

**The Power Line: A Model for Generating a Systemic Focus  
on Organizational Health**

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**Abstract**

The Power Line model identifies a series of critical leverage points to which leaders must attend, including an overarching vision, teams that implement effectively, and individuals willing to bring their energy to the organization. By emphasizing the need to work on purpose, action, and energy at the systemwide, group, and individual levels, we can develop leaders able to take integrated actions that will engender and sustain deep levels of change.

**Introduction**

While it is increasingly accepted that organizational development is built upon attention to issues at the individual, group, and systemwide levels, we lack theoretically-grounded yet practical tools to help leaders to identify and encourage holistic approaches to organizational change that integrate work across these levels. Furthermore, many conceptions of organizational health are limited to describing requirements for long-term fiscal viability, whereas organizations today are becoming increasingly concerned with their need to provide a context in which individual employees find direction, meaning and challenge in their work.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the value of considering healthy organizations to be those that are not only able to be productive, but are also rewarding places to work, and to describe a model that has been used successfully in practice to enable the deep change required to bring about this type of organizational health. Many of the concepts presented here draw on foundations of organizational behavior (Argyris 1964; Schein 1965) as well as centuries-old thought about human development (Bennett 1987). We present a simple, practical model for introducing these key concepts to executives that emphasizes the inherent links between systemwide organizational effectiveness and organizational health. Several examples of the use of the model in practice are also provided and discussed.

**Defining Organizational Health**

Although organizational health has not been a major topic of discussion in sociological practice, a number of authors have addressed it over the last 40 years. In particular, we have relied on the work of Argyris (1958), Schein (1965, 2000), Frost (1999, 2001), and Bruhn (2001). Their ideas and definitions provide a useful context for our model. According to Argyris (1958), a healthy organization is one that enables mature human functioning. He describes how the traditional, hierarchical design of most organizations combines with the need to enforce specific behaviors through managerial controls in ways that have a profoundly damaging psychological effect on individual employees. They become passive, uninvolved, and submissive, simply so they may maintain their own psychological health. He comments, "It is not illusionary to see, in the far future, a "sick" society where the "oddball" is truly healthy but will be locked up

because there is no way of knowing that it is the majority who are ill.” (1958:107). As he writes, “It is as if the employee says to himself: ‘I want to be a healthy, creative human being. I cannot be and still produce what I am required to produce. Therefore, I will say to hell with my total personality and place the major emphasis on money.’ ” (1958:116) Half a century later, it is interesting to look back and realize that Argyris drew attention to such phenomena during the 1950s.

Schein (1965) identifies five criteria for organizational health. In order to be considered healthy, an organization must be able to do all of the following: 1) sense environmental change, 2) get information to the right places, 3) digest and utilize information, 4) adjust and transform itself without destruction, and 5) get feedback on consequences of transformations. At the core of these criteria is the notion of adaptability. Healthy organizations are those that can identify the need to change and also carry it out successfully. Given Argyris’ work (1960, 1964), we find it appropriate to supplement Schein’s five criteria for organizational health with two additional requirements. Healthy organizations are those that also provide for their employees: 1) a sense of meaning and direction, and 2) tasks that are both challenging and possible to do well.

Other writings do not describe health as a goal, but rather as an ongoing process of metabolizing frustration and difficulty within organizations and individuals (Maslow 1962; Schein 2000; Frost & Robinson 1999). Rather than considering health or higher levels of development as something that will eliminate problems, these authors view health as a state in which, as Schein (2000:36) wrote in an interview with Frost, “Some level of toxicity is normal. That really has to be hammered home rather than thinking of toxicity as abnormal. The body is producing toxins all the time.” The challenge then becomes one of designing processes to intentionally purge the system of the toxins, rather than allowing roles to emerge unintentionally in which specific individuals function as “toxic handlers” who save the day for the company at the price of their own individual physical or emotional health. This recent work shifts the context from health as “goal” to “health as process.” This distinction is important.

Bruhn grounds his writing and consulting on organizational health in the definition provided by the World Health Organization (Bruhn 2001). From this perspective, health is a state of physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease. As Bruhn describes the health of an organization,

- *Body* refers to the structure, organizational design, uses of power, communication processes, and distribution of work
- *Mind* refers to how underlying beliefs, goals, policies, and procedures are implemented, “how conflict is handled, how change is managed, how members are treated, and how the organization learns”
- *Spirit* “is the core or heart of an organization, ...what makes it vibrant, and gives it vigor. It is measurable by observation.” (Bruhn 2001:147)

Improvement or decline in health is something that can be monitored via the behaviors of the people within the organization. It lives primarily in the state of relationships among the people.

From these combined perspectives, we see that organizations will serve society best when they can adapt to changing demands while providing meaningful work in a context of vibrant relationships among people. This requires organizational and role design that builds on what we

know about mature human functioning and group effectiveness.

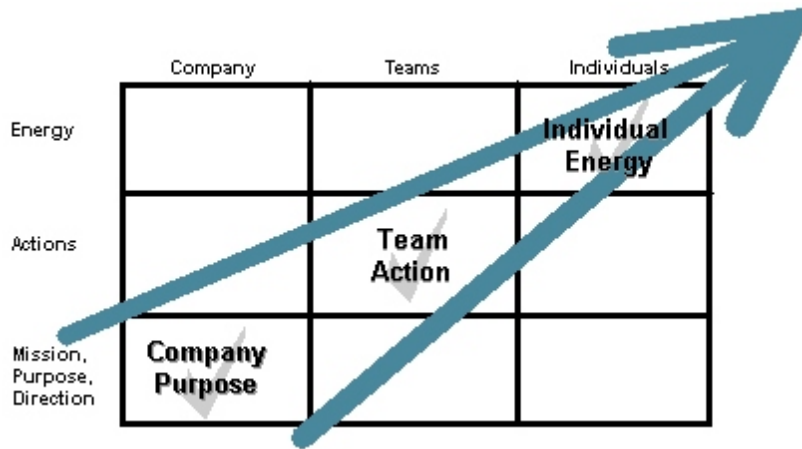
While it is possible for an organization that does not meet our definition of health to be financially successful for a period of time, we believe it is rare as a long-term situation. Most research shows otherwise (Kotter and Heskett 1992). In many industries (including engineering, high technology, and biotechnology), organizations are becoming more knowledge-oriented and must rely on the deep and creative involvement of their employees in the development of products and services (Frost and Robinson 1999; Pascarella 1997; Sethia 1989). Furthermore, rapidly advancing technology and increasingly competitive markets require that organizations exhibit the high degree of adaptability that is implicit in Schein's (1965) criteria for organizational health (Denton 1998; Van Velsor & Leslie 1995). When employees do not find a sense of meaning and direction in their assigned tasks or are unable to carry them out successfully, quality products will not be developed, existing problems will not be brought to light, new information will not be absorbed, and the organization's finances will, sooner or later, be negatively affected.

When an unhealthy organization fails to perform financially, external evaluators such as investors, the board of directors, and the media place responsibility directly with the executive team. They typically insist that the executive team bring about immediate improvement in the situation. Although quite common, these circumstances create difficult hurdles for attempts at organizational change. Because executive teams are given complete responsibility for bringing about successful organizational change, they often mistakenly assume that employees will quickly and easily implement all decisions made in the executive conference room. In reality, enduring change within a social system requires *integrated* efforts at three levels: that of the leaders, the groups, and the individuals. The literature on organizational change contains numerous examples of change efforts that failed because they did not address all three levels (e.g., Greaves and Sorenson 1999; Elkjaer 2001; Hernandez and Leslie 2001; Thorne 2000).

Deep organizational change is dependent on integration of changes that occur in and across these three levels of an organization. There is a reciprocal and magnifying relationship among the levels; change in one impacts the others, and simultaneous change in all three levels has a synergistic effect. Individuals are more likely to change if they see the organization attempting to change. Teams will experience greater change if their members concurrently experiment with new behaviors on an individual basis, independent of team building processes. Individuals and teams work more effectively when they see leaders who "walk the talk" in relation to organizational change and desired behavior styles.

### **The Power Line Model**

The Power Line Model is a tool that has been used successfully in sociological practice with a number of organizations to both diagnose the root causes of organizational unhealthiness and focus efforts to bring about lasting organizational change. We believe that change is far more likely to persist when it integrates work at all three levels. The Power Line Model, shown below, acknowledges the interconnection of the individual, group, and system levels in effective organization change.



**Figure I.** The Power Line Model

The elements along the top of the diagram (Company, Teams, and Individuals) refer to the macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis within an organization. Those along the left side of the diagram are adapted from the work of Bennett (1961, 1966) and were applied originally to organizational change by Krone (personal communication). This fusion of sociological thinking with concepts developed in other realms produces the distinctiveness of the Power Line as a tool for thinking about and enabling change.

Krone is a former Procter and Gamble manager who became an organizational consultant (Krone 1971, 1975; Walton 1985; Sanford 1993). His thinking and practice were major influences in the development of Open Systems Thinking and became controversial because of the ways his colleagues applied it in a particular effort at large system change. A consultant for years to major Fortune 500 companies, he incorporated the thinking of Gurdjieff as it was developed in the work of Bennett, and taught internal consultants from many companies in an ongoing series of “Resource Trainings” that met regularly for decades. Gurdjieff was a teacher of wisdom who lived in Europe during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His work was connected with many different spiritual traditions, particularly the Sufis (Bennett and Blake 1978; Bennett 1976, 1983).

*Mission, Purpose, Direction*

For an organization’s leader to bring about change, he or she must articulate new values or vision for the organization. This means providing direction and purpose. The concepts of *active* and *receptive will* are central to the notions of mission, purpose and direction. In our industrial society, managers are typically taught to focus on the driving, or active, side of will. They are encouraged to value pushing their views over the views of those who oppose them. Thus, in practice, they ignore the part of will that is receptive and open to the ideas of others. While many executives believe their success depends upon such forcefulness, it is difficult to

engage an entire organization in a change effort without the use of receptive will. Receptive will is far more than active listening, and involves bringing focused attention to others' needs and perspectives. This facet of leadership is well-described by the term "servant leadership" (Greenleaf 1996).

#### *Action*

Action brings the new vision to reality. It refers to activity related to the strategy, structure and skills necessary to bring about the envisioned change. The organization's leadership must rely on a cooperative network of resources: a coalition that is sufficiently powerful to implement a strategy for change. Leaders at all levels of the organization need the interpersonal skills necessary for building such strong coalitions. Similarly, work groups must have team skills to engage successfully in collaborative work, both internally and with other teams. Action at the team or group level refers primarily to effective processes, so that what people do can produce results. Unless such processes are in place, considerable time is wasted in rework and redundant steps. Action in an organization is impossible without an infrastructure of well-designed processes. Because teams are a prime vehicle for infusing new management into the mainstream of organizational life (Kilmann 1989), change efforts must consciously include strategies for inducing change at the team level. Teams must be given the power and skills to identify and implement changes or they will be unsuccessful, regardless of their skills. However, it is advisable to begin by looking at what skills the team members demonstrate, using a form of appreciative assessment, rather than simply assuming that training is necessary, as often happens.

#### *Energy*

Energy manifests itself in four different ways in organizations. *Physical energy* involves member actions that build and produce products or services. *Mental energy* refers to the organization's and members' intellect and provides creativity and problem solving for organizational challenges and opportunities. *Emotional energy* represents the psychological well-being of the organization and its members. Finally, *spiritual energy* represents an almost indefinable higher-level energy that brings people together in service to others.

Managers who effectively implement change know that times of transition dramatically impact the organization's energy. Transitions need to be anticipated and managed as part of the planning cycle for change. To fail to understand and anticipate the impact change will have on people and their energy is a major oversight in many change efforts and often leads to the ultimate failure of the effort.

In the past, individuals tended to have energy for what was needed in the organization without specific interventions. However, when their company has been bought or sold or merged, as well as re-engineered and taught one new fad after another, people naturally lose commitment to the organization. At such points, individual energy must be nurtured, not assumed.

Similarly, leaders must be willing to look at their own actions and energy to ensure that they are in alignment with the organization's stated mission, purpose and direction. In many cases, efforts toward systematic change fail because the individuals in the organization correctly

read the key executive's behavior as a demonstration of adherence to the old ways. What leaders do is always more influential than what they say. When leaders fail to model the changes they claim they want to bring about, groups do not spring into action because individuals will not be willing to contribute their own passion and energy to the cause.

### **The Power Line and Organizational Diagnosis**

In organizational consulting, members of the client organization are often deeply involved in the process of diagnosis. The simple structure and concepts of the Power Line Model can lead clients to formulate and ask important questions about their organization and themselves. For example: Are our executive decisions not implemented because teams are unable to take action? When individuals bring energy to an effort, do they usually find success and reward, or do they end up frustrated and burned out? Do I make good decisions about when to use active and receptive will, or am I missing important information and forcing my ideas on others?

When clients are invited to formulate, ask, and answer questions like these, they develop a strong commitment to improving the organization and themselves. In contrast, when presented with models that are complex or steeped in jargon, clients often assume a "hands-off" approach and limit their personal involvement in both the diagnosis phase of an engagement and the interventions that follow.

### **The Power Line as a Tool for Change**

The Power Line Model is a powerful tool for assisting managers as they think about the concepts of mission, action, and energy, as well as the interconnection of organization, groups, and individuals in successful change. The diagram is straightforward and easy to understand, and encourages managers to examine their situation in systemic terms without being intimidated by unnecessary complexity. It draws attention to practical steps that must be taken at all levels in order to bring about change to an entire organization.

The areas through which the power line thrusts represent the critical leverage points for planning and carrying out systemic change. A company's senior management typically provides the overarching vision for a major change. New and existing work teams provide the structure and systems for change. They are the instruments of change either in the form of natural work groups or in task forces created to facilitate change. Individuals provide the energy to cause change. Each individual in the organization makes a conscious or unconscious decision regarding the change, and chooses what kind and how much energy to expend on the change.

Rarely do managers who are attempting to lead change efforts take all three levels of the organization into account and monitor them throughout the process. It is most common to see a clear action plan, with little attention paid to first building a sense of shared commitment and purpose among those impacted by the changes. After the first set of actions, people have difficulty if they are left on their own to solve unanticipated problems; and there are always unanticipated problems. When change leaders specify actions without attending to people's energy, they may create a plan that few people have any desire to implement. People will do what they "have to" but the creativity and alacrity will not even approach what the same individuals are capable of when truly excited about a project.

Few managers are equally adept in all three areas: leading the group in building a clear, shared purpose (*will*); ensuring that all participants know what to do when in order to accomplish it (*actions*); and creating the *quality of energy* required to carry out the action plans with the desired effectiveness. Most business training focuses only on the functioning or actions. Managers are rarely taught about the awareness of oneself and others that is the foundation for managing energy, in addition to actions.

### **The Power Line and the Practice of Systemwide Change**

In private discussions, senior managers often express feelings of frustration (and even impotence) regarding their inability to change their organizations. More is required of the CEO than simply to order a change. Having the greatest positional power in the organization is not enough to bring about pervasive change. Unless leaders can align the organization's will, energy and action, change will be minimal and frustration will remain high. Ultimately, the aim of any organizational change is the achievement of more coherent action across various organizational units. This happens when the organization aligns its energy and actions with its vision so that it uses energy efficiently and minimizes resistance.

Will provides the vision, action the behavior, and energy the fuel for change. Large-scale organizational change is less effective if it does not tap into all three. Referring to the model, note that this means there are nine elements to keep in mind: at the macro, meso, and micro levels, we have each of the three elements (energy, action, and purpose or direction.) How will direction be clarified at the individual, team and organizational levels? What kinds of actions and skills are necessary at all three levels? How will they be coordinated and linked with the overall direction? And, how will individual physical and emotional energy be sustained throughout the organization during the difficult period of change? This is a challenging task that is often ignored by top executives for whom the process seems complete once the key decisions are made.

An organization with which one of the authors consulted knew the limitations of relying primarily on individual or team efforts to engender organizational change. Top management had worked diligently over the years developing the organization's vision, strategy and structure, as well as on individual development for all executives. Teams participated regularly in team-building activities and were seeing results from their efforts. Individuals participated in many management development offerings, both internal and external to the organization. Yet, the leader's frustration grew as he became increasingly aware of the misalignment between his vision and the organization's behavior.

Thinking together with his top management team, they decided on four integrated courses of action to increase organizational alignment. Using the terminology of the Power Line Model, they put in place: 1) large-scale meetings to establish a mission, purpose, and direction that would incorporate feedback from members at all levels of the organization; 2) individual self-development work among members of the executive team to improve their ability to act with a high degree of integrity -- to "walk the talk" and ensure that individuals were encouraged to bring their energy and commitment to meeting the organization's new challenges; 3) increased mechanisms for soliciting and responding to feedback (valuing receptive will) to allow better

understanding and integration of diverse perspectives and concerns; and 4) ongoing support for team-building and for training in a new management style, so that teams at all levels would be empowered to help move the organization in its new direction.

The leader of this organization launched large-scale problem-solving meetings along the lines of those described by Dannemiller and Jacobs (1992) to create alignment among the top managers with its vision and strategy and as a way to gather better information about internal issues. Initially twice a year and annually thereafter, the top one hundred managers representing the top three levels met for three days to discuss and resolve organizational issues. From a process perspective, these meetings were different from traditional sales-oriented or product introduction meetings held for sales and marketing organizations. They employed a minimum of hype and high-tech audio-visuals to create enthusiasm among the participants. Instead, participants generated energy by participating in the resolution of significant organizational issues.

The meetings had three broad purposes. First, participants built a complete picture of the organization's state at that moment by looking at business and organization health from several perspectives, including those of its customers, employees, managers and senior managers. Together they built a common database by ensuring that all relevant issues were on the table.

Second, the participants explored, problem-solved and came to agreement on what the organization had to become. Top management understood that it was not only important to sell their strategy (*active will*), but to genuinely ask for feedback and implement suggested changes whenever possible (*receptive will*). The organization's leaders presented their vision and strategic plan for the organization and asked for critique by the meeting participants. Because they had explored business and organizational issues earlier in the session, the participants responded with solid and informed opinions and suggestions concerning the organization's strategic direction. The top management team listened and met that same evening to review suggestions and adapted several ideas. They prepared a response for the next day's session, particularly when they believed a suggestion could or should not be implemented. The next morning the CEO reported to the main body which items the senior managers were willing to adopt or consider and which they were not and why. Participants expressed considerable pleasure and satisfaction at the number of suggestions adopted by top management. Top management in turn was pleased at the number and quality of the suggestions made by the participant managers. More importantly, the suggestions signaled a level of understanding and buy-in concerning the organization's strategic issues that the top management team had not seen previously.

The third main purpose for this type of meeting was for those attending to make commitments to one another as to what each needed to do differently to achieve the vision and strategy. After individual commitments were made, the meeting facilitators used problem-solving and brainstorming techniques to generate action lists intended to resolve identified issues. Each functional group made a brief presentation on what actions it would commit to back at the work site. The entire group agreed to regular follow-up as a means of tracking results. As we consider these actions, we can see that they involved the three key boxes of the model: organizational purpose, group actions, and individual commitment and energy.



The organization realized a number of positive outcomes from their large-scale meetings. There was a high level of honest, straightforward, and non-manipulative communication among key participants worldwide. Top managers listened and responded without defensiveness or evaluation. Participants learned to take appropriate risks, saying what was on their minds without fear of retribution. Relations and networks among the participants grew stronger. This minimized the tendency for functional groups to circle the wagons and build enemies. The collaborative model used in the meeting minimized reliance on outside experts, and also resulted in greater buy-in and alignment between individual and organizational goals.

Another example of the use of the Power Line Model in assessing systemwide change can be found in Gunter and Chicoine (2002). The authors set out to ascertain what made a particular organization successful at implementing clinical practice improvement at a time where others were unable to affect real change. Using the Power Line as a tool, they evaluated the degree of alignment of organization purpose, team implementation capacity, and individual energy that were present in a successful clinical practice improvement project. The degree of success in this project was outstanding: “The practice improvement team set the goal of improving the rate of ace inhibitor use for their entire region by 8% within 12 months. The team had exceeded this goal only six months after the launch of the program, six months ahead of schedule. Approximately 90% of the health care teams were actively using the new clinical practice within 3 months” (p. 10). They found that the conditions described by the Power Line were met — conditions that are not often seen in health care organizations.

“The case study presented here lends credence to the utility of the “power line” as a mechanism to guide the design and implementation of clinical practice improvement efforts. Many studies have been conducted to determine ways to improve physician acceptance of new clinical practices. In a study conducted by the Departments of Epidemiology and Public Health at Yale University School of Medicine, the investigators uncovered several factors that influenced successful performance improvement efforts. Performance improvement efforts succeeded when the goals to improvement of patient care were specific, the effort was championed by a credible physician, appropriate data, resources and analytical support was provided to the clinicians, and there was a shared desire to improve by the staff (Bradley, E.H., et.al., 2001). The elements required for successful change in physician practice articulated in the Yale study are in direct alignment with the elements of the “power line” (Gunter and Chicoine 2002:11).

## **Conclusion**

Our experience with the Power Line Model shows that it has much to offer both individuals and organizations as they go through the process of change. Its theoretically-grounded yet practical approach helps organizational leaders recognize that bringing about systemic change requires a clear vision, the skilled participation of groups and teams, and the energy of individuals throughout the organization. By working simultaneously in all three areas within one organization, it becomes possible to hold onto a sense of the organization as a whole

while working practically to address real issues at all three levels.

When executives look honestly at themselves, think systematically about the interaction of the major elements identified by the Power Line Model, and take bold steps when necessary, they are in a strong position to build organizations that are both profitable and meaningful places to work. This creates a strong platform for organizational health. Despite the scope of the challenge, we look forward to seeing increasing numbers of healthy organizations that provide employees with a sense of meaning, as well as with tasks that are both challenging and possible to do well, in addition to doing what it takes to thrive in today's difficult economic times.

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