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## Relationship: Rethinking the Fundamentals

By Shae Hadden

*“Everything that has been done or that can be done is possible only within the context of authentic and effective human relationships.”*

—Jim Selman

Many of our basic beliefs about what is possible and how work is accomplished have been challenged over the past two decades. Globalization, technological advances, and environmental and security concerns have affected the daily operations of even the most traditionally stable institutions. Large-scale change initiatives have barely kept pace with rapidly shrinking resources, increased competition and expanding activism among all stakeholders—from employees and governing bodies to customers, suppliers and the general public alike. The need for flexibility, continuous improvement and true leadership has never been greater.

Increasing pressure to produce real, lasting change in how people work is evident in not only commercial enterprises, but in government and not-for-profit institutions. Deficits, budgets, media attacks and lack of public confidence are forcing senior management in the public and private sectors to acknowledge they must go beyond traditional ‘bureaucratic’ responses. Endorsing the need for improvement and then implementing well-conceived redesign or change initiatives affecting large numbers of people over a long period of time has not necessarily produced sustainable change. Something seems to still be missing.

### What is an Organization?

Nearly everyone agrees that the human dimensions of an organization are central. To succeed where other people-sensitive processes have failed, we require a definition that will allow us to observe an organization in such a way that new possibilities for design and invention are created. Most of what we would define as key elements of an organization—its models, structures and practices—have changed very little since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Management philosophy and its associated practices originated in the command-and-control environment of the military. In situations where change happened slowly and there were few alternatives to choose from, management by control and procedures seemed to work well.

However, in today’s environment, constant, rapid change accelerates complexity in every facet of the system. With 30 years of sophisticated information technology and innumerable management fads behind us, managers today still ‘manage’ their increasingly diverse workforce within the same basic context of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: optimize performance of tasks and



procedures by exercising authority in an attempt to control human behavior. We have more than a century's worth of experience to tell us that this traditional way of viewing jobs and of working together does not result in a utopian state of affairs.

Transforming a culture, whether of an organization, a company or a nation, requires we inquire into the fundamental nature of 'who we are' as individuals and as a community. We must also rigorously examine the limits on action and responsibility we have imposed on ourselves as individuals and as a culture, for these limits set the boundaries of what is and is not possible in the future. Typically, we tend to focus on three important aspects of design when creating or re-creating an organization:

- ✓ An organizational structure that outlines individual roles and their related authorities
- ✓ The physical structures or facilities
- ✓ Information and processes that define tasks and procedures

We do not normally design our organizations around *how* people will communicate and relate with one another. This, instead, becomes the operating charter of the IT and HR departments: to provide a foundation for people to realize the overall vision (the background commitments for everyone in the organization) and each individual's commitments while working within the controls created by the 'design'. Yet, we can only realize our intentions through relationships with others. Rather than searching for understanding or trying to modify or re-create 'the system', leaders require a way to focus their attention deliberately and rigorously on the fundamentals of relationships.

### Relationships by Design

*Understanding* relationships alone will not suffice. Explanations about why trust is absent, for example, or justifications about why people don't trust each other do not produce this critical component in a relationship. Relationships—like the future—are created constantly in the conversations we have. Successful leaders take responsibility for the future by taking responsibility for their relationships: they choose to be the 'Creator' of each relationship, rather than the victim of it. They master the principles and competencies that generate, rather than explain, effective working relationships and they move into action with their words.

*“The ability to build and maintain congenial, warm relationships and to network effectively with people is a key leadership competency.”*

—Jim Selman

Generating effective relationships starts with developing the competency to observe, communicate with and relate to others in a context of commitment. Being committed to creating an effective relationship with everyone in one's life starts with the



realization that *a relationship is simply an interpretation*—often unconscious, but not an absolute fact. How a person ‘occurs’ for us is solely a function of our point of view—an interpretation that is neither right nor wrong. When we forget this, and think that how they ‘are for us’ is reality, we implicitly make a commitment to interact with them on that basis...and that limits how far we can go in coordinating our actions with them. Sharing our assessments<sup>1</sup> with someone else may help us ‘justify’ what we observe (and may potentially offer us some comfort in knowing we are not the only one seeing things this way), but it does not necessarily ground our assessment of the person in question as an assertion<sup>2</sup>. Rather than enter a right/wrong struggle over our interpretation, we can commit to observing the person from a different perspective.

*Listening* is a primary competency of committed communication. Not the passive ‘hearing’ of information, but the active, generous listening that creates space for the other person to fully express themselves. Designing a relationship can start with observing ourselves when in conversation with another person in terms of:

- ✓ How we are listening to them (dismissively, inattentively, generously, etc.)
- ✓ What ‘prior interpretations and stories’ we bring to every conversation with them
- ✓ What we are ‘listening FOR’ (their concerns, possibility, relationship, commitment, etc.)
- ✓ What assessments we make of *them* as they are speaking versus what assessments we make of *what* they are saying
- ✓ When we are listening completely and when we are only partly ‘present’ and what effect that has on the relationship.

Once we see which of our assessments are ungrounded (that is, which ones cannot be observed and measured by a third party), we can begin to understand that this is not ‘the way the person is’ or ‘the way the relationship has to be’. From this perspective, *we can imbue a relationship with whatever we wish to create*—not in opposition to the circumstances, but as a function and expression of what we are committed to creating. If we wish to create trust, then we can choose to trust the other person—no matter what our cultural story is and no matter what incidents around trust have occurred in their past. This can happen naturally if we are willing to *create a context around the existing circumstances* for that trust to exist in. That context may be a commitment to taking a stand for trust, a commitment to re-creating this particular relationship, or a commitment to seeing human beings as possibilities (rather than as ‘problems’).

Breakdowns, which are inevitable and healthy in any relationship, provide us with opportunities to create this new context. At first glance, they may reveal behavioral patterns and unconscious mechanisms that are normally concealed, often buried in resignation, apathy or depression. *These hidden aspects of our selves often thwart our intentions to change* and limit what is possible.



The appearance of a breakdown is like a doorway opening onto a new world: once we step through the door, we ‘break-through’ to seeing the world from a different perspective... and our relationships change accordingly. We can either embrace the breakdown as an opportunity to move forward or we can back away from it. Covering up a breakdown with platitudes or avoiding it with excuses and justifications means we lose an opportunity to learn from and relate to the other ‘human’ being. We essentially guarantee we will experience this same breakdown—albeit in different circumstances and perhaps with different people, but essentially this same breakdown—again sometime in the future.

Recurring breakdowns often get labeled as “relationship issues”. Relationship issues and communication issues are heads and tails of the same coin. All our conversations occur within the context of our commitments, and we coordinate all our actions within the context of our relationships. When we can effectively coordinate our actions in the context of our relationships and our commitments, there are no “relationship issues”. There is only conversation—committed speaking and listening.

### **Coordinating Action in Conversation**

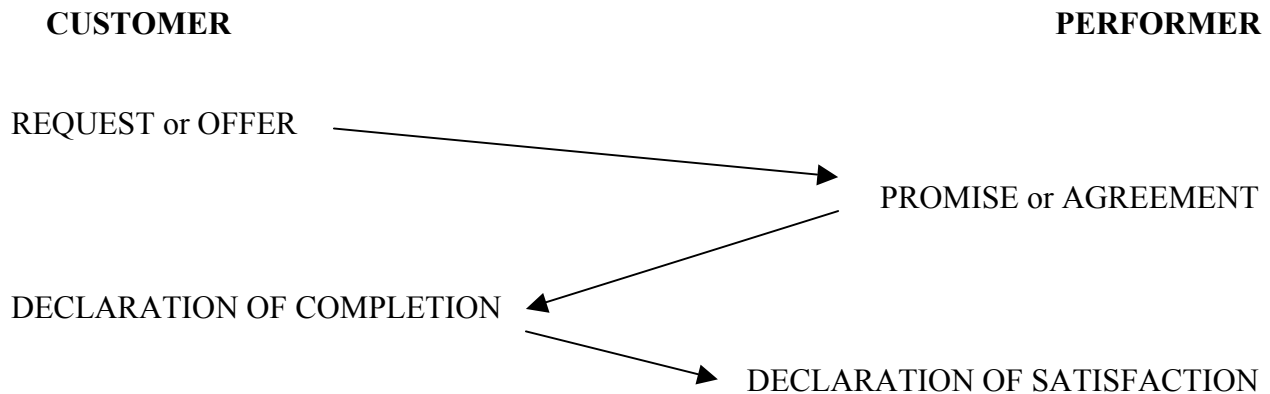
Nothing that is intended occurs until someone makes a request<sup>3</sup> or an offer<sup>4</sup>. Successful coordination of any endeavor either begins with a person (the customer) making a request and another person (the performer) making a promise<sup>5</sup>, or someone making an offer and another person accepting. Both parties can negotiate until they reach an acceptable agreement on the conditions of satisfaction and timeframe involved.

A condition of satisfaction, implicit in any request or offer, is usually interpreted in the context of cultural traditions and practices that both people share. For example, requesting a cup of coffee in North America assumes it will be delivered hot and black and be several ounces in size, whereas in Europe the coffee may include milk or cream and be delivered in a small espresso cup.

Once the performer has delivered on their promise, they can make a declaration<sup>6</sup> that they have completed the job. The coordination is not complete, however, until the customer declares that the conditions of satisfaction have been met.



*Coordinating Action through Speech Acts: Basic Workflow*  
(developed by Fernando Flores)



How often do people in organizations assume their request or offer has been accepted when no such agreement has been reached? How often are projects launched without clarifying the conditions of satisfaction or the timelines involved? Without clarity, uncertainty, waste and dissatisfaction (including interpersonal tensions, upsets and moodiness) can become commonplace.

An organization's processes are made up of innumerable, interdependent basic workflows. Failure to satisfy the conditions or the timeline in any one workflow can result in resentment, resignation and loss of trust between the people involved—which can impact all workflows in which these individuals participate. In a mechanistic culture, repeated failure to produce satisfaction reinforces the command-and-control paradigm. A person who fails to deliver becomes a 'problem' (or at very least the source of the problem) and ceases to be a person. Much time and effort is wasted trying to control, motivate or relocate the 'problem' to improve the basic flow of work.

### Exposing Waste

Organizations normally look at waste in physical and material terms. The typical solution: increase organizational complexity and add more technology to identify and eliminate redundancy and 'unnecessary procedures'. This often leads to a downward spiral in which the more efforts made to reduce waste, the less it is eliminated. Bureaucracy and self-justifying practices thrive. Solutions to the problem of waste produce more problems and eventually reduce morale.



Observing work as a series of committed conversations focused on coordinating action allows us to see ‘waste’ from a new perspective. It is essentially comprised of:

- ✓ A lack of coordination (through the use of requests, promises and declarations)
- ✓ A lack of trust among participants
- ✓ Insufficient commitment to clarifying the conditions of satisfaction
- ✓ Inadequate commitment to fulfilling the conditions of satisfaction.

Whenever individuals are unclear about their commitments in a relationship, when a basic action in the workflow is incomplete, or when roles are unclear, we experience confusion, delays, unnecessary actions and breakdowns in relationships. We can avoid ambiguity, misunderstanding and dissatisfaction by focusing on specific speech acts in each phase of every workflow process. Rather than viewing the people or the ‘system’ as the problem, we can focus on clarifying and fulfilling the conditions of satisfaction for specific requests.

### **Commitments In Action**

Committed speaking and listening is not necessarily comfortable. Nor is it a panacea. But it does offer us a way to bring breakdowns to the surface and to resolve them quickly. It can be the basis for building relationships and trust. And it can help us observe how we coordinate our commitments.

Using the basic distinctions of committed speaking and listening, we can learn to listen for opportunities to coordinate our actions more effectively and to observe when coordinated action is breaking down. Rather than focusing on defending a point of view, we can focus our attention on *why* we are having a conversation. And what we may once have viewed as ‘waste’ can be seen as an opportunity: to build relationship, promote creativity and innovation, and to possibly redesign the organization and our work processes to enable people to effectively navigate their network of relationships.

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### **Distinctions of Relationship Fundamentals**

(From Jim Selman’s Original *Distinctionary*)

<sup>1</sup> Assessment: a point of view that is neither true nor false. Commitment to provide grounding or rationale if requested to do so.



<sup>2</sup> Assertion: a statement that may be “true or false”. Commitment that what is asserted can be witnessed and measured by a third-party observer.

<sup>3</sup> Request: commitment to receive (accept) some conditions of satisfaction by a specific time in the future.

<sup>4</sup> Offer: an unsolicited promise.

<sup>5</sup> Promise: commitment to satisfy some condition of satisfaction by a specific time in the future. When we revoke a promise, we must be responsible for the consequences of this on our relationship with the other people involved. If we let a promise slide, we are not being responsible. Done on a consistent basis, slipped promises erode our integrity and our reputation.

<sup>6</sup> Declaration: commitment that something is the case because I say so. Some declarations require social agreement or authority, others do not. Assessments are a particular kind of declaration.