

# Don't Just Treat the Symptoms! Alternative Medicine for Business — Lessons From Motorola

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Although alternative medicine and holistic healing approaches to treatment vary considerably, they have at least one thing in common: they identify the cause of the illness before prescribing a solution. This philosophy differs from conventional medical wisdom which perpetuates a this-for-that mentality, i.e., if you have a headache, take an aspirin; if you have an infection; take an antibiotic, if you are overweight; exercise and diet. Critics of conventional medicine complain that often a diagnosis is made without a comprehensive, integrated picture of one's true physical condition. These critics claim that all too often insufficient data are collected, too little time is taken and too little discipline employed for the processing of those data, resulting in costly, premature prescriptions that rarely deliver the desired results.

In the same way that methodologies for holistic healing and wellness offer important alternatives to traditional medicine, there are, in corporations, alternative methodologies for decision making and problem solving that help ensure that organizational prescriptions go well beyond simply treating symptoms. The organization is a complex system, therefore, as valuable as traditional data-gathering tools and instruments are and as thorough as data collection might be, unless sufficient discipline is utilized in the processing of those data, one runs the risk of arriving at potentially costly solutions to the wrong problems.

Premature conclusions and recommendations often result in the "program of the month" cycle. All too often, industrious, well-meaning executives talk enthusiastically with colleagues about the remarkable results other companies are realizing with one or more programs,

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initiatives and interventions. Competency training, reengineering, quality circles, customer focus, et al. capture the attention and resources of hundreds of organizations, often without the hoped-for bottom line business results. Sadly, many corporations are under leveraging the organization at potentially critical junctures. Just as unfortunate is the potential impact on executive and organization development practitioners, who run the risk of eroding confidence in their very function.

For over seventeen years, the principals of our firm have built executive and organization development initiatives that embody our commitment to strong information gathering and processing. In the course of building these initiatives, we have identified a set of practices that dramatically increase the likelihood that the organization will focus on the right problem at the right time. Companies such as Motorola, The Gap, Inc., CIGNA Corporation and Dow Chemical have harnessed the power of such disciplined information processing approaches, particularly in the context of organizational interventions.

### **Critical Practices For Executive Information Processing**

How do executive and organization development practitioners ensure that their prescriptions are viewed as relevant and valuable? How does an organization gather meaningful information, calibrate all the data, and recommend intelligent, effective solutions to increasingly complex issues? The answers lie, at least in part, in three critical practices:

- Tolerating ambiguity
- Balancing focus and mass
- Expanding perspective

At the height of the pain, a migraine sufferer's primary goal is relief. Heading for the medicine cabinet, he or she reaches for the strongest painkiller available. Alternative medicine practitioners will point out that the pain is not the issue; it is simply a symptom of an "extremely complex systemic disturbance." (1) Likewise, in corporate America, the natural tendency is to take quick action in hopes of relieving corporate pain, often ignoring possible causes beneath the surface. This bias must be restrained however, in order to leave questions and issues open long enough to discover not only the best solutions but, more importantly, the right problems and questions.

Moving to solutions too quickly may presuppose the problem. To help avoid this, it is important to develop a shared understanding of the right problem before selecting and implementing possible solutions. Having people grapple with information, giving them a chance to agree, disagree or reject assumptions and conclusions will help them sort through the mess. In the end, rather than having to accept someone else's solution, they will come to collective agreement that there is a problem, one that warrants their attention. As people come to a shared understanding, they feel more ownership – they are more likely to help identify the right solution and mobilize for action.

## **Balancing Focus and Mass**

In order to meet organizational goals and ensure that each initiative/intervention has the desired impact, companies must aim for future-oriented targets and make the necessary investments. They must deploy a mass of resources critical or clearly sufficient enough to accomplish those targets. Key variables such as time, funding, sufficient information resources, etc. need to be in place in order to build the momentum required to make a difference in the way people think and behave.

"Critical" is relative and determined in large part by the objectives or focus of the project. If the focus is sufficiently limited, and enough of the right information has been gathered, a two-hour meeting can have critical mass.

Over the years, we have witnessed the successful outcomes of corporate interventions that had significant impact, in large part, because they maintained a disciplined focus on a specific key emerging business issue. If the focus of change and/or development efforts is on such issues, even the most resistant executives are more likely to be engaged. The organization benefits from the focus on an important issue and the development practitioner makes his/her strongest contribution. One other aspect of "critical mass" is the importance of confronting the organization, especially executives, with a heavy dose of the external reality that is (or will be) exerting pressure, such as: emerging technologies, regulation / deregulation, geo-political realities, economic and financial concerns or environmental pressures. Our experience suggests that the most likely response on the part of executives is their claim to already be fully aware of those external realities. They are usually mistaken. The key is in finding cutting-edge information that stimulates even the most seasoned executive.

## **Expanding Perspective**

The closer one gets to a business problem or health challenge, the harder it is to see the issue in its larger context or framework. By stepping back just a little bit, the scope widens, presenting a broader view. As the "landscape" changes, we increase our capacity to view things in their true relations or relative importance. In addition, this alternative perspective often provides new ways of looking at a problem and increases the choices we have to find solutions to that problem.

Almost one hundred years ago, Thomas Edison said, "The doctor of the future will give no medicine, but will interest his patients in the care of the human frame, in diet, and in the cause and prevention of disease." At about the same time in history, a different perspective on health was emerging, based on the germ theory. The subsequent result was the birth of conventional medicine, leading to the discovery of antibacterial drugs. This "miracle" technology caused some people to lose perspective and focus on drug therapy – often aimed at treating symptoms, not causes. Conventional medicine has since predominated – often rejecting or overriding the voices of alternative medicine and a more holistic approach to health. Generations of families have therefore been exposed to only one approach to healthcare, rather than a more balanced menu of healthcare options.

Unlike those who take advantage of the overwhelming appeal of moving quickly to solutions, prudent business leaders insist upon a balanced menu of inputs, rarely making decisions based

solely on one set of data. Instead, they make a conscious effort to broaden their perspective by first exploring multiple (and even opposing) views.

## **MOTOROLA**

The critical practices described above are illustrated in a brief case that describes the way Motorola responded to Asian competition in the mid '80s and the decisions it made that, history now suggests, had sustaining, positive effects on the corporation. Motorola, for some time, has been thought of as an organization with an exceptional commitment to executive and employee development. It is widely recognized that these efforts have been instrumental in the success of the company. Motorola has a strong history of custom-built executive education and action learning programs that not only enrich and develop individual participants, but have a bottom line business impact as well. Was Motorola's development effort always such an icon of success?

In the late '70s and early '80s, Motorola was experiencing stiff competition from the Japanese, and leaders were unclear about other potential competitors in the Asian Pacific Rim. The company was struggling with entry into several new markets in the Pacific Rim and was losing ground in a few of its historically healthy markets. Perceptions regarding the cause and severity of the problems varied widely throughout the company. Not surprisingly, so did the biases regarding the best solution.

Some managers saw the problems and challenges in relatively micro, focused terms (cost structures, design/production interface, etc.). Others viewed the problems in more macro and somewhat global terms (international currency fluctuations, Japanese labor costs, etc.). Few of these successful, experienced and dedicated executives understood the problem and the possible solutions at the elevated and truly global levels that they would soon come to discover. By the mid 1980s and due, in part, to Motorola's revitalized executive education efforts, Motorola's top 180 executives would come to believe that the source of the company's problems with Asian competition were as fundamental and far-reaching as the competitive intentions of entire countries (Japan, Korea, the NICs) and the corresponding dramatic shifts in the rules of global business engagement.

These topics had surfaced on previous occasions, as had suggestions about how to address them. The emphasis, however, had always been on isolated solutions to isolated problems: learn creative/innovative problem-solving methods; find ways of sourcing less expensive raw materials; broaden understanding of international monetary trends and their implications for a global corporation. Until now, these solutions had failed to stir the blood of a sufficient number of decision makers and, perhaps consequently, to address the more strategic issue of Asian competition.

In the early 1980s, executive education was chosen as one tool for exploring these key emerging business issues. Motorola's executive education design council, a small group of executives charged with shaping development experiences for senior managers, knew that it would not be enough to present information on these subjects simply for the purposes of explanation and clarification. The challenge was to create a forum that would engage the heads and hearts of senior managers, leading them to take personal and collective responsibility for action and change.

The initiative was framed in a context large enough to warrant the time, attention and energy of Motorola's top 180 executives. A five-day, "Asian Competition" program emerged. It was designed to enable participants to contribute to decisions about the future direction of the organization. The contexts of globalization and strategic decision making provided a larger picture in which the "softer" subjects had more meaning and impact. Additionally, emphasis on Motorola's external environment contributed greatly to participants' shared understanding of why changes would need to occur if corporate health and vitality were to be maintained.

### **Why the Motorola Senior Executive Program Succeeded**

Motorola's "Asian Competition" initiative, the first of a series of Senior Executive Programs, exemplified the critical practices for executive information processing. Anthony Fresina, the Founder and President of Executive KnowledgeWorks, was then responsible for the design and development of the "Asian Competition" program. At that time, he was Motorola's Manager of Corporate-Wide Management and Executive Education. We talked with him and asked how the program embodied the critical practices. With limitations of space and time, we asked him to select only one of the practices – balancing focus and mass.

### **Tightening the Focus**

"When we did the initial needs analysis for the revitalization and resurrection of executive education at Motorola, it was the late '70s, maybe early '80s. Initially, it was decided that the design should focus on a business issue, rather than the traditional 'mini-MBA' approach. This represented the first of several sessions that narrowed and tightened the focus of the initiative.

"The design council tightened the focus even more by recommending a key emerging business issue, one that was looming on the horizon: the growing business challenges in the Pacific Rim. But two members of the design council, Gerhard Schulmeyer and George Fisher, were strong advocates of narrowing the focus still further.

"Two issues surfaced as possible grist for the design: Japan as an emerging market, and Japan and other Asian countries as global competitors.

"There was general consensus that we should not try to mix the marketing opportunity with the competitive issues, but rather do a strong job on one. Fisher and Schulmeyer argued for focusing on emerging Japanese (and other Asian) competition.

Although several executives expressed concern that the focus was too narrow to have any substantive discussions, over the next several months we discovered that directing our attention to this single issue would still represent an enormous challenge, and would provide more than enough compelling material for the program."

### **Deploying Resources**

"Even though we thought we had the topic narrowed, we were surprised by the significant level of resources we required to achieve the intended breakthrough.

"At that point in time, over 87% of the officers had already attended Motorola's previous executive education effort. The initiative, called Oracle, was held on a desert mountaintop

campus in Tucson, AZ. It was a 30-day, in-resident, mini-MBA that had lain fallow for several years.

"With so many executives having already been 'baptized' in this experience, some difficulties arose. Managers thought that the Oracle experience was more than adequate. In addition, they felt that they were already quite familiar with Asia and the Pacific Rim. Motorola had a presence in Japan, Korea and Malaysia, and a number of officers had served as managers overseas. As a group, they thought they were knowledgeable about the region and its competitiveness."

### **Overcoming the Challenge**

"We knew we had to capture and hold the attention of these senior officers if we were going to change their mindsets.

Motorola needed to adjust its thinking and behaviors to more effectively compete with rivals emerging from the Pacific Rim, but the customer didn't want human resources messing around with a new round of executive education, much less one on the topic of the Pacific Rim.

"While not every manager had voiced these objections, as a group, the 180 officers slated for the program clearly did.

Evidence of this strong mindset was witnessed by all eighteen participants in the pilot session, plus the then-CEO, Bob Galvin.

On the last day of the week-long pilot, nine of the participants openly and publicly admitted that prior to attending, each had been asked by colleagues to make sure that the Asian Competition program did not go beyond the first session.

"The program, however, convinced participants that they had serious issues to address. They discovered that they had underestimated the nature, scope and complexity of the threats originating in Asia. The next step was clear—hasten the process of delivering the program to the balance of the 180 executives."

## **THE DIFFERENCE – CRITICAL MASS**

### **Budget**

"Once we had a design in place, we went to Galvin with the projected budget: a per-person week cost. It was higher than Bob expected and higher than the dollars previously allocated per person week for Oracle. We asked for authorization of the budget through the pilot, stating that the first session would tell us if we were overstating the need. Galvin OK'd it, and that "OK" was one of the many "critical mass" decisions made during this intervention.

### **Resources**

"We used an exhaustive process for finding, managing and testing faculty. We tested every speaker, dismissing and replacing those that didn't measure up with alternatives we had waiting in the wings. We were spending additional money, but in the end it was well worth it.

The faculty were challenging and stimulating, they offered compelling and often disturbing information, and they really opened up new thinking. This speaker selection process was another form of "critical mass."

"Still another example of critical mass was our series of decisions regarding the numbers of faculty. There were moments in the program where a single speaker would have been adequate; the program would have been good, and we would have contained the costs. But on several of the days we added a second resource person—not always as prestigious as our primary speaker—but experienced and significant in his or her field. We wanted the officers to be given thorough information, so we provided a strong counter-perspective on each of the Pacific Rim countries examined in the program.

One result of the counter perspective was that the onus of drawing conclusions and insights remained primarily with our officers. The thousands of dollars invested in faculty expertise potentially saved the organization far more than that in avoided mistakes or captured opportunities."

### **Program Outcome**

Motorola's intervention was thought to be highly successful. It enabled leaders to contribute to a decision about the future direction of the organization by creating common understanding of the real problems/issues and the required strong organizational responses. The participants recommended that further intense effort be devoted to studying the corporation's interaction with and presence in the Asian Pacific Rim. The Chairman, Vice-Chairman and President created a task force of seven senior vice presidents who, for three months, devoted 100% of their time to extended, in-depth analysis of Motorola's strategic options. The results and recommendations of the task force were shared with all 180 officers in a series of facilitated follow-up meetings.

### **CORPORATE AMERICA**

There are other corporations where leaders are successfully employing the practices mentioned in this article, though they remain a growing minority. Likewise, there are more and more individuals and families practicing alternative medicine and holistic healing though again, they are a growing minority. Whether in personal healthcare or in business, there is an increasing population of proactive and systematic individuals who recognize the power of more fully understanding the problem before moving to the solutions. This disciplined approach produces results that, in the case of Motorola, pay off over time.

### **NOTES**

1) *Alternative Medicine - The Definitive Guide*, Compiled by The Burton Goldberg Group, Future Medicine Publishing, Inc., Puyallup Washington