



Applied Systems Thinking

Use the Power of Structure to Create Lasting Change

**From the AST Library
Leveraging Change
Article 3**

Exposing the Hidden Benefits of Business as Usual By David Peter Stroh

For the Medical Informatics unit of a major health services organization, the vision was clear and compelling: assuring that the most advanced current knowledge about medical informatics is incorporated into the company's clinical information systems. Despite strong corporate support, the unit faced multiple problems, including: trying to convince a loosely knit confederation of hospitals to implement their ideas, making uncertain promises to these hospitals and then failing to deliver high quality systems on time, and burning out its staff in the process.

One very experienced manager went so far as to say, "The primary dysfunction is that I'm still here." Senior staff talked about the need for change and actually learned new skills such as how to make more reliable commitments, but they had an uncomfortable feeling that they were not addressing the really critical issues.

This situation is all too common in organizational life:

- We have noble aspirations for what we want to achieve;
- The costs of conducting business as usual are high and growing;
- We make changes that *should* work but don't seem to get at the core issues;
- We can't get traction on making the most important changes

It raises two questions:

1. **Why do people persist in making seemingly superficial changes?**
2. **What would motivate them to make the changes that would *best* enable them to accomplish what they want?**

We'll answer both in turn.

One of the premises of Systems Thinking is that systems are perfectly designed to achieve the results they are producing. At first glance, when we look at how dysfunctional our existing systems can be, this premise seems absurd. For example, *why would people create a system that produces low quality products delivered late at the expense of their own personal health and well-being?*

However, on closer observation the premise leads to some very important insights:

1. **People experience *payoffs* from the system as it is currently designed.**

For example, the senior managers of the Medical Informatics group came to recognize that the existing system acknowledged them for their ambitious vision and commitment, motivated them to work hard in service of this vision, and protected them from having to challenge their clients' own unrealistic expectations.

2. **One of the most common payoffs is that the current system prevents people from having to pay the costs of changing their behavior.**

For example, the senior managers of the Medical Informatics group, many of whom are doctors themselves, had to acknowledge that making more reliable commitments would require them to plan their work more carefully, which is not a natural strength of physicians accustomed to responding to ambiguous and sometimes life-threatening problems.

In addition to avoiding the costs of change, there are **several other typical benefits to conducting business as usual**. These include:

- **The solutions that people have employed, and the changes they now make, produce short-term improvements.**

Example: When the senior managers in the Medical Informatics group make uncertain promises to their clients, the very act of making a commitment temporarily removes external pressure from them to perform. They see themselves as people of high integrity and consider the word that they will deliver as tantamount to the result itself. Moreover, they experience the act of making the promise as motivation to work as hard as they can to deliver on that promise.

- These **short-term benefits reinforce the belief that people are already doing the best they can** because they assume that their current actions will lead them to achieve their vision if they only persist.

Example: the Medical Informatics managers take comfort in the belief that their noble aspiration, innate intelligence, and hard work are sufficient to achieve their vision. Belief in the power of one's passion and persistence is perfectly understandable, even though these qualities might be necessary but not enough for achieving great results.

- The **benefits people experience tend to meet normal human needs for acknowledgement** (of their effort) and blamelessness (for shortfalls in execution).

Example: the Medical Informatics group prides itself on working as hard as it can to achieve a significant vision, and staff can easily point to external obstacles e.g. the corporate culture or clients' unrealistic expectations, as preventing them from being as successful as they could be.

Table 1-1 can help people expand their awareness of the benefits and costs involved in changing. It helps people explicate not only the more obvious benefits of changing and costs of not changing, but also the frequently hidden benefits of not changing and costs of changing.

(Table appears on next page...)

Table 1-1 Cost Benefit Analysis of Change – No Change

	Changing	Not Changing
Benefits	1) Benefits of changing	3) Benefits of not changing
Costs	4) Cost of changing	2) Costs of not changing

In order for change to occur, the product of cells 1 and 2 must exceed the product of cells 3 and 4.

There are five steps you can take to increase your ability to achieve what you really want:

- 1) Reinforce the vision of the desired outcome, i.e. make the benefits of changing as visceral as possible;
- 2) Acknowledge that the status quo, however overtly dysfunctional, also produces benefits you value;
- 3) Clarify how your current actions actually undermine the vision you want to achieve. Systems maps can assist this process by tracing the long-term unintended negative consequences of people’s well-intentioned behavior. Illuminating these consequences:

- a) Reduces your attachment to your current behavior and the accompanying benefits of maintaining the status quo,
 - b) Increases the costs of not changing because you can see how your actions lead to worse rather than better performance,
 - c) Reduces the perceived costs of changing because the benefits of not changing are also reduced;
- 4) Look for ways to achieve both the benefits of the status quo and the desired state. While this would yield the best of all possible worlds, the more common reality is that you will have to make tradeoffs to achieve what you say you really want;
- 5) Force a choice: decide in favor of those actions that are likely to produce the result you say you really want, or accept that the benefits of the status quo are more important than your espoused vision – and consciously choose to maintain the status quo.

About the Author:

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