

We Space Theory Application

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The intent of this short paper is to place We Space Theory into a more fundamental application context and provide “general guidelines” as to how to apply it within an organization. It’s quite general because every organization functions differently even when they produce the same product or provide the same service.

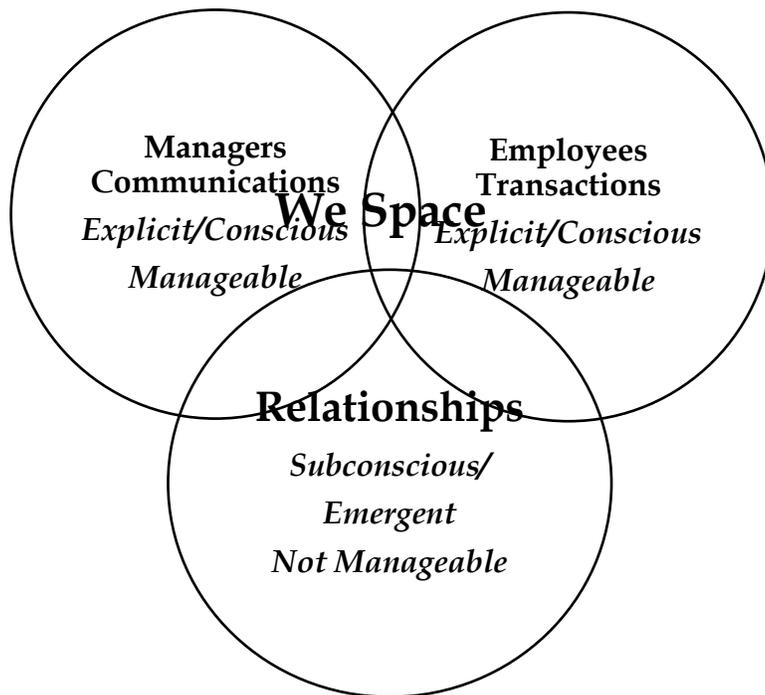
We frequently hear the expression, “People are not machines.” Through carelessness or ignorance, however, management seldom follows that sage advice. As Fred Herzberg used to say while I worked with him (I’m paraphrasing), “If you want people to do a good job then give them a good job. If you don’t, you’ll get movement rather than motivated behavior.” Thus, real leaders should be colleagues rather than judges. They are “value-adding facilitators” counseling people but also learning from them.

As I stipulated in “We Space Theory,” people will spontaneously self-organize in response to any situation or environment. Collaborative environments (a perceived reward) allows brains to process data easier and faster enhancing productivity and innovation. Coercion and compliance (a perceived threat) has the opposite effect. As Fritjof Capra has said, “The ideas of self-organization are very important to understand the autonomy, the authenticity and basic humanity of people.”

So, let’s take a closer look at We Space and see how the concept helps to visualize the combined value-adding and self-organizing dynamics of the formal organization (comprised of managers) and the informal organization (comprised of employees). Both sides, of course, need to interact with one another in some fashion in order to produce sought-after products and services.

How can that be achieved in the most mutually engaging, productive and satisfying way? The figure on the next page represents the general configuration of We Space. In order to keep it fairly simple I’ve only included two partakers in the model. In reality it usually includes 10 to 30 people.

Typically, managers give instructions (communicate) to employee to perform some activities (transactions). That initiates the formation of a We Space that increases or decreases in size depending on the types of relationships that develop over time between members. Thus, We Space size and performance value are directly related to the degree of shared-identity, cohesion and collaboration between members. Specifically, as shared-identity and cohesion increases among participants transaction costs decrease while their value increases.



So, how does one determine the relationship value of each “Productive We Space?” Clearly, determining those values “precisely” is unfeasible. However, I’ve developed a method to estimate the “approximate relationship levels” of a typical We Space. The levels and their names are:

- Collaboration
- Cooperation
- Coordination
- Compliance
- Coercion
- Bump-and-run

To assure agreement on the above wording, I will first define the above terms more precisely. I will then show a practical method to gage at what approximate level of relationships a particular We Space happens to be at a given point in time.

Bump-and-Run is my label for a random temporary meeting between individuals that fails to lead to any specific outcome. Another designation for it could be “hello and goodbye.”

Coercion is quite self-explanatory. It's the practice of forcing another party to act in an involuntary manner by use of threats or force. Illegal but, unfortunately, often practiced by supervisors.

Compliance is the act of following rules or orders. It's a prerogative of supervision but generally not a "motivator" for followers.

Coordination is a basic function of management (planning, organizing, directing, and controlling) but it can also be accomplished by experienced associates. It's the minimum waterline for a Productive We Space.

Cooperation is the process of people working together to achieve results or common goals. It's fairly voluntary.

Collaboration is the process of creating a shared meaning about a process, a product, or an event. It's completely voluntary. At this We Space level managers become colleagues without titles, except for external use. In essence, feeling safe and secure, members interact without bias and unwarranted expectations. Everyone is in sync helping each other to make better choices.

Now let's take a look at a practical method to gage the approximate level of relationships that a specific We Space happens to be at a given point in time. It's all about the attained levels of self-management each member has earned over time.

What exactly is self-management? In general, it's a form of self-organization that we all adhere to innately in response to any situation we happen to encounter. Self-management comes into play when an individual has attained the skills and has earned the trust of management and associates to carry out all the necessary functions of management on their own. Specifically, they:

- Accept "We Space" tasks and goals as being their boss.
- Carry out all managerial functions necessary on their own.
- Coordinate all necessary activities with other group members on their own.

Accordingly, I use self-management to roughly determine at what level of supportive relationships a We Space is. That is, self-management is a good indicator as to what direction a We Space is heading – progressing towards collaboration or digressing towards compliance.

One additional point needs serious consideration, although I will not dwell on it extensively. It's organizational culture. Without a strong supportive culture, the progression toward more and more collaborative and productive We Spaces will be limited. Most of them will seldom advance past the "coordination level."

Cultures are ever-present but invisible. They are:

- Subconsciously activated and emergent.
- Driven by repetitive social norms such as leadership styles, values, attitudes, beliefs, etc.
- Slow to change and are not conventionally manageable.

So, what are the primary components of a We Space supportive culture? That is best displayed by the figure below.



Individuality, joint goal alignment and codependent goal execution go hand-in-hand. One without the other doesn't take you far towards advancing a We Spaces culture. It's not easy but definitely worth it for all participants.