Clarity, Conditions, Constraints: an alternative to top-down control

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Things are the way they are because they got this way.
In a typical hierarchy....

TOP ("Leaders")
Set Strategic Objectives

MIDDLE ("Leaders")
Direct, Coordinate, and Monitor Activities

BOTTOM
Perform Activities as Directed
Assumes TOP DOWN AUTHORITY

Knows WHAT TO DO

Seeks THE RIGHT ANSWER & THE RIGHT WAY

Relies on INDIVIDUAL ABILITY

Relies on SUPERVISION
• Defined span of authority.

• Clear reporting relationships.

• Work decomposed into component parts.

• Policies that proscribe behavior.

• Rewards and sanctions.

• Supervision.

• Efficiency.
And yet.....

Work happens thru informal networks that bypass hurdles and get work done in spite of the formal hierarchy, roles, and policies.
Hierarchy is not bad!
"The original purpose of a hierarchy is always to help its originating subsystems do their jobs better."

Donella H. Meadows
“To be a highly functional system, hierarchy must balance the welfare, freedoms and responsibilities of the subsystems and total system--there must be enough central control to achieve coordination toward the large system goal, and enough autonomy to keep all subsystems flourishing, functioning, and self-organizing.”

Donella H. Meadows
“…there must be enough central control to achieve coordination toward the large system goal, and enough autonomy to keep all subsystems flourishing, functioning, and self-organizing.”

Donella H. Meadows
Steering

Enabling & Enhancing

Making
Assumes REFERENT AND EXPERT AUTHORITY thru out

Assumes LEADERSHIP at all levels IN SERVICE OF THE GROUP

Knows HOW TO ADJUST THE SYSTEM

Seeks LEARNING AND GROUP OWNERSHIP

Relies on GROUP ABILITY & SYSTEM CAPABILITY
Clarity.
Conditions.
Constraints.
Clarity:
People know what to work on, and what to work on next.
People know why their work is important.
They know how their work fits into the big picture.
Conditions:

People have the means to do the work.
Organizational structures and policies support the work.
Constraints:

People know what should always be done
…and what should never be done.
People can articulate their bounded autonomy.
Steering
(up to the first ####)

• Where do you see effects?
• What are they?
• From where you sit in the organization, how might you influence Clarity, Conditions, Constraints that contribute to the current pattern?
Enabling & Enhancing
(up to the second ####)

• Where do you see effects?
• What are they?
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Doing

• Where do you see effects?
• What are they?
• From where you sit in the organization, how might you influence Clarity, Conditions, Constraints that contribute to the current pattern?
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Learn to live with...

perception of loss of control

(it was never really possible to control things from the top)

complexity and mess

(cause that’s what life with humans is mostly like)

design by successive approximation

(cause you can’t design it all up front)

experiment, nudge, iterate
Sign up!

I’m making an on-line course to help teams have more effective retrospectives. Sign up to receive information about Powerful Retrospectives and other online courses.