THE *why* OF work

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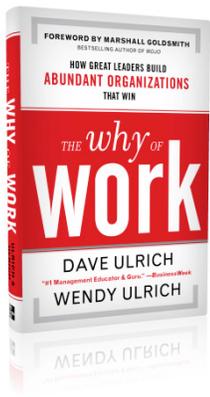
TOOL 8.5

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Organizational Viruses

[8.5] ORGANIZATIONAL VIRUSES

A TOOL FOR OVERCOMING VIRUSES THAT PREVENT CHANGE

All firms have orthodoxies, sacred cows, norms, and patterns of thinking and behaving that impair their financial health. One way to think about these beliefs and practices is as viruses. If you think of them as natural parts of the firm, it's easy to shrug and accept them as facts of life. But if you recognize the way they can paralyze your operations and block the use of your collective knowledge base, it becomes clear that they're as dangerous to your corporate culture as computer viruses are to your corporate IT systems. They share another feature of computer viruses: they're at their most deadly when they're not recognized. You can isolate a computer virus, prevent it from spreading, repair and restore your files once you find an antivirus program able to diagnose and detect viruses. Likewise, once an organization spots a cultural virus that is keeping things from happening as fast as they should, it can take steps to eliminate the blockage. For example, in one firm, managers routinely held pre-meetings before meetings. The original idea had been to speed things up by coming to a decision in a small group then selling it. But it turned out that the preliminary sessions just hardened differences among the managers. Not only did they not decide anything in advance, they had nothing to sell in the larger meeting and generally wound up postponing matters to yet another meeting. Decisions were so slow that the competition surged ahead easily, and employees who valued getting things done left the organization to work for the faster competitors. By identifying this practice as a virus, leaders of this company were able to articulate the problem and then take explicit action to eradicate it, making the company more success-focused, efficient, and agile.

Exercise: The Virus Scan

Antivirus programs rely on signature files—lists of known viruses and their symptoms, which they use to scan computer systems for traces of the listed viruses in action. You can do the same thing on the job once you know what to look for. Here is a fun exercise we often use in our leadership workshops.

Step 1: Take your team and break it into small groups. Have each group identify the two or three most salient viruses in your organization from the virus list provided on the next page. This list is a basic set of management virus signatures that we regularly witness. Your organization may have viruses we have not yet named. There is space provided to write these in.

Step 2: Have each group draw a picture that represents how the virus actually works in the organization. Be creative and have fun.

Step 3: Have each group show their picture to the larger group and explain their choice of virus in less than one minute.

Step 4: Kill the virus. In one case, we placed all of the flipchart papers with the virus drawings in a large trash container and lit fire to it. In another company, all of the drawings were signed by each group of leaders and then framed and displayed in the hallways of corporate headquarters as a way to communicate to all employees what they were dedicated to eliminating.

(see viruses on next page)

32 COMMON VIRUSES THAT PREVENT CHANGE

○ **1. Over inform: Tell everyone then have a meeting.** We make sure everyone has been informed, then have a meeting which slows things down.

○ **2. Have it my way.** We don't learn from each other; "not invented here" syndrome.

○ **3. Saturday morning quarterback.** We criticize everything, even before things happen.

○ **4. False positive.** We do "nice-talk" … overly kind even if we disagree. This leads to false positive.

○ **5. Concealed consensus.** We confuse participation with consensus. We think that everyone has to agree before we act, so people say they agree when they don't.

○ **6. Forward to our past: Look in the rearview mirror.** We are so afraid of losing our heritage that we don't change our culture; we are locked into our habits.

○ **7. Caste: Value by grade.** We judge people by their title and rank rather than performance or competence.

○ **8. Turfism: My business vs. "our" business.** We defend our turf sometimes to the detriment of the overall organization.

○ **9. Command and control.** We like to make sure that senior managers run the company and delegate responsibility; this keeps us from feeling a personal obligation to change.

○ **10. Activity mania.** We like to be busy; our badge of honor is full calendars, even if it excludes thinking and results. We hide behind our "busy-ness".

○ **11. Narcissistic competitiveness.** We like to win as individuals not as teams.

○ **12. Show me the results: Results rule.** We like results – anyway, anytime, anyhow – we don't instill a process.

○ **13. Crisis jumping.** When in a crisis, we act decisively; then we wait for the next crisis to act again.

○ **14. Customer antipathy.** We don't include customer criteria in our thinking; we are internally focused.

○ **15. Authority ambiguity: Not clear on accountability.** In our matrix, we are not sure who is responsible or accountable, so no one is.

○ **16. All things to all people.** We have too many priorities; each good idea gets energy and attention; we don't say no; we are not focused on the critical few.

○ **17. Flavor of the month.** We jump from program to program; we don't have integrated initiatives; and there is cynicism about "new" programs; we end up with concept clutter.

○ **18. Over-changed (full sponge).** We have a capacity problem with too many changes going on at once; we are burned out and stressed out on change; we cannot let things go.

○ **19. Misalignment: Disjointed actions.** We don't see the big picture and see how our work fits with the strategy; we tend to get lost in the details.

○ **20. Compliant deflector: Over-obedient.** We wait to do what we are told and delegate responsibility upward.

○ **21. Process mania.** We are so consumed by process that we don't focus on results and outcomes.

○ **22. Kill the messenger.** We don't share bad news even to a fault.

○ **23. Glacial response: Whose decision is it?** We cannot get decisions made quickly.

○ **24. Perfectionism: Right way or no way.** We have to have the perfect answer before we do anything.

○ **25. What have you done for me yesterday?** After a successful change, we only want more.

○ **26. Over measure.** We measure everything, even to a fault. Our dashboards are way too complex.

○ **27. Under measure.** We don't have indicators that track the important stuff; we measure what is easy not what is right.

○ **28. Sustainability.** We do not sustain the changes we start.

○ **29. Going for the big win.** We look for the mega change that will solve all problems vs. starting small.

○ **30. Skills or aptitude.** We don't have the skills required for the future.

○ **31. Event vs. pattern.** Change is an event (do the checklist, attend the meeting), not a sustained pattern.

○ **32. Fire hydrant.** Everyone has to "mark" every initiative or project before it can be moved on.

○ **33.** _____
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○ **34.** _____
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