

“We Space” Driven Organizations

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Dan Siegel stipulates that, “Of all the factors in human life that predict positive outcomes supportive relationships are number one.” I suggest that most of us who have been immersed in the realm of practical management and its theoretical foundations would strongly agree with this general statement. Conversely, Gary Hamel and Michele Zanini state that, “An excess of bureaucracy costs the U. S. economy more than \$3 trillion in lost economic output per year.”

Bureaucratic systems seldom support self-initiatives no less supportive relationships. So, where are the disconnects in our economic systems? I hope that at least part of the answer to this dichotomy will become clear by the end of this paper.

For most of my management and academic life I’ve struggled with one basic question, “How can we manage people in the most humane and practical way?” It took me some time but I finally concluded that you really can’t manage people. You can control them in various ways but not their minds, specifically their subconscious minds. Thus, engaged people function best when they are free to manage themselves *in unison with others around them*.

The reason for that is quite simple. High performance is self-initiated commitment:

- Founded on supportive relationships.
- *Subconsciously* and *emotionally* driven.
- Collaborative context dependent.
- Conventionally virtually unmanageable.

The following are the main points I will cover in this paper:

- Our autopilot, the subconscious mind
- Primal emotions and behavior motivation
- Relationship evolution and “We Space”
- The Organizational Sweet Spot
- Essentials of “We Space” driven systems.

The Subconscious Mind

According to Tali Sharot our brains evolved to control our bodies so that our bodies can manipulate our environment. More precisely, our minds are composed of one conscious and two subconscious levels. Further, these levels have different data processing speeds. Our conscious mind processes information at about 40-60 bits per second whereas the subconscious mind whips along at roughly 10 million bits per second.

So, what gives? Essentially, we couldn't survive for very long if most of our bodily functions and external sensors weren't operating at high speeds and in an "autopilot mode." Yet when is the last time you heard a manager or supervisor talk about our subconscious minds and emotions in a business meeting?

It's important because we automatically respond to our given environments (for example organizational cultures-good or bad) without much conscious thought. Hence, all those imaginative organizational slogans decorating the walls of many organizations seldom have their intended affect. What counts are day-to-day activities not slogans.

More specifically, we and all life forms for that matter, operate in a self-organizing manner. Essentially, our will power, analysis and conscious decisions account for only ten percent of what makes us tick. So, what specifically is self-organization? It's defined as a process by which systems of many parts spontaneously attain their structures or functions without interference from an outside agent. More definitely:

- It's an entity's intrinsic ability to change itself as it interacts with its environment and strives to maintain its identity
- The interactions produce self-referential patterns without the need to be designed or managed
- Evolving patterns are both sustained and transformed by spontaneous interactions
- Creativity and destruction are part of the emergent process

Further, subconscious data streams can be categorized into two general forms: *biological homeostasis* (internal bodily functions data) and *sociocultural homeostasis* (external social settings/cultural affects data—Antonio Damasio's terminology). We have very little indication as to what is taking place within our bodies other than feelings of comfort or discomfort. It's quite different when it comes to sociocultural homeostasis or responding to our surroundings. This is where our five senses (vision, smell, taste, sound and touch) come into play "spontaneously" way before our conscious mind attempts to make sense of these inputs.

As suggested before, spontaneity is critical for our survival. This will become more obvious shortly. For the moment let's just keep in mind that consciousness accounts for only ten percent of the overall survival equation encompassing will power, analysis and decisions. The remaining ninety percent consists primarily of beliefs, values, emotions, habits, imagination and intuition.

In a nutshell, the subconscious is:

- Active 24/7
- A proficient multitasker
- Alert and quick reacting
- Much faster than the conscious mind
- Defines our being—personality, taste, talent, values emotions, habits and beliefs

Now let's take a look at our evolved primal emotions and how they fit into the overall equation. They will further help to clarify what's been discussed so far.

Behavior Motivation

According to neuroscientists Jaak Panksepp and Lucy Bevin, "Feelings came first in mind brain evolution." Essentially, emotions alert us instinctively what supports our survival and what does not.

So, what are these primal emotions that we rely on for our basic survival? There is now ample evidence and agreement on at least seven of these basic emotions. They are:

- SEEKING—Enthusiastically searching for or investigating some event or entity
- CARE—Tender loving care for others or something benefitting others
- PLAY—Joyous events involving other people
- RAGE—Anger towards others because of perceived threats to oneself or partners
- FEAR—Anxiously anticipating threat/s to oneself or associates
- PANIC/GRIEF—Loneliness and sadness over personal or partners life events.
- LUST—Sexual excitement

What needs to be kept in mind is that the above emotions are triggered spontaneously. That is, before we have a chance to react to these emotions "rationally" they are already in play. That's why, for instance, it takes considerable time to overcome one's rage over an event because our minds are reacting instinctively.

In the distant past, and even occasionally today, certain events demand instant reaction or we would be dead or at least seriously hurt. For instance, when a lion is running towards us or an out of control car is bearing down on us, we don't have time to debate what our options are. We only have time to react instantly to the approaching threat.

Let's now take a closer look at how all this comes into play. As hinted previously, the main triggers for our primal or instinctive emotions and reactions are our five senses. Next our learned but still subconscious "filters" and emotions come into play. Finally, the conscious/awareness level gets into the act as the inputs from the senses continue to be distributed and processed. Again, the brain, like the rest of our body, is a self-organizing system. Thus, all its parts work together simultaneously and not in a step-by-step fashion.

In summary the conscious and subconscious influences on our thoughts and actions are as follows:

- Conscious 10%
 - Analyze
 - Reason and plan
 - Short term memory

- Subconscious 90%
 - Personality
 - Beliefs, values, habits
 - Relationship patterns
 - Instincts and emotions
 - Intuition
 - Long term memory

So, how does all this affect individual motivation? Obviously, the subconscious governs most of our behavior. Thus, neuroscientists have concluded that *human social behavior is governed by an all-encompassing principle of minimizing threat and maximizing reward*. Threat is not just fear. It includes anything that's an avoidable response. Also, reward is not just financial. It's any pleasing experience. Finally, our brains treat social needs the same as the need for food and water and all behavior is tightly entwined with emotions.

Then, what specifically are the main desired human experiences in any social setting? David Rock has defined five such looked-for experiences and his findings have been duplicated by others. Listed and briefly defined below are our general desired human social experiences:

- *Status*—is about relative importance to others
- *Certainty*—concerns being able to predict the future
- *Autonomy*—provides a sense of control over events
- *Relatedness*—is a sense of safety with others
- *Fairness*—is a perception of fair exchange between people

Now let's start to take a closer look at how the features covered so far begin to merge into a more dynamic whole with practical implications.

Relationship Evolution

Dan Siegel's research makes a strong case that relationships evolved first and self-reflection followed. This, of course, was expounded by the parallel development of language and socially-needed empathetic skills. "We could now examine in thought and feeling what an 'I' might be, and reflect about what a 'you' might be (not only in here-and-now but in concept, across time and context). 'I' could now connect to 'you,' which led to 'we' (we could reflect on the past, sense the present, and make future plans."

When it comes to developing supportive relationships we also need to observe the social limits set by the "Dunbar Number." Robin Dunbar's research twenty years ago, and confirmed by numerous studies since, revealed that close personal affiliations are restricted to groups of no larger than around 150 people. That is, our cognitive affiliation limit (ability to maintaining stable relationships) can seldom be extended beyond this number. The reason for that is quite straight forward. In a group of 150 people its members are already devoting 42 percent of their

time just to sustaining helpful relationships. Increasing that number of affiliates even further clearly limits the time needed to be dedicated to other productive and life sustaining endeavors.

In the final analysis, supportive relationships enable us to do the following:

- Achieve way more than we can ever on our own
- Provide an effective way to satisfy our sociocultural needs
- Help us trigger more of our positive primal emotions—seeking, care and play

So, what are our basic relationship choices? From my perspective there are only three:

- Detached “My” and “Your” Space
- Common and evolving “We” Space
- Disputed “My” or “Your” Space

Before two (or more) individuals meet they are dependent on managing their own immediate environment or “My/Your” Space around them independently. Hence, they can accomplish things only as much they are able to achieve on their own. Also, when two or more people meet they have a choice whether to initiate supportive relationships or continue to go it alone. That is, they can continue to be completely self-reliant or expand their interdependence as much as possible.

When two or more individuals decide to start developing supportive relationships they, essentially, trade some of their Self-reliant Space for “We Space.” All parties concerned hope that this will enhance their lives. Of course, “My Space” and “Your Space” can never completely overlap into “We Space” since there will always be things that can only be accomplished individually by the people involved. What counts from a productivity and sociocultural enhancement perspective is how extensively the individuals interacting are willing to expand and maintain their “We Space” *together*.

The third option can be quite confrontational depending on how aggressively the parties involved are determined to win outright or willing to resolve the dispute to mutual satisfaction. What makes the resolution of the “Disputed Space” most difficult to remedy is that it can trigger one of the most negative primal emotions to overcome—rage.

The three relationship choices are particularly important when we select members for business requirements or more personal activities. In either case, the selection process is central to success. Hence, the emphasis needs to be on assuring, as much as possible, the non-selection of people who are not only willing to engage with others but take full responsibility for their actions. Also, self-aggrandizers who are most likely to try to dominate any situation need to be avoided.

Beyond the importance of selecting sociable group members, there are also several other ways to “boost” the development of supportive relationships. That is, there are certain dynamic

factors that enhance “We Space” expansion and its long-term sustainment. The major boosters include the following:

- Certain environmental settings or cultures
- Connections to other associated friendship networks
- Small group size—the Dunbar Number
- Catalytic or shared leadership
- Persistent positive emotions—seeking, care and play

I’ll just briefly focus on the positive emotional part of the equation. As an example, the seeking emotional system is largely activated by novelty. People get excited by chances to learn or experience something new. Hence, it’s important to at least occasionally break with the routine activities and talk about future possibilities especially if we want to be innovative.

Caring also carries with it tremendous benefits. Many of us are familiar with the African proverb, “It only takes one woman to bear a child, but it takes a village to raise it.” The same holds true for a business. It can only take one person to come up with a great new idea, but it takes a supportive group of people to make it a success. We should never forget that caring others (in any environment) are the ones who can offer us the gift of a successful and happy life. Just look back at your own lifespan for a moment.

Finally, many of us have a great deal of difficulty visualizing the benefits of play especially in a business environment. Fiona Haywood, however, reminds us that we should keep a closer eye on the advantages of play. Briefly play:

- Increases imagination
- Creates a simultaneous sense of safety and adventure
- Invokes creativity
- Encourages adoption to the outside world while remaining authentic

Thus, it’s not just some frivolous activity that has little effect on innovation and productivity.

Below is a short summary of what has been covered so far. All of it will now be applied, in a more cohesive fashion, to a general business framework. Briefly, people are principally:

- Shaped by hidden or subconscious information streams
- Vying for status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness
- Engaged in “We Space” networks in order to minimize threat and maximize reward
- Less engaged in groups larger than 150 people

Again, the bottom line is that 90 percent of our actions and reactions are dealt with by our biological “autopilot,” the subconscious mind. Hence, maximizing business success is as dependent on a positive social setting as it is on up-to-date systems and processes.

As suggested by Tali Sharot, we are driven to be *causal agents* internally rewarded when in control and internally punished when not.

The Organizational Sweet Spot

Nine years ago I defined and described the Organizational Sweet Spot in my book by the same title. Today I define it more precisely as the macro “We Space” (linked “We Spaces”) within an organization or a group attained via expanded self-management and supportive relationships. One also needs to bear in mind that every functioning enterprise has a Sweet Spot or it couldn’t exist.

Some folks may immediately contend that they function within a very regimented top-down management framework and, therefore, nobody practices self-management at their place. That can’t be true. Even at McDonald’s the person cooking hamburgers does it on her/his own once they have learned the task. If that wasn’t the case there would have to be a supervisor standing behind every employee constantly telling them how exactly to carry out their assignment(s). That, of course, makes little sense and is financially unsustainable.

Instead, every enterprise has to practice some degree of self-management otherwise they couldn’t be in business. So, what is self-management? I define it as, “Activities based on supportive relationships and personal commitments, ‘We Space,’ rather than hierarchical control and compliance.” In other words, self-management brings organizational structure to an enterprise spontaneously. The wider it’s spread the larger the Organizational Sweet Spot.

Essentially, the Organizational Sweet Spot is the space where the formal and informal organizational systems overlap. Hence, the more the Formal and Informal segments are in agreement as to what needs to be accomplished the larger the overlap between the spheres. More specifically:

- The Sweet Spot portrays all work activities within an organization taking place in a self-managing mode
- Extended spheres overlap “can” abolish the need for all formal management
- The two spheres can never completely overlap because (a) total agreement on all systems and processes is unrealistic and (b) continuous full member engagement is unsustainable

Now let’s take a closer look at the multitude of positive dynamics that take place within the Sweet Spot or the macro “We Space.” Essentially, what makes the Sweet Spot so sweet for an organization and its members.

The Organizational Sweet Spot expands as more and more activities within an enterprise are carried out in a self-management mode. There, of course, is no guarantee that the process will continue even during a formal effort to increase the use of self-management. The reason for that is quite straight forward. Not everyone may be on board to support the effort or many of the necessary dynamics are yet to be activated. This will become clearer in a moment. The

bottom line is that once the Sweet Spot is increased there are no guarantees that it will not decrease in size.

In the most basic terms, as self-management increases so do supportive relationships because they have to if self-management is to be sustained. Further, the increase in supportive relationships has to expand the five desired experiences of organizational members. If not, why would associates be motivated to continue maintaining or expanding supportive relationships. Finally, the above processes provide stable socioeconomic homeostasis to most folks involved and, thus, lead to a strong sense of community. In essence, a home away from home instead of a place to be tolerated for the sake of a livelihood.

The key to really understanding the interrelationships of the factors in the self-management process is the realization that it too, like our minds and bodies, is based on self-organization as delineated previously. That is, the process doesn't happen in a linear fashion, step-by-step. Rather, it takes place in a very integrated and dynamic manner. Therefore, it makes little sense to focus on any of the self-management factors in isolation. Every feature of the progression is very closely related to all the other activities.

Accordingly, I define the Organizational Sweet Spot dynamics as, "Reciprocally supportive and caring relationships committed to seeking and pursuing common goals."

Some Key Practical Considerations

First, we need to comprehend what is manageable in an organization from the standard top down perspective. A typical organization has three primary general components:

- A formal structure
- A comprehensive Sweet Spot
- Informal networks

So, which of these components can be realistically managed? Well let's see. The formal structure is composed of three elements: systems, processes and management arrangements. I think we can safely say that all of the three are manageable. What about the Sweet Spot? Activated and maintained by self-management/self-organization dynamics it can hardly be a candidate for being managed. Finally, the informal networks, that are part of every organization, are named "informal" for a reason. These networks can be influenced but never managed. They are created and maintained by our social drive to promote common interest.

Clearly, only one of the three general organizational components is manageable. That's why most mainstream executives tend to focus on the first part and ignore the other two. Overlooking two thirds of the dynamics of an organization promotes some very negative outcomes. Hence, it's no wonder that only 33 percent of US workers are fully engaged at work.

The lesson here is that we can't ignore something we can't manage. It may lead one to greater success. Therefore, our general objective should always be to nurture an organizational

environment that minimizes threat and maximizes reward. We can accomplish that by adhering to the following:

- Decreasing bureaucracy and increasing self-management (Linked We Spaces/Sweet Spot)
- Expanding the five desired human experiences
- Rousing seeking, care and play emotions
- Limiting business units to 150 associates

So, how does one develop what can be considered an “ideal organizational setting”? From my research and practical experience, the following four interactive system’s components need to be advanced and function in unison:

- Individual Identity
- Shared Identity
- Challenging Aspiration
- Mutual Alignment

If one element of the arrangement is neglected in any way it automatically affects the progression of the other three. Thus, for best results, every part needs to get equal attention rather than sequentially.

Let’s now take a closer look at each component of what I call the “*We Space*” *Driven Organization* starting with the Individual Identity component. The focus of this domain is on the maintenance of two life sustaining aspects of each member: their individuality via sociocultural homeostasis and their wherewithal through fair compensation. Both are attained by various degrees of supportive relationships with fellow associates.

The development and maintenance of the Individual Identity component is by far the most critical of the four even though they all need to function together in a balanced fashion. Why? Basically, because the screening and acquisition of the right people impacts the ultimate successful development of the other three features and the system as a whole.

People who are ultimately asked to join the organization must be capable of working independently and in self-managing teams. Thus, they need to possess not only the suitable talent(s) but also be responsible individuals committed to the overall success of the enterprise including its other members. Explicitly, they need to be “able and willing to earn” their status within the group.

The Shared Identity element is all about the establishment and maintenance of a sense of community—expanded We Space. Therefore, it needs to be based on “reciprocally supportive and caring relationships committed to seeking and pursuing common goals.” Member desired human experiences (status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness) also need serious attention as are respect and empathy because they are directly associated with expanding

supportive relationships. Another factor needing close consideration here is the linkage of individual skills to other associates and recognized organizational core competencies.

Challenging Aspirations comes next. Every enterprise needs to project and decide how it wants to proceed as it faces new challenges and opportunities. In a “We Space” driven Organization that is the joint responsibility of all its members.

During periodic reflections, associates need to agree not only on the overall goals for the organization but also assure that their personal orientation is in line with the overall proposed arrangements. A key part of this is to assure all associates are keenly aware of the latest forecasts for their particular industry and the economy as a whole.

Finally, a quick look at the particulars of Mutual Alignment. Here the focus is on making sure that everyone is “marching to the same tune and direction.” More specifically, making sure that all associates are following the agreed upon goals and timelines jointly decided in Mutual Alignment sessions.

Again, in a ‘We Space” driven organization the alignment process, of course, is the responsibility of every member of the organization. Hence, it’s carried out by what I have termed, “Catalytic Leadership,” based on expertise or value-added knowledge facilitation and not on position power. It’s about encouraging others to participate in activities that they are either not aware of or hesitant to initiate action on their own. Fundamentally, this is another key part of self-management.

Conclusion

The need to focus on the Organizational Sweet Spot is all about expanding the linked enterprise supporting We Spaces to the maximum extent possible. That is only likely if organizational members carry out their functions mainly by means of reciprocally supportive and caring relationships committed to seeking and pursuing common goals. It’s not easy but the payoff can be significant.

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