement that come from outside the role set.

To focus only on one role set, however, misses the truly extraordinary power of this social structure. It is important to notice that all the role senders for any focal person are also focal persons in their own role sets. The role senders are also struggling with ambiguous, conflicting, and unrealistic performance requirements and take from the focal person what they can get to satisfy their own role sets. Each focal person is at the center of many concentric rings of role sets. An organization is an immense web of role sets binding every individual in a somewhat predictable and serviceable pattern of behavior.

The role set's structure is like a heavy, messy web that drapes itself all over the individuals inhabiting the nice, clean, logically arranged boxes of the organization chart. Touch any box, and the whole web vibrates with alarm; to move any box you have to drag the whole, heavy web! The web's messiness makes it difficult to identify and change its performance requirements. So, almost invisibly, the role set's subtle, very personal negative feedback keeps performers frozen in the current patterns of behavior. This is the systemic substructure at work stabilizing the organization's culture and resisting change, including all performance improvement.

Taking this network of role sets into consideration reveals what causes the difference between a formal job description

and what any individual actually does after a few days on the job; role sets redefine jobs. It is easy to see why it does not work when a boss tries to change a subordinate with training that occurs apart from the role set; the subordinate returns to the role set's relentless punishment for doing things differently. The subordinate does not improve, even after receiving a negative evaluation and being put on a program of corrective action; the role set also escalates its counter threats and puts the focal person in a world of pain. When the boss fires the subordinate, it is just the coup-de-grâce; the role set terminates focal person first. Then, amazingly, the role set greets the new hire and begins teaching that person the same role for which the predecessor was fired!

On the positive side, role sets function like the organization's immune system, rejecting all new behaviors that might detract from the organization's ability to do what it has always done to survive. Without holding a large part of its human performances steady, it is unlikely that the organization will be able to afford the risks of change and growth. So an organization should not fight the role-set structure, but use processes that keep the role set requirements aligned with those that support the organization's ongoing need for human performance improvement. To the extent that role-set requirements align with the formal organization's requirements, the organization will control itself to those changed requirements very efficiently.

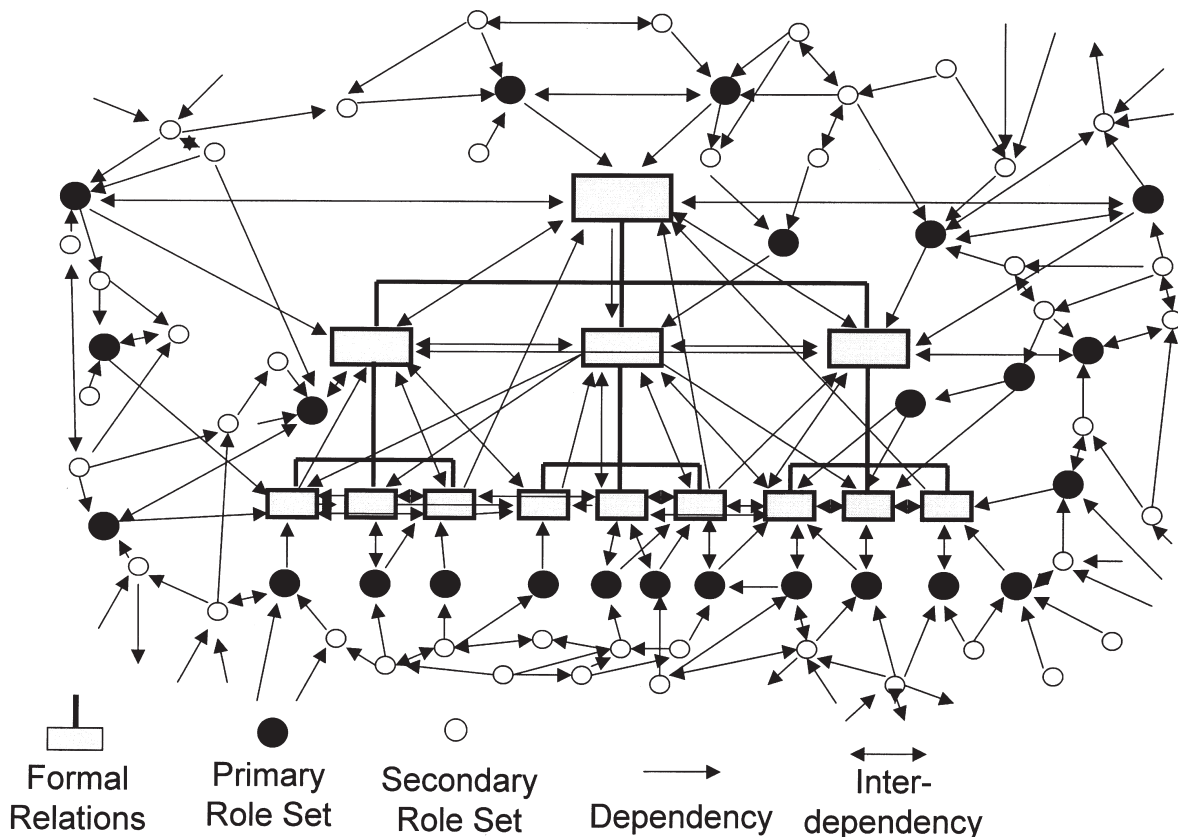


Figure 2. Formal Structure Draped by Primary and Secondary Role-Set Relationships.

Obviously, the key processes that affect the alignment of performance requirements are the organization's methods for goal-setting and work review. The organization's formal processes for setting performance requirements and controlling the use of its resources must be made transparent and invite the attention of its role-set structure. By creating environments in which the formal requirements are frequently exposed to the performers' role sets, the organization facilitates the alignment of both formal and informal performance requirements. Participatory management practices create these kinds of environments (Likert, 1961, 1967; Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; Collins, 2001). Perhaps this is one of the keys to understanding why these practices make organizations unusually adaptable and capable of long-term, rapid growth.

The problem to be solved, however, is how to help organizations adopt these practices when they are operating with different, less-effective cultures. How can we use our understanding of role-set power for the design of management development?

Aligning Manager's Formal and Role-Set Performance Requirements

From the outset, it is recommended that the human performance technology (HPT) practitioner keep the intervention focused on the organization's formal processes of goal-setting and work review. Do not try to engage busy managers in the theoretical understanding of role sets. They don't design role sets, and they can't directly redesign them either, so the theory is not very relevant to their learning the necessary management practices. Being very excited about the importance of these informal systems, I find this a very difficult piece of advice to follow. But experience dictates that it is best to avoid the distraction. The intervention to be described only works directly with the formal processes of goal-setting and work review; it works *indirectly* on role sets.

The HPT practitioner should approach the task as a process consultant and look at the organization's *current* goal-setting and work review systems. To the extent that these processes are attempting to operate in isolation from the role-set structure, they are fostering stressful competition for the performer's attention and are likely to lose the contest.

Notice that both *goal-setting and work review* processes are necessary. The typical alignment intervention focuses only on goal-setting, often beginning with an annual executive strategic planning retreat followed by a cascade of goal-alignment sessions with each team of subordinate managers. This process almost always produces a wish list, more or less beautifully bound, set aside in each manager's office, and irrelevant to understanding the organization's human performances 90 days later. It is the organization's performance feedback systems that are failing to win the contest for the performers' attention. Rather than looking at the special meetings devoted

to planning, look at the more frequent and regular meetings in which work review is (or should be) occurring. The most frequently held meetings, for instance weekly staff meetings, are usually the ones that most fully expose the organization's dysfunctional performance feedback systems.

A good way to expose these systems for reconsideration is to get permission from the meeting leader to lead one of these regular meetings. Start the meeting by asking the members to work alone to write a brief description of their most pressing, *real* issue. Define an issue as something the member does not know how to resolve without additional allocation of resources. Ask the members to continue preparing for the meeting by drafting a recommendation about what resources are needed to resolve their issues and where those resources might come from. Finally, ask the members to write what outcomes they are trying to deliver by resolving these issues. When the members present these statements to each other, it raises all the right questions:

- What are we *really* trying to do?
- How important are these outputs to the meeting leader and the other members of this group?
- What is obstructing the delivery of the outputs?
- What can the group do about it?

While these are right questions, the group, working alone, is usually less able to take corrective action than is desirable. The leader's and members' role sets are not readily available for participation. This leads to the next, and most important step in the intervention.

Work With Several Levels of the Management Hierarchy at Once

Work with at least three levels of management at once. A one-day, three-level management meeting is the best opportunity to bring both the role-set and formal performance requirements into alignment. Get at least all the first-line managers, all the middle managers they report to, and the department head that leads the team of middle managers in a large room together. With all of these people in the room, it is likely that you will capture the critical mass of role sets affecting their managerial behaviors.

Start this three-level management meeting with all the teams of first-line managers and their leaders sitting together. Ask everyone to work alone to prepare their issues, recommendations, and objectives as described above. Then ask the middle managers to lead a meeting with their first-line managers, using consultative decision-making, to resolve as many of the team's issues as possible. Consultative decision-making is a group process in which the members discuss the issue with the intent of informing the leader's decision. The leader participates actively in the discussion so that the members can assess what the leader does not know or understand. The members agree before the discussion to

comply with the leader's decision at the end of the discussion. All these meetings should be happening simultaneously in the same room. Let the department head informally walk around to audit these meetings.

Next, hold the department head's meeting and let the middle managers bring up the issues that their lower-level teams could not resolve. Let the first-line managers observe. Keep the focus on getting the issues resolved, the objectives clarified, and the resources properly allocated according to the department's priorities.

Then have the lower-level teams meet again to deal with implementing the resolutions passed down from the department head's meeting. Go through at least two of these rounds of passing the issues up and down.

Just before each round of meetings, take a few minutes to offer advice about the procedures the team needs to use for preparing, deciding, and recording the meeting's resolutions. Provide checklists with which the groups can evaluate their own goal-setting and work review processes. In these ways, the clients learn and determine the department's preferred management practices while on the job, doing their managerial work. It is a form of *action learning*. Learning and implementation of the management practices is simultaneous.

It is very useful to follow up these management meetings with a set of lower-level meetings. This time, divide the department into its middle manager structures. Bring in all the individual contributors and first-line managers for about four hours. Share with them the objectives, priorities, and resolutions reached in the management meetings. Then ask the first-line managers to lead a meeting with their direct reports to chart their next four weeks of deliverables. All of these meetings should happen simultaneously in the same room. Use at least one round of escalation and pass-down so that any resource issues that are discovered can be resolved. Again, escalate issues that first-line managers cannot resolve directly with their teams of individual contributors to the next highest meetings in the organization's hierarchy, that is the team in which the first-line managers meet as a group with their middle manager. When the issues are resolved there, the decision should be passed down to another meeting of the individual contributors with their first-line managers for clarification and implementation. Then, with the weekly deliverable defined for each team, ask the individual contributors to work alone to make their own daily to-do lists for the next week. Then have them show these to-do lists to each other and discuss what changes might be necessary to ensure better coordination and cooperation.

The point is to always examine and alter the process by which the organization sets and reviews its performance requirements. Learn the new processes while using and testing them. Get everyone in the room to watch and listen to each other so that all the role senders have a chance to realign their expectations of each other.

Finally, help your clients see these meetings are a better way of conducting the ongoing business of the organization. The smaller meetings can be held weekly, probably replacing the current staff meetings. The larger, three-level meetings should probably be held once a month and may be appropriate replacements for other current meetings. Avoid making the intervention seem like a once-upon-a-time event. Once-upon-a-time is always the beginning of a fairy tale.

Summary

Approach the task of management development as process consultants. Encourage the practice of bringing at least three levels of managers together for goal-setting and work review on a frequent basis. This increases the exposure of the organization's formal performance requirements to the organization's role sets. It gives the performers' role senders a chance to articulate their needs, get their needs aligned with each other, and get the needs to fit the resources accessible to the performers. This results in a coalition of formal and role-set requirements that makes it possible for the organization to operate with unusual efficiency and flexibility. 🌟

Author's Note: This is an abbreviated version of a chapter that will appear in the upcoming third edition of the *Handbook of Human Performance Technology* by William R. Daniels and Timm J. Esque.

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William (Bill) R. Daniels has been working since 1973 with organizations in numerous industries to improve managerial performance and organizational productivity. His work has focused on the causal relationship between managerial behavior and organizational results. He is passionate about finding a way to fully use human assets in organizations. An organization that balances its focus on both people

and performance (tasks and outputs) obtains a high level of productivity with employees who feel successful and satisfied with their work. Bill also believes that it is extremely important to rely on group work and to listen, listen, listen to each other.

As CEO of American Consulting & Training, Inc., Bill provides the following services: executive and management development services, training design and development (including workshops and simulations), and keynote presentations. He also enjoys being a member of ISPI and serving as a past member of the Board of Directors for the International Board of Standards for Training, Performance, and Instruction (IBSTPI). Bill may be reached at actbd@aol.com.

Master's Statement

What advice would you give someone on the path to becoming a master in his/her field?

Don't be too much of a specialist. Three related skills are better than one. For instance, be able to design, present, and facilitate rather than be stuck just designing. Pick a subject matter you are willing to pursue for a lifetime—one that you are a bit compulsive about. I'm this way about the causal relationship between managerial behavior and organizational results. Take partners (not prisoners) all along the way. Partners accelerate your learning! Never work more than 100 days a year on site with clients.

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