

Musings from



Musings from Gate 44 is a series of papers written from one of the most sacred reflective places in a consultant's life – the airport. As we depart our client's cities, we are often decompressing, celebrating, venting, strategizing and reflecting on behalf of those we serve. We're inviting you into our private thoughts about...you. "You" means those of you leading complex organizations trying to grow, change, improve and compete. These "musings" are stimulated by patterns we see over and over again as we work. Our hope is that letting you into our inner thoughts will help you grapple with the issues that frustrate your noblest aspirations and thwart what you seek to achieve. (We hope we'll also have a chance to laugh gently together at some of the silly things organizations can do.)

Caught in the Thick of Very Thin Things: Transforming Pettiness and Short Sightedness into Passion and Performance

By Eric Hansen and Ron A. Carucci

***We've finally reached our seats!** Now that airlines charge for carry-ons, we've noticed some people really pushing the envelope. The gentleman ahead of us in the check in line had a bag absolutely bulging and right at the edge of the size requirement. He was spouting rules and regulations at a disinterested gate attendant while the line behind him ballooned exponentially. He complained loudly that the charges were petty and short sighted while he served as a poster child for the same behavior, whining and trying to pick a fight with the gate attendant. It's always easier to see someone else's pettiness than your own. His shouting*

only inflamed the gate agent more, evidenced by an increasingly legalistic judgement of the man's suitcase. The agent finally demanded the passenger gate-check it or get out of line. Pettiness only begets the same. The passenger looked behind himself for sympathy, but the people backing up on the line just wanted to get on board and were grimacing at his tantrum. We sighed with relief when we saw we weren't going to have to squeeze our carry-ons into the overhead bin with his behemoth.

Calling something petty and short-sighted can be like saying something is "nice" – people don't read deeper into what you're saying. But pettiness and short-sightedness are far from trivial. As we sat on the tarmac waiting to take off, this experience reminded us of a friend named Louise who is the CEO of a media company. She is about two years past a merger designed to bring together broader access to clients and a greater, more integrated portfolio of capabilities. Of course, one of the biggest challenges Louise faced was bringing down barriers within the enterprise. In Louise's case, she wanted to focus on

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the creatives in her company. Creatives in advertising and media companies like to play by their own rules and frequently resist integration with other disciplines. Louise had her work cut out for her.

She decided to bring her chief creative officer, Chris, into an important part of the post merger integration work. Louise's company, like many in the media field, had grown through many generations of mergers and acquisitions. One result was that the print and design shops used by the creatives across the organization were terribly inconsistent. In some geographies, several features of design and print were missing, whereas in others, capacity far exceeded the need for services. Louise wanted to weed out the less productive legacy print shops and create shared service centers out of the best ones. She thought that would be an easy win in the first few months after the merger. She put her chief creative, Chris, and her CIO, Terry, in charge of coming up with a plan to migrate to the shared services model and phase out redundant and inefficient print and design capacity.

And weeks went by. Then months. There always seemed to be some delay or other. Finally, Louise completely lost her patience when she saw the two year anniversary of the merger approach. She called Chris and Terry into her office and wanted to know what was happening. She quickly found herself deep in Chris' favorite cause – how creatives had unique needs. Chris argued that his people couldn't work on the interdisciplinary client services groups Louise and others wanted and he was adamant that creatives needed to continue sitting on their own floor so they could "think the thoughts that win awards." Even being on the same floor with lowly researchers would stymie creativity in Chris' view.

Louise realized she had completely lost track of the shared services argument. She turned to Terry for support and instead got a gloomy assessment of all the reasons why shared services was an impossible dream. Terry's list ended with Chris' own resistance, which in Terry's view was the final roadblock. Couldn't Louise see that it was just too difficult and expensive to do this? Louise shook her head and said she had never seen such pettiness and short sightedness from

two senior executives in her life. Both were insulted – Chris said he was fighting for the very life blood of the company and Terry said she had to deal with the reality of the situation. But Louise said she'd chosen her words carefully – and as we spoke to her later, we agreed.

Why Should You Care?

As we talk to senior leaders like Louise, we agree that their organizations are too frequently derailed by pettiness and short sightedness. Both are linked to a fundamentally distorted view of the world. When someone is being petty, as Chris was, their perspective of how they see themselves versus others is warped. They feel compelled to distort an unrealistic comparison to make sure they "win" by imposing their view on others. Of course this is rarely a conscious choice. Ironically, they make a habit of feeling small – threatened, besieged, or put upon – in order to feel big. Short sighted people, on the other hand, have a warp in scale – like Terry, they see the world much closer and smaller than it really is, and they create the proverbial inability to see the forest for the trees. Some are so focused, they may even miss the tree for the leaves!

So why talk about pettiness and short sightedness? Because they are both pervasive in all sizes and types of organizations and they suffocate performance. We've seen both everywhere from the village justice court to the boardroom of a \$50 billion company. Pettiness and short sightedness shape behavior to an almost frightening degree. We've seen executives paralyze their teams with a focus on minutia and exact figures so that the big picture never gets discussed. We've seen people leave literally three quarters of the money in a potential deal on the table because they refuse to think broadly about all the possibilities. Pettiness and short sightedness undermine organizations at every level.

Pettiness and Short Sightedness Challenged by the Greater Good

But there is also a bigger issue at play. Companies today are moving towards a mission-driven approach – instead of focusing only on a traditional financial bottom line, organizations are looking at the "triple bottom line" of people, planet and profits. A friend of ours had an experience when she moved into the health care industry that really highlights what this is all about. Several years ago, she had a sudden, life-threatening illness. She was deeply affected by the high quality of the supportive care she received as she recovered

and she decided to change careers, moving from the consulting industry to health care. As she started with her first hospital assignment, she became part of the effort to switch to electronic patient record keeping. It came as a surprise to her how much patient records are still dependent on paper files. The health care industry as a whole has not been exactly “green” in the past. According to a recent study by Health Leaders Media, hospitals emit more greenhouse gases than comparable commercial buildings, spend \$5 billion a year on energy and produce 4 billion pounds of trash annually. Dense paper charts in bulging files coupled with multiple personnel armed with prescription pads helps explain why we read of avoidable drug interaction deaths in the papers too frequently. According to the Journal of the American Medical Association, 4% of the US population is at risk for potential drug interaction illness. Our friend’s hospital was one of the first in the nation to aggressively pursue comprehensive use of electronic patient records. They did so with a conscious focus on the triple bottom line. Mobile wireless units now follow the patient in the hospital providing every caregiver with a comprehensive view of each patient’s medical history and flagging any possible drug interaction issues – this is the “people” part. The hospital is discarding paper records permanently, cutting down on need for paper and trash productions – the “planet” part. And the use of electronic records – and backing them up offsite in a disaster recovery protocol – is far more cost and space efficient than the old filing and cross referencing system. This is a great example of the triple bottom line. Hospitals across the country had lagged behind all other industries in taking advantage of computer record keeping, always citing the cost of implementation. Now, a newfound clarity about the benefit to and beyond the financial bottom line is driving a swift move towards electronic patient record systems everywhere in the health care industry.

We’re seeing companies large and small making new connections to the personal meaning of how they work in their communities. Interface, a leading modular carpeting manufacturer with annual sales of over \$1 billion, gave up the traditional golf activity at their 2005 national sales meeting and instead the national sales staff spent a day on community service. Despite initial grumbling, the staff felt the reward of what they were doing and community service has been the activity at the national sales meeting ever since. In the first half of 2010, retail giant Wal-Mart donated 128 million pounds of food that otherwise would have entered a landfill to food banks. One of the pioneers in questioning how profit can be part of a wider picture is Tom’s of Maine, which was begun by Tom and Kate Chappell in 1970 to sell the first non-phosphate laundry detergent. The company branched out to organic toothpaste and body care products within a couple of years and pioneered testing without animals for human body care products. In 1993, Tom Chappell wrote *The Soul of a Business: Managing for Profit and the Common Good*, which has



become one of the blueprints for managing towards the triple bottom line. With sales approaching the \$50 million dollar mark, the Chappells sold Tom’s of Maine to Colgate Palmolive in 2006 for \$100 million and the promise that the new owners would continue to follow the same environmentally and socially conscious strategies. These are so deeply ingrained in the brand, that Colgate Palmolive has been as good as their word.

Tom’s of Maine and similar companies have begun to solve some of the public relations problem that bedevil big business today, from animal testing to global warming. The other side of the coin is companies that have acted so badly in the public mind as to become poster children for the evils of looking only to the financial bottom line. BP, the largest company in the UK and the fourth largest company in the world, suffered a catastrophic blowout of its Deepwater Horizon drilling rig in April of 2010 that was not capped even temporarily until July. The resulting spill spread oil across the Gulf of Mexico, with tar balls washing ashore from Texas clear to Florida. Though the event is still being both cleaned up and analyzed, it appears that at every step of the way, BP put “lowest cost” as the paramount concern. From the operation of the rig to the installation of the blowout preventer all the way to the use of dispersants once the oil was in the water, BP has been accused of consistently choosing the cheapest approach in the face of an unprecedented and undeniable environmental and economic catastrophe. Even BP’s statements that it would cover the expenses of the families whose members were injured or killed rang hollow in light of the company’s refusal to pay the victims of an earlier explosion at a BP Texas City refinery until compelled by the courts to do so. BP’s stock value dropped by half in a mere four months – a loss of billions in market cap. Tighter safety rules and more attention to the best blowout preventer and safest dispersants for the conditions in the Gulf – instead of the cheapest and riskiest approach – could have mitigated the disaster, if not prevented it outright. Here we see pettiness and shortsightedness on a grand and system wide scale. The loss to British pension funds as BP’s stock sinks has spread the pain of this event across two large countries. The Tom’s of Maine story serves as an invitation to companies to adopt the triple bottom line, while the BP disaster is a potent threat to those



companies that ignore it. Either way, more companies are looking at a mission-driven approach. They are asking themselves what kind of company they really want to be. They are asking themselves what kind of company their stakeholders *expect* them to be.

But if the focus on becoming a mission-driven organization is vital, then pettiness and short sightedness are lethal. As organizations become more cause driven, they reorient themselves to find meaning that is socially and environmentally sustainable as well as fiscally prudent. Those that mouth commitment to these ideas and then betray people's sense of allegiance to the cause by retracting or shifting focus to earnings and profitability will likely never win it back. Unlike past management fads that employees expected to pass into management history, cause-driven organizations appeal to people on a deeply personal level – and if you betray the cause it becomes a personal betrayal. Individuals have become used to feeling betrayed by large employers in a US economy with persistent unemployment near the 10% level. Every household in the US has a story of someone they know that has been let go, cut back to a four day week, forcibly early retired, or compelled to take a commission-only "job." One long term job seeker we know successfully adopted a strategy of taking the first job they could find but continuing their job search until they got their old salary back. They swore up, down and sideways they wanted the job they were offered and would stay for at least year, only to quit twice in a row to take higher paying jobs. Their employers were annoyed, but this job seeker felt that no company had any right to expect loyalty when he had himself been fired after putting 20 years in with an organization. Companies talk a good game but then act differently, he reasoned – why should he stick to what he said when he expects the company won't? In a world where corporate employers have acquired a reputation for zero loyalty towards their employees and where jobs are completely unguaranteed from one day to the next, this job seeker felt that reciprocation was in order. If you want people to move past this kind of narrowly defined self-interest toward the larger shared vision, pettiness is the first dysfunction you have to dislodge. If you don't, expect your people to find ways to make you pay – whatever the cost.

Me First – Types of Pettiness

Pettiness comes from a distorted view of the self in relation to others. People see themselves as different, unique, entitled and exempt – and this can have a huge impact on others. Pettiness comes in several forms:

Selfishness and Self Interest

Selfishness is defined by attitudes and behavior where there is little or no acknowledgement or empathy for others. It is an excessive or exclusive concern with one's own well-being without regard for others. It is demonstrated in behaviors that focus almost exclusively on improving personal welfare or advantage. We all have selfish or narcissistic behaviors to some degree (see *Characteristics of Narcissism* sidebar on next page). It is both normal and necessary to think of one's self and work to get needs satisfied. We all need to care enough about our selves sufficiently to survive and to function effectively. But when selfish behavior is no longer counterbalanced with healthy and necessary regard for the greater good, the results can be crippling. A company we worked with had an unhealthy rivalry between two of its regional offices. The head of one was so driven to outperform that he aggressively sought to win accounts away from other regional offices. His numbers were great, granted, but his activity created severe problems for one of the other offices, and placed the CEO in a very awkward position. Healthy self-regard means setting appropriate boundaries and limits for your own self protection. It means giving up destructive win-lose survival patterns so you can work in collaboration with others for mutual advantage.

Turf Wars

This is territorialism – drawing a line around what you "own" and jockeying for control over resources. The story we told earlier about Chris, the chief creative in a media company, is a perfect example. Chris was concerned wholly about insulating his people from everything his CEO wanted to do to bring their company and its disciplines together. He was closed to the benefits this might have presented – he was completely committed to preserving the uniqueness and prestige of his own fief. Chris told himself he was "protecting his people" but in reality, he was protecting his prestige and concept of his own position.



Retaliation – “Tit for Tat”

We caught in the press the story of a group of teenagers from Arizona who went on an all-day picnic into the desert on the outskirts of Phoenix. As they hiked along the trail they passed the sparse clusters of mesquite, cat claw, and Palo Verde trees, with cactus scattered here and there. Particularly in the summer, these thickets are a refuge for desert creatures seeking protection from the intense heat. As one girl ran ahead, she felt a sharp pain on her ankle. Looking down she saw a snake recoiling, preparing to inject a second dose of venom which she avoided by jumping backward. Her friends caught up quickly, responding to her scream. So what to do next: get treatment for the wounded girl or look for the snake to destroy it? Instinctively the girl and her friends pursued the snake. It slipped quickly into the undergrowth and avoided them for nearly twenty minutes. Finally, they exposed it and pummeled it with rocks, avenging the wrong. With their anger satisfied, they turned their attention to their friend, who was in shock by then and having difficulty breathing. With her heart racing, pumping blood at an increased rate, the venom had been left to carry on its insidious work. Within another thirty minutes they were at the emergency room, but the venom had been allowed the time to cause massive tissue damage. Her foot and leg were swollen almost beyond recognition. Despite the doctors’ best efforts, her leg was ultimately amputated below the knee. Many of us are bitten in the course of work life and metaphorically face a similar decision. How do you respond when you’re hurt by another? The longer the poison of resentment and vengeance stays in a body, the greater and longer lasting is its destructive impact. The poison of retaliation destroys the people involved, and negatively impacts those around them.

One-upsmanship

Several years ago, one of our clients made a necessary, but difficult decision to separate their wholesale and retail functions in the face of declining same-store performance. The new strategy and organization structure gave the recently hired head retail executive decision authority to tailor the wholesale product offering instead of perfunctorily accepting what had traditionally been dictated to his predecessors. Against decades of “pack-it-in” behavior reinforced by a wholesale reward system that for too long ignored actual product performance, the new retail executive invited Wholesale to partner with him to devise an alternative assortment to match a new store format. After sustained joint efforts over weeks yielded little but a reworking of the same old plan—with Wholesale

Characteristics of Narcissism

Noted psychodynamic psychologist Marion Soloman says, “Each of us functions with a core of narcissistic, self focused view of the world. We all have a bit of narcissism and indeed need some of it to survive. We all have a bit of selfishness in us and that is okay. Otherwise we would end up giving away everything. We need to learn to receive as well as give to be healthy.” How do you know if you’re stepping over the line from a healthy narcissism to a destructive selfishness? Consider whether you:

- Turn every conversation to yourself;
- Fish for compliments and regularly relate stories or comparative accomplishments to bolster ego;
- Ignore the impact of negative comments or behaviors on others;
- Often make unreasonable requests without acknowledgement or apology;
- Become angry and intimidating when personal needs are not met;
- Are quick to criticize others, but are closed minded about your own mistakes;
- Use anger to shut down criticism;
- Seek status symbols and external validation – money, titles, material rewards;
- See yourself as above rules and laws;
- Struggle to listen and don’t allow others to have different opinions;
- Aren’t able to see things from any other point of view;
- Control others by making them feel stupid, helpless and inept;
- Exploit others with lies and manipulations.



insisting the pack-ins remain constant, the new executive team went it alone and dramatically altered the offerings for the tests stores. The wholesale leaders were livid, and passively stood by to watch the new team fail. When the second month results showed a persistent downward trend, they took courage. During the next executive business review forum the lead product executive asked obvious leading and loaded questions, each one beginning with the refrain of “in all my years of experience and dedication to this company ...” With this not-so-subtle and public lecture to the CEO and new retail team, he claimed superiority and reminded everyone of his indispensability. His moment of glory was short-lived, however, when retail sales turned around dramatically in month three, showing same-store product growth in high double digits.

Face Time

Many organizations develop an unintended currency known as “face time” – the importance of “being seen” in certain places at certain times by certain people to secure a reputation of being important, even indispensable. In one client organization facing significant committee proliferation, senior leader spent nearly 60,000 hours a year in meetings – this is nearly 7 years of time in a twelve-month period. “Owning a meeting” and being seen by important people had become such a preoccupation that people had to spend nights and weekends doing their day jobs because so much of their daily routines were consumed in unproductive, politically motivated meetings. To perpetuate the sickness, people would set their Outlook to send emails out at 3:00 a.m. to proliferate the illusion that they were up at all hours having to work, justifying the complaints of exhaustion they bemoaned the next morning.

Victimization/Vilification

Often a by-product of face time, and other cultural anomalies, people fend off true accountability by becoming victims of the very environments which they

help create. We constantly hear mid-level managers beset with great suffering at the hands of unreasonable executives asking far more of them than available resources or a desire to balance one’s work life can accommodate. To be fair, this is often true – the “do more with less” mind-set can run completely amuck and lead to out and out abuse. But the opposite is also true. Environments of excessively low levels of accountability overcompensate for the fear of exposure by creating the illusion of progress and productivity by massive activity addiction – just looking busy to ensure one is seen as necessary. This is almost always followed by dramatic displays of exaggerated exhaustion, victimization, and laying blame at the feet of some unreasonable villain of a boss. In the face of such suffering, people believe they can look innocent, angelic, and garner the sympathy of others. Like the man in line at the airport, the strategy often backfires when people see right through the drama to the lack of any meaningful contribution or results.

Mountains out of Molehills – Types of Short Sightedness

Short sightedness is a distorted view of the world relative to one’s proximity to it (see *At the Roots of Shortsightedness* sidebar at on page 7 for the roots of the problem). The world seems much smaller than it really is. Obstacles seem bigger and insurmountable. It’s not hard to spot short sightedness – it is often a companion running parallel to pettiness. Where you find one, you usually find the other. Here are some of the most salient examples of short sightedness:

Catastrophizing: Finding Armageddon

History books record periods of upheaval, distress, disease, economic depressions and wars in great detail. Golden ages actually tend to make the shortest chapters – “they lived happily ever after” tends not to make for a compelling story. The news media lives off of bad news. Some people play the prophet of doom in their professional lives so others will listen to them. The more terrible things seem, the more these people feel significant. People who prey on fear can seriously impair their organization’s ability to interpret data and make balanced judgments. We recently worked with a media company which found a quality issue in a publication that had gone out to one of their clients. This is always a serious situation, and we never make light of this sort of thing. But one of the division heads had a reputation for seeing “end of the world” or at least “end of business” scenarios and this time we saw it in full play. The division head pulled over a dozen projects slated for publication in the next quarter and



sent them through the quality process again as if they had never been checked – and he required that this be done in two weeks during a heavy production season for the company. People worked round the clock and ironically, current work in the queue was delayed and then released hastily because no allocation was made for the time this rechecking took. While the quality issue for this company was a serious one, the disproportionate and alarmist response – fueled by repeated pronouncements that “if we don’t do this, we’ll get killed” – actually placed the company at greater risk. It certainly made everyone miserable. The executive driving this response saw himself as the only thing standing between the company and oblivion and he was almost impervious to any other point of view.

Playing the prophet of doom can severely undermine your own personal credibility. Once people realize that things are seldom as bad as you make them out to be, they will stop listening to you. In one organization we worked with, the head of strategy was notorious for his capacity to turn the slightest of issues into a catastrophe. His impulse was so out of control that the CEO, along with his peers, began to discount his input almost before he began speaking. No matter what progress was made against a particular strategy, his ability to demonstrate how the slightest deficiency spelled sure failure, incompetence of others, potential disaster, or out and out defiance of others was agonizing, if not almost comical. His short sighted attempt at bolstering his credibility and expertise resulted in just the opposite – his voice became marginalized and his input was pursued less and less.

Tyranny of the Urgent

One of the most common things we see when we start coaching executives is a focus on pressing issues at the expense of actions that have long-term consequences. In a sense, this is an inability to see the forest for the trees – or as we suggested earlier, for the individual leaves. It can seem counterintuitive to tell someone that the burning issues on their desk are not necessarily the best thing to work on and that they should step back and look for the bigger picture. One of the executives we’ve coached was asked by his CEO to take on a troubled department. After his first hundred days, the CEO worried that the department wasn’t changing. This executive had identified a couple of large client accounts that were troubled and he was spending his time working with those teams to rebuild relationships and save these accounts. This seemed to him like the most urgent thing to do, and this is where his first hundred days went. We talked to the people both on these “high risk” account teams and on the other teams managing the other relationships in his group, and found that those who had worked with him directly thought he was fantastic – and those

At the Roots of Short Sightedness

We see the same set of behaviors repeatedly in leaders who manifest crippling short sightedness. In rare instances these result from deep seated character flaws of individuals, but in most instances these behaviors are driven by circumstances influenced by deliberate organization choices and their reactions to threats and fears rather than intentional choices by otherwise well-meaning individuals. See how many of these you recognize as drivers of short sightedness:

- Perfectionism;
- Fear of insignificance – of being invisible;
- Addiction to activity – regardless of whether it is productive or not;
- Workaholic bosses with martyr complexes – emphasis on personal sacrifice even when it contributes little or nothing toward outcomes;
- Distrust that breeds paranoia;
- Reward systems that breed individualism;
- Irrational/unrealistic standards adjudicated capriciously;
- Insularity and arrogance – assumption that the company is the center of gravity and there is nothing to learn from outside;
- Assumption that all I know is all I have to know.

who hadn’t felt he was a dreadful manager who had abandoned them completely. We suggested that he help his direct reports handle these accounts rather than doing it himself, and that he also check in with the other account teams in his department. It turns out that the biggest problem across all fifteen account teams in his department was a lack of resources and a feeling of disconnection from the rest of the company. Simply putting out the biggest fires did not address the problem for most of the people in his department.



What seemed the most urgent wasn't actually the biggest thing that was wrong. By changing his focus, and working to give his people the resources and the sense of connection they needed, he started making the progress his CEO and the rest of the organization wanted to see.

Hyperbolic Justification/ Defense

One aspect of shortsightedness is the use of exaggeration to justify or defend one's actions. We talked earlier about Terry, the CIO tasked with helping create a shared services resource in her company. In her case, she justified her inaction by exaggerating every number. Expenses became huge, savings became negligible. As with all aspects of shortsightedness, Terry believed her own hype – her distorted view of the obstacles facing her became more real than any Excel spreadsheet or presentation to cross her desk. The collective weight of these perceived obstacles made it impossible for her to move forward. People who use hyperbole to build their view of the world exaggerate data and leverage anecdote to justify how they behave. The key to getting past this is to get people to realize that “the plural of anecdote is not data.” A related aspect of shortsightedness is hyper-vigilance, where the focus is to selectively collect an overwhelming heap of data to substantiate a preconceived point of view.

Revenge/Vindictiveness

This comes from a sense of threat or being hurt by others and the unquenched desire to retaliate or get even at all cost. There is a shift of focus from organization issues to fixing personal pain. We've seen examples of this when executives have been considered for a senior position in their company but then been passed over. Given that there are only a few senior team positions and one CEO role, many ambitious executives will be thwarted at some point in time during their careers. It can be particularly difficult

for executives to see a former peer or even a protégé pass them and become the boss. Behavior can become poor – hyper-critical and undermining. When someone becomes vindictive in an organization, it is terribly destructive. Careers end this way and while it often seems to be those preyed upon by the vengeful person, eventually what goes around comes around and people turn on you.

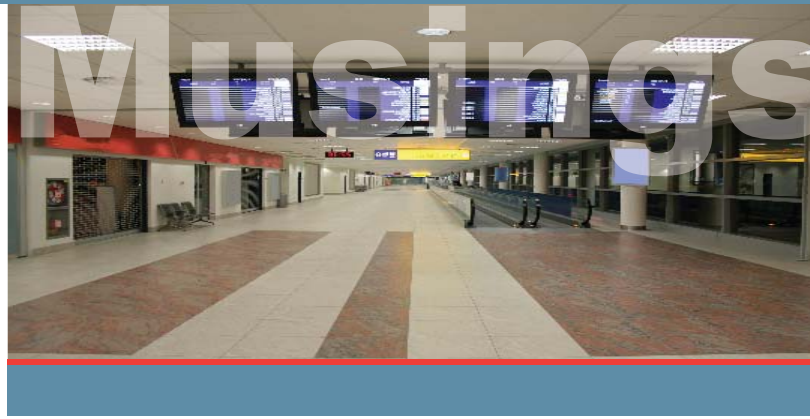
Classic Double Bind

Mercantile economic theory in the 18th Century held that there had to be winners and losers in the marketplace – the concept of “win-win” didn't exist yet. Economists have moved off the simplistic idea that there has to be a loser for every winner, but a lot of people still subscribe to this view on an emotional level. An executive we worked with went to high school with a classmate who went on to become a major Hollywood director and producer. This executive, despite his own success in his field (which was considerable – he ran a major product line in a consumer products organization that had a P&L of nearly a billion dollars), confided in us that his classmate's success made him bitter. After all, Hollywood celebrity is in itself overwhelming. A frustrated writer himself, he simply could not maintain his friendship with his old classmate because he couldn't get his own level of success in perspective, nor could he celebrate his former friend's success. This double bind idea is present in many of the examples we have described – short sightedness and pettiness both involve a component of believing that other people have to “lose” in order for you to “win.” The corollary here is that this person felt his friend was a huge winner – and that made him feel like a loser. Being trapped in this bind removes the possibility of more productive options, kills relationships and spreads unnecessary bitterness.

Forms of Asphyxiation

All of the forms of pettiness and short sightedness we've described suffocate organizations. As organizations become more cause driven – connecting people to broader purposes in the social and environmental spheres – pettiness and short sightedness become even more problematic. You cannot have people proliferating these problems in a cause driven organization – you'll never live up to your organization's promise. You have to do the real work of changing the system to invite and support individual behavior that reinforces the organization's purpose. Without this the consequences can significantly undermine achieving the aspirations of the cause.

It's not hard to see the symptoms of a company that is suffocating. You'll notice that:



- **The company is too slow** to respond the way it needs to – every needed change becomes bogged down
- **Output is of low quality** – if not formally tolerant of mediocrity, the organization seems to settle for it
- **Coordination is difficult** within the organization because it seems to be costly
- **Innovation is stifled** – new ideas either take too long to see the light of day or are shot down before they can be fully developed
- **Employees become disenchanted** and the organization suffers high turnover
- **People are exhausted** and burned out
- **Stakeholders are ambivalent** about the organization – promises are discounted and people adopt a “wait and see” approach

In the sidebars above, we’ve highlighted the roots of short-sightedness in the character flaws people carry around with them. As we’ve mentioned, these flaws are often brought out in well-meaning people by organizational cultures that are embattled, overloaded, and reward competitive solutions to problems. In those types of cultures, people feel they have to fight to distinguish themselves or risk being passed over. People become distrustful of their colleagues – after all, these are the people you have to “beat.” The organization effectively wages war upon itself. We’ve seen this many times in destructive rivalry between business units or geographies in enterprises that literally begin to poach clients and customers from each other. All too often, this leads to confused customers who may decide your competition is a more stable business partner.

Companies that are asphyxiating are frequently in conversations with themselves. They’ve lost their sense of inquisitiveness and assume that they already know everything they have to know. When we started work with a technology company several years ago, we were startled by the degree to which they were contemptuous of the experiences other companies in their industry had had. It took a while to help them see that they were making some of the same mistakes – and paying a price for it. They started from a posture of “we know better” and “we already know,” and were disdainful of any suggestion otherwise. The next time you’re in a meeting, count the number of declarative statements vs. questions asked to see if you’re running the same risk. In asphyxiating cultures, most meetings devolve quickly into a series of parallel monologues.

Many asphyxiating businesses, as noted earlier, have cultures addicted to activity. We’ve seen instances where there were upwards of twenty different and sometimes contradictory strategies to change or improve the organization in place simultaneously. It’s hard to see how any real work can get done with all this busy work demanding attention. People pride

themselves in the workaholic hours they put in and lose focus on what they are actually getting done in those hours. Many years ago, we worked with a leader who had a good perspective on this sort of “sacrifice.” He came in one morning to find an executive at his desk, looking a bit ruffled. This guy had put in an all-nighter to complete a job and he proudly trumpeted this to his leader, expecting an appreciative accolade. Instead, the leader asked why this executive had taken it all on himself and not had the foresight to get other people involved so an all-nighter wasn’t necessary. Far from lauding this guy as a “hero,” the leader suggested that this executive use resources better and avoid such heroics in the future. This is a good step out of the trap of asphyxiation.

Rites of Passage: Shifting Focus From the Immediate and the Self Toward a Greater Good

The leader who refocused the workaholic executive was applying the best root cure for pettiness and short-sightedness – looking at things as they are and evaluating courses of action that benefit the organization instead of playing up to the conceits of the people in it. Here are a few ways you can combat asphyxiation and enable your organization to move past petty, short sighted behavior toward a higher purpose that brings out the best contributions of all and realizes the greatest levels of performance.

Legitimately Serve A Greater Good and Mean It

Patagonia, a business catering to outdoor enthusiasts, is grounded in and driven by the values of founder, Yvon Chouinard. “No longer can we assume the Earth’s resources are limitless,” Chouinard says, “that there are ranges of unclimbed peaks extending endlessly beyond the horizon. Mountains are finite, and despite



their massive appearance, they are fragile. ... We believe the only way to ensure the climbing experience for ourselves and future generations is to preserve :

1. The vertical wilderness
2. The adventure inherent in the experience

“Really, the only insurance to guarantee this adventure and the safest insurance to maintain it is exercise of moral restraint and individual responsibility. As we enter this new era of mountaineering, re-examine your motives for climbing. Employ restraint and good judgment. Remember the rock, the other climbers — climb clean.”

This plea was published in Patagonia’s first equipment catalog in 1974. Chouinard began rock climbing in the early 1950s and immediately began to push the limits, refine the sport, improve the available equipment, and conquer bigger mountains. His enthusiasm and native ingenuity transformed the sport of climbing. His early financial success came from hard-steel pitons that he designed, hand forged, and sold from the back of his car between surfing and climbing trips. Unfortunately, after only a couple of years he discovered that his pitons scarred and littered many once pristine mountainscapes. True to his beliefs, he did what few would have done. He stopped manufacturing the very product that produced more than two-thirds of his profits and redirected his ingenuity to design new, aluminum chocks that were wedged by hand rather than hammered in and out of cracks.

This pattern of reinvention and choosing alternative, counter-intuitive approaches has been repeated across the breadth of Chouinard’s career. In his book, *Let My People Go Surfing*, he explains: “I was trying to instill in my company the lessons I’d already learned as an individual and as a climber, surfer, kayaker, and fly-fisherman. ... Never exceed your limits. You push the envelope, and you live for those moments when you’re right on the edge, but you don’t go over. You have to be true to yourself; and you have to know your strengths and limitations and live within your means. The sooner a company tries to be what it is not—the sooner it tries to ‘have it all’—the sooner it will die.”

Connect Meaning and Purpose to Work

While this seeming management fad often gets rolled eyes, the core truth is that people’s greatest levels of performance only appear when they feel personally impassioned and connected to the contribution they are making. It’s only a cliché if you make it one. But organizations that create environments that actually expect people to find their own personal connection to their work, and lead in ways that encourage it, end up with the people who are most open to possibility and change, most willing to go extra miles when needed, offer the most courageous and boundary-pushing ideas and feedback, and garner the greatest loyalty and devotion from those they lead.

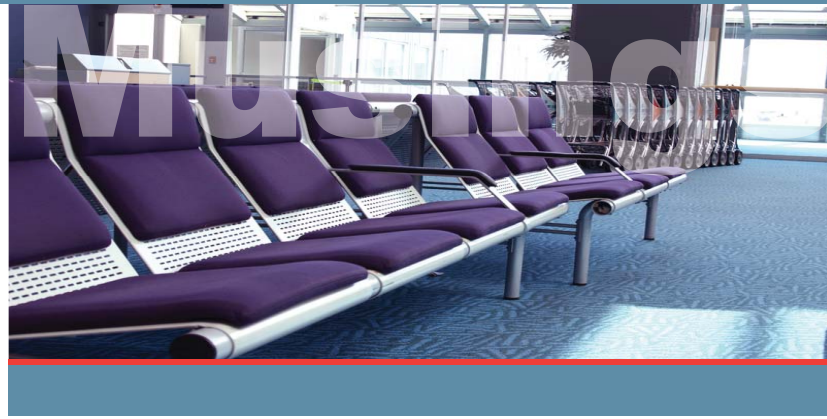
Broader Access to Information

When we were in graduate school, one of the most odious tasks was running to the library to read materials on reserve. The library frequently had only one copy of an assigned work, making copies on the single copy machine in the reserve area was prohibitively expensive and there was no Internet to simply find the material on line and read at leisure. We often pined for the ability to see the full text of materials, no matter how new or old, or rare, or where in the world it might be located. It would have been nice to be freed of the limitation on the number of items we could request at one time, too. Google’s digital library initiative seems poised to make our graduate school problem a memory of a vanished age. Google’s stated mission is not only “to organize the immense amount of information available on the web” but, even more broadly, “to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful.” While there are many search engines available today, Google has become a dominant force in the information world because it has the money, ambition, and agility to offer more full-text information and a variety of other services. Google has made seven million titles available, and fully five million of these are out of print or hard to find. There have been criticisms of Google’s project and there have been several copyright and regulatory hurdles (the service has been taken down in France, for example, because of the thorniness of copyright issues). But it is hard to argue with Google’s contention that the main beneficiaries are the readers of the world.

Strong Reinforcement of Relationship/Collaboration

Our colleague, Megan Staczek, blogged recently about “What a Lacrosse Team and Business Leaders Have in Common.” Megan coaches two interesting

teams: one is the senior leadership team of a large national business and the other is a women's college lacrosse team. Megan talks in her blog about a league championship game where the lacrosse team she coaches saw their opponents score five goals within the first three minutes – and how the team recovered from that in the 50 minutes they had left to play. As she says about both the teams she coaches: “A success for both teams came through the form of structured, open dialog and team feedback. Working with both teams, it was critical to create an environment where the issues could be framed and presented in a way that enhanced trust versus eroding trust. ... For both teams, this conversation felt risky and exposing. For the lacrosse players, it was completely new to talk openly about how each team member played and how she contributed to the team's performance. Building their skill to do this more often and more effectively over time will be critical. For the business leaders, it was new to talk about the issue in an open, collaborative and structured way that tied to the team's purpose. This approach enabled the team to draw new awareness, leading to new conclusions about the execution criteria required for strategy success. This open and robust dialog resulted in the team creating new thinking not only about this business strategy but two others as well.”



Obsession with External Factors

Organizations that remain grounded in the world outside themselves tend to avoid short sightedness and pettiness simply because they avoid the hubris that arises from losing sight of the greater context in which they reside. In one organization we work with, they leveraged their technology platform to enable all levels of employees to set their performance goals in an integrated system that connected everyone's accountabilities to the larger strategies of the organization, their customers, their consumers, and their corporate social responsibilities. No matter where you sat, you had a clear line of sight to a larger world and knew how your work mattered to serving the larger causes of the enterprise.

Measurement Systems that Raise Altitude

What you measure says an enormous amount about what you value. It almost doesn't matter what you say – what you measure will have an enormous impact on what people do when they get back to their desks. Will they work collaboratively, or will they just be in it for themselves? Will they innovate or will they remain stubbornly wedded to the way things have always

been done? Your measurement systems – and how they plug into rewards – set the stage. You see the power of this idea in change situations all the time. Measurement systems can be powerful enablers or they can be equally powerful restraints. One of our clients dealt with this during a presentation on a new go-to-market model for his teams. He's the head of one of the major offices of a media company, and his teams were doing two things simultaneously. They were coming together after a large merger for the first time. They were also figuring out a new collaborative model of working. Right in the middle of our client's presentation, a well respected team member stood up and said the company's commission and bonus set up didn't take the new model into account. This guy pointed out that team members would actually lose money if they acted the way the new model urged. He said he had spoken to a finance person that very morning and confirmed that all the measures were out of synch with what our client was saying. Our client enlisted the protester right then and there to accompany him over to both the finance and legal departments after the presentation to hammer out a new compensation model that complimented the new way of working. He also told the audience when they could expect to hear back on changes to the comp policy. He followed through within the week on new measurements and his group became a model in the enterprise for the new way of working. His experience illustrates the enormous power measurements have. Your measures can reward holistic contributions vs. only rewarding numeric contributions. You can refocus your organization on collective contribution and neutralize hierarchy and privilege by having a transparent measurement system that everyone understands and is tied to recognition, advancement and reward.

Optimistic Leadership with Futuristic Outlooks

We've seen executives who have turned situations around with a few well chosen words. The power of hope and gratitude is a potent force for positive change and for eliminating pettiness and short sightedness.



The downturn of the past couple of years has seen a housing market implosion, banking system collapse, the bankruptcy of two of the three big US automakers and persistent high unemployment. Now we seem to be coming out the other side – GM is considering a post bankruptcy IPO. But unemployment remains high, wages remain lower and many organizations are functioning with much smaller headcounts. The organizations we've seen that are well poised for the recovery are ones where leaders have maintained a level headed view towards the economic news. These leaders did not panic in the downturn – they looked at how their organizations could work efficiently while guarding the engine of growth within themselves. They were looking towards the recovery when everyone else was talking about a New Great Depression. Now these leaders are talking optimistically – and realistically – about the future and how their people can practically make that happen. And they're not afraid to thank their people for what they've done to keep the company moving forward in the past few years.

Calling the Question for Self and Organization

The way you stay optimistic – in fact, the way you accomplish any of the positive things we've talked about above – is what we've been saying throughout: see the situation for what it really is and move forward practically in a way that brings everyone on board. The roots of pettiness and short sightedness lie in distorting what you see and using facts selectively to justify your preconceptions and conceits instead of simply calling it what it is. Ever sat in a room and listened to a group talk around an issue without actually ever saying what it is? It's maddening – and it's also a way of avoiding the real issues and keeping everyone in justification and rationalization mode. We've coached executives who have talked around issues interminably – what you're hearing is explanation, justification, and defense, with a healthy undercurrent of anxiety and fear. Cutting through this Gordian knot is simple – just call it what it is. Be honest about what you're seeing and name it. If you can honestly name it, you've gone a long way toward cutting through the distortions of pettiness and short

sightedness and you're grappling with the real issues. Tell it like it is. This is a key step in actually moving yourself and your organization to a higher altitude with all the benefits and responsibilities that serving a greater good offer. Shedding the trappings of pettiness and short sightedness in exchange for leadership that transforms both people and performance means letting go of the surges of short term (sometimes pathological) satisfaction they provide and learning to be gratified by service over self interest, and faith in a longer view instead of the freneticism of the immediate.

We're finally about to take off, so we're shutting down our laptops. Thankfully, and with no small amount of effort, all the overhead bins closed! We're confident there will be little shifting on this flight.

We hope we've given you some ideas for breaking through the barriers of pettiness and short sightedness and bringing a broader context to your organization so you can lead effectively and reach the mission-driven goals you've established. At the very least, get a dialogue going they gets you closer to a clear view of the issues you face without the distortions pettiness and short sightedness bring.

If you want to hear more, drop us a line at eric@passagesconsulting.com or ron@passagesconsulting.com

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