

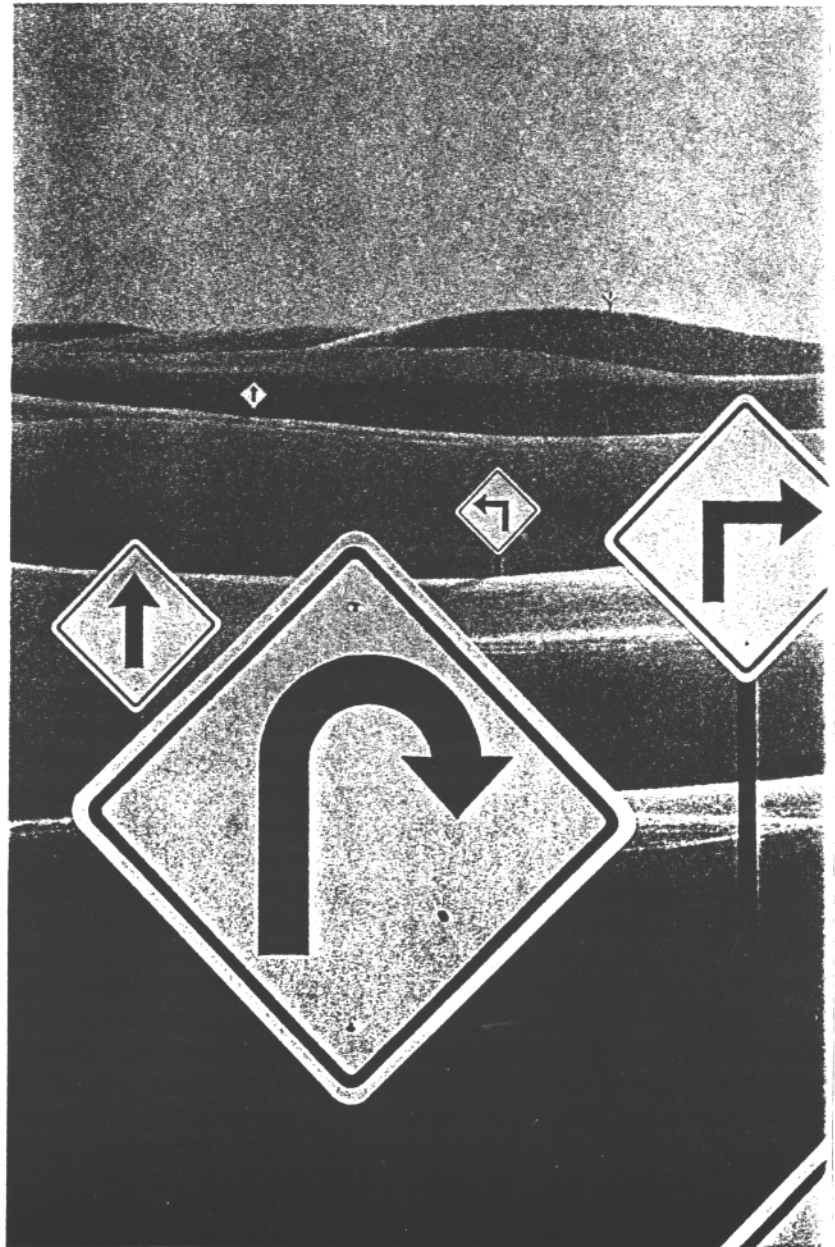
By Edward J. Cripe

Use Graphic Metaphors To Communicate Organizational Change

The Situation

You are the CEO or general manager of a major company, division or department. Something is not the way you want it to be, but you're not sure what the problem is. Financial results are OK, but you know they can be better. You are well-read, regularly scanning numerous business periodicals, newspapers and books. You know the latest theories, fads and practices of the so called "best" companies. You have used a number of bright consultants with a fair degree of success. You know that for starters you and your communication management team need to get a clearer picture of where you want to take your company and then get all of your employees to see and commit to your "picture."

SO WHERE DO YOU START? Selecting a sound theoretical model or framework for organizational improvement that can be used throughout the entire process is a logical first step. An equally important, but usually overlooked second step, is to develop a plan and method to ensure employee understanding of the model and process. The key is to find a common sense framework to analyze and improve your organization's performance, and then communicate your plans in an easy-to-understand format. Creating a graphical metaphor that your entire team can relate to helps the team "see" your vision of what you want for your organization.



Assessment of the Organization's Systems

A basic organizational improvement model drawn from a number of sources is shown on page 37 (before applying a metaphor.) It views an organization as a system with inputs (Business Requirements) and outputs (Business Results). To identify if a problem exists, and the nature of the problem, you simply examine the "gap" between Business Requirements and Business Results listed at the top of the model. For example, if a corporation expects its operating divisions to produce earnings growth of 10 percent per year and your division increased its earnings

by only 2 percent last year, there is an obvious gap.

Business requirements and the environment in which the business operates dictate the strategy that an organization develops. Broadly speaking, the strategy encompasses a number of elements that define the organization's reason for being. Included are the critical steps of clarifying the values, vision and mission of the organization.

Design of various "system" components follows. Embodied in the design process are both human and business elements that form a "sociotechnical" system. This would include such things as selecting and developing people who have the capabil-

ity to perform the necessary tasks (human) and designing an information system that enables all employees to receive the information needed to do their jobs. Each system component has the potential to affect each of the other components. Therefore, the design of a high performing system requires a lot of patience, perseverance and skill. (Specific design and implementation approaches are discussed in the references cited at the end of this article.)

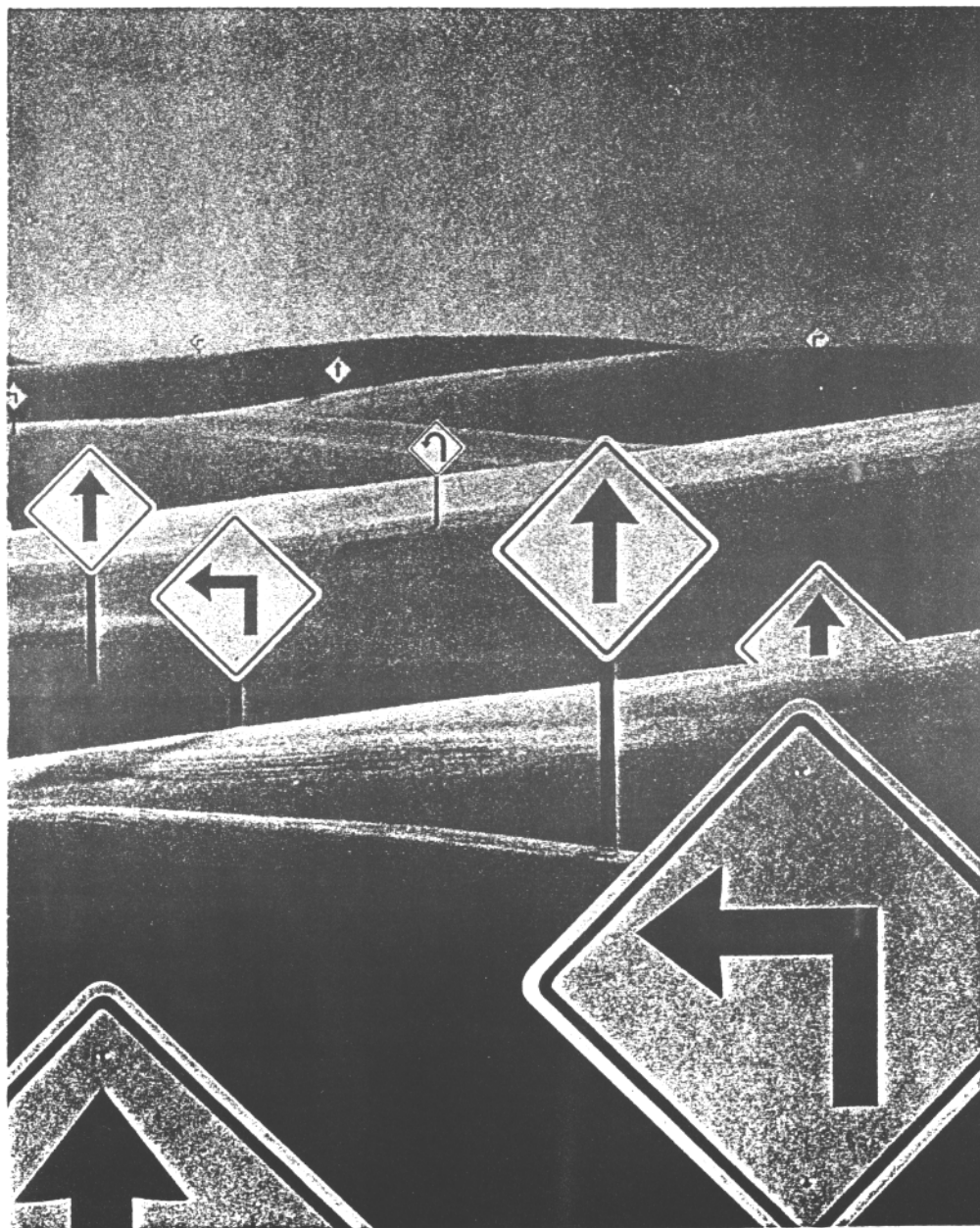
Strategy elements and system elements help to create or influence the culture of the organization. Essentially, culture is "the way things really operate" within the organization. A more comprehensive description of culture is the shared philosophies, ideologies, values, assumptions, beliefs, expectations, attitudes and norms that knit a community together.

All of these interrelated psychological qualities reveal a group's agreement, implicit or explicit, on how to approach decisions and problems. Culture is manifest in behavioral norms, hidden assumptions and human nature, each occurring at a different level of depth.

Collecting Data

The combination of strategy, systems and culture produce business results (the output). To determine the causes of gaps between actual results and requirements, data must be collected to identify issues that are affecting the organization's performance. The issues then are analyzed as a part of the system's cause-and-effect chain by backtracking through the model. For example, if the assessment process reveals that employees at all levels are confused or unclear about the organization's priorities (part of the culture), the first question to ask is: "What is the effect on business results?" The effect may be mediocre performance in several key areas. If a negative effect cannot be clearly identified, there is no need to devote time and energy to the issue.

Where a negative effect exists, the next question to ask is: Why? Why are employees confused? Going backward into the system, each design element must be assessed. It may be determined that one cause is that while the strategy emphasizes customer service, employees are really rewarded for cost control.



Questions that can be asked at each stage of the design process for any key results area, i.e. service quality, profitability, etc., include the following:

1. Is the result satisfactory?
2. Which cultural values, assumptions and behaviors influence the results?
3. Do decisions reflect knowledge, experience and a bias for action?
4. Are desired behaviors rewarded or punished? Are undesired behaviors rewarded or punished?
5. Is the information people need to carry out assigned tasks available?
6. Does the structure permit the right people to work together on the tasks?
7. Do people have the skills and knowledge to do the tasks?
8. Are specific tasks clearly identified that will lead to achieving the strategy and goals?
9. Do the strategy and goals ensure that current and future business requirements will be met; are your vision and mission clear; do they have the commitment of top management team?

For each question, a simple yes or no leads to a more in-depth analysis of the sub-system. Again, asking "why?" and "what's the impact on business results?" (or "so what?") can provide a fairly comprehensive assessment.

A more thorough assessment and implementation may be required than what has been outlined here. Interviews with individuals and groups, observation, examination of current processes and systems, and surveys can be used for an in-depth assessment.

Now let's take the overview of organizational change and put it into a graphic metaphorical format that can be communicated throughout an organization.

Metaphors for Organizational Change

Many different metaphors are possible for describing the process of organizational change. The key is to find a metaphor to which the group can relate, so that the concepts and process come alive in a form that is easily understood.

A metaphor that has worked for a number of groups is that of an exploration metaphor. The components of this model are represented in the following way:

Values are sets of real beliefs (in team-

work, customer service, respect for each other, for example) that determine standards of practice. When inevitable changes begin to happen, leaders can inspire employees and move their organizations in new directions if there is congruence with their fundamental values. Employees' commitment and energy is fueled by the values that actually move the organization.

Guiding principles are a philosophy of operations derived from the values. They serve as a code of ethics for operating the business and as criteria against which peo-

Visions grow out of the natural tension between current reality and desired future states. Leaders must learn how to lift themselves above current realities and practice 'helicopter thinking.'

ple can test future decisions. Guiding principles are like wheels; they roll the organization forward. If they are made explicit and communicated throughout the organization, they will drive organizational behavior. (Organizations on the leading edge of service quality typically have guiding principles in employee involvement and empowerment, customer focus, quality, continuous improvement, community involvement and ethics.)

Visions grow out of the natural tension between current reality and desired future states. Leaders must learn how to lift themselves above current realities and practice "helicopter thinking." By hovering over the entire territory, they can get a broader view and begin to visualize the right things to do. Like explorer teams, they articulate these imaginings to each other and work to translate these visions into actual pictures and stories that can be shared widely. Most importantly, when the vision is lived every day, the system begins to move purposefully, realigning

from the current reality toward the vision. It energizes and mobilizes people and creates enthusiasm, because it comes more from the heart than from the head. It communicates that which makes you special and unique and sets you apart from your competition.

The *mission or purpose* of an organization becomes a roof under which people gather. It captures in a concise way the essence of the organization. It describes the nature and scope of the work to be performed and communicates the business you are in. It is the basic reason for an organization's existence.

Strategies are the stories management sets forth about how the vision will be realized, similar to the stories explorers told around the campfire at night about how they were going to cover new territory the next day. They scan the environment, check and perhaps recalculate their bearings and come up with new scenarios for the trip ahead. Business leaders and teams do the same thing, shaping strategic "how tos" through teamwork processes that explicitly challenge assumptions, explore developing areas and identify core competencies.

Management teams have found it helpful to actually visualize the various aspects described above in one integrated framework that resonates with the exploration metaphor.

Using graphic conceptual tools to orient everyone in the organization to the work that has to be done is a powerful way to gain employee understanding and commitment. For leadership teams, visual mental models (with key words and pictures) provide common ground for dialogue and planning and help communicate ideas and processes more effectively than words alone.

Edward J. Cripe is president and chief catalyst of Merit Group, Inc., a training and organization development firm in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

REFERENCES

- Hanna, David P. "Designing Organizations for High Performance." Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1988.
- Sibbet, David and O'Hara-Devereaux, Mary. "The Language of Teamwork." *Healthcare Forum Journal*, May/June, 1991.
- Pasmore, William A. "Designing Effective Organizations: The Sociotechnical Systems Perspective." New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1988.

BUSINESS REQUIREMENTS

Hard number/financial requirements
Corporate requirements
Social, political, legal expectations
Competitive pressures
Expectations of customers
Expectations of employees

BUSINESS RESULTS

Hard numbers
Requirements are met
Social, political, legal conduct
Position relative to competition
Customer satisfaction
Employee expectations are met

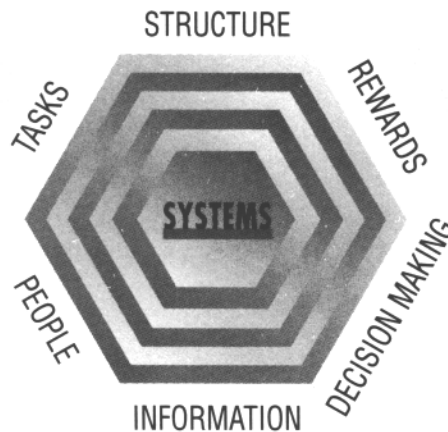
ORGANIZATION

IMPROVEMENT

STRATEGY

Underlying values & assumptions
Purpose, mission, vision
Competitive strategy
Operating principles
Objectives & goals

MODEL



CULTURE

Attitudes toward strategy & goals
Organizational climate
Distribution of power & rewards
Work people do or don't do
Other norms that explain how things get done

An Application: Improvement of Service Quality

IN RECENT YEARS, many companies have decided to focus their organization's change efforts on customer service and on quality in their core businesses. In other words, they have identified significant gaps between customer expectations and the perceived level of customer service.

Using the organizational improvement model described in the accompanying article, one company determined that its existing culture would not allow it to succeed in an increasingly dynamic and competitive environment. The existing culture was viewed as conservative, risk averse, bureaucratic, paternal

and more concerned with costs and productivity than with customer satisfaction.

Because service quality was the focus of this change effort, specific service quality attributes were targeted in the assessment of the systems that were affecting the culture.

A comprehensive survey instrument helped collect data on how employees viewed the effectiveness of existing systems. The assessment uncovered problems in each of the attribute areas that were creating the existing culture and which would have to be changed to improve both the culture and business results.

For example, information that people needed to provide good service to industrial customers was not readily available. Communication

between departments was inefficient and ineffective. Important pieces of information were not shared with other people and departments for a variety of reasons, one of which was a reward system that rewarded individual performance more than team performance. Many managers had little experience in a dynamic, competitive, customer-driven environment and thus lacked the skills and knowledge to behave differently. The emphasis on cost control caused the company to invest very little in training and educating its work force to succeed in a different business environment. These and other factors produced a vicious cycle that was difficult to break.

Looking at the whole picture from a systems point of view, it was easier to see the relationship of the various factors. In this case, one of the solutions involved redefining the strategy of the organization, given a new set of business requirements. The old vision and mission did not accurately reflect the changes that the CEO intuitively knew had to occur. Mixed and confused signals vibrated throughout the organization, causing important tasks to go unassigned and decision making to slow down. A new and clear strategy, explained with the help of the graphic metaphor discussed in the accompanying article, was an important step in helping this company alter its culture.