



# talking about...

August 2010

... *designing better relationships for better outcomes*

## Crisis ... What Crisis?!?

*"A journey is like marriage. The certain way to be wrong is to think you control it."*

... John Steinbeck (1902-1968) US novelist

Have you ever wondered how people find themselves in a crisis situation at work? Surely no-one ever sets out to create one, yet somehow they occur with great regularity. So, why do they happen?

Reason would tell us that a crisis occurs due to a series of poor decisions being made. After all, in a work context, it is hard to imagine that a crisis is the result of just one poor decision. Although there are no doubt many reasons for a crisis to occur, I would like to explore only one with you today. As with many organisational breakdowns, the starting point is the modern worldview that sees the organisation as a machine to be controlled.

The mechanistic organisation is a basic assumption of many people in the corporate world. Indeed most people who live with that assumption would not even be aware that they do so. The mechanistic organisation is characterised by the basic idea of control, which means that people believe that to be effective you have to be "in control". When you explore this further, it tends to play out like this. You, the manager, have to make a plan to achieve the organisation's outcomes as they apply to your area. You must then follow that plan to achieve your goals. Any deviation from that plan is seen as not being "in control" and this is not a good thing. Indeed, it is often represented as failing to some degree. This idea is a foundation for an aggressive culture where perfectionism, competition, power and criticism rule. As you, the manager, do not want to be seen to be not "in control", you will almost certainly seek to find ways to make it appear that things are going well regardless of how they are really going.

The real challenge with this approach is the assumption that being in control means nothing goes wrong, and this is what leads to crisis. Because you cannot appear to be "out of control", you may well choose not to share any breakdowns in the plan with others and seek to resolve them yourself. In doing so, you not only potentially make it more difficult to resolve the breakdowns, you also begin to play the game of creating appearances and your energy and effort becomes scattered.

So what do we do about this? The one thing we know about life is that it is uncertain. As much as we might like to think otherwise, it is impossible to predict the future and things can go wrong mighty quickly. You just have to take the so-called global financial crisis as a case in point. The key is to see that it is not about control per se, but rather about adaptability. The easiest way I have found to see this is to use the analogy of an auto-pilot. (and I do get the irony that this is a machine!) The premise of an auto-pilot, as with living systems, is that it needs feedback – lots of it. Using an

auto-pilot, a plane will start from point X and head to point Y. As it goes, the auto-pilot regularly checks its position and self-corrects. The feedback loops give it choice points. This is a key difference. In the aggressive culture, feedback is often seen as criticism and something to be avoided. Hence it is given infrequently and poorly. In a more constructive culture, people recognise that feedback creates the opportunity to choose, and it is those choices that allow them to be more effective and deliver better outcomes. And avoid a crisis!

If we are going to design better organisations in the future then we have to make sure those who are accountable to make decisions are supported by appropriate and frequent feedback loops. By doing so, we can create organisations that are not only more effective but more adaptable. And as Charles Darwin pointed out in his landmark work on evolution, *"It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change."*

*"If you cannot mold yourself entirely as you would wish, how can you expect other people to be entirely to your liking?"*

... Thomas a Kempis (1380-1471, a mystic Catholic monk)

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## Some Questions to Ponder

Jacqui recently found some thought provoking questions in a list called "50 questions that will free your mind". We thought we would share some of them with you. You can find the complete list by searching the web for the list title...

1. If life is so short, why do we do so many things we don't like and like so many things we don't do?
2. When it's all said and done, will you have said more than you've done?
3. What is the one thing you'd most like to change about the world?
4. If happiness was the national currency, what kind of work would make you rich?
5. Are you doing what you believe in, or are you settling for what you are doing?
6. If the average human life span was 40 years, how would you live your life differently?
7. To what degree have you actually controlled the course your life has taken?
8. Are you more worried about doing things right, or doing the right things?
9. You're having lunch with three people you respect and admire. They all start criticizing a close friend of yours, not knowing she is your friend. The criticism is distasteful and unjustified. What do you do?
10. If you could offer a newborn child only one piece of advice, what would it be?

*By the way, there are no right or wrong answers to these questions, but if you give them some thought and answer them honestly, they will tell you something about you.*

***"Always keep learning. It keeps you young."***

... Patty Berg (1918-2006) US golfer

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