
The Tao of Action- Reflection

Recognizing and
Responding to the
Organizational
Dysfunctions of Shut-
Rut and Paralysis by
Analysis

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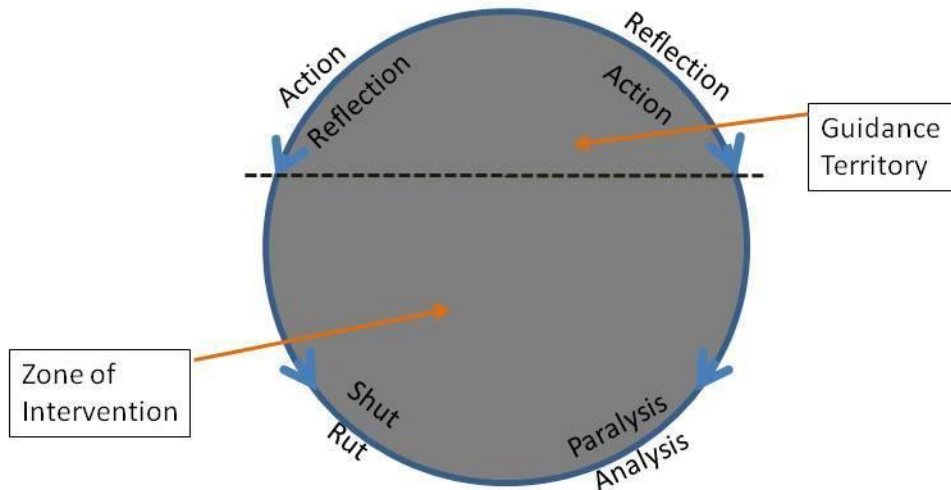
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The work of Design Group International™ puts us in relationship with business, nonprofit and ministry leaders. Whether our work is with boards or executive leaders, we are frequently privileged to assist organizations of all types as they work their way through organizational change. Managing change provides opportunity for organizations to build toward greater success. Not every organization is able to perceive and act upon these opportunities, however. Consultants frequently discover too late that their advice is not heeded. Even worse, a consultant discovers that their contracted service is not what the organization needs.

Stress exists naturally when managing organizational change. Adding to that stress through consultative mishaps is especially unwelcome! Matching the best consultative service to the organization's need is a key step in the client's continued success. Drawing from our extensive experience, my colleagues and I offer a key insight which we diagram on the next page. It is a way to match the organization with the best type of consultative help.

Each organization has its own character in how it manages key decisions such as leadership succession or adjustments in strategic approach. A key marker of an organization's character is whether the organization tends to stop and consider (reflect) before acting, or whether it acts first and then takes time to reflect on the result. Which it normally does first is a matter of style. The character of an individual is analogous to the character of an organization in this respect. When an individual or organization is committed to both action and reflection, it does not really matter which comes first. What is important is the commitment to do both.

Healthy organizations manage organizational change without much external assistance. They act and reflect. When they draw on consultative help it is as a matter of guidance (identified as *Guidance Territory* in the diagram). The healthy organization asks the consultant to be an advisor or an auditor of the change process. Unhealthy organizations, however, fall in the *Zone of Intervention* because the balance between action and reflection is lost. Either the action phase has become mere reaction without reflection, or the organizations continue to call for data without taking action. An imbalance that requires intervention on the *action* side is what we call **Shut-Rut** (closed-mindedness accompanied by repeating the same course of ineffective action). Imbalance that requires intervention on the *reflection* side becomes **Paralysis by Analysis**.



The Action-Reflection Arc
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We have learned the importance of:

Quickly and accurately identifying the organization's style and matching it in order to increase the effectiveness of the consultant's assistance to the organization.

Accurately identifying the organization's need of guidance or intervention in order to recommend the application of an appropriate level of service.

An executive leadership team can be balanced between people of both styles who appreciate the contributions of people who start from the opposite place. A shared commitment avoids both closed-mindedness and inaction, regardless of where one starts. This helps the organization to strike a similar balance between action and reflection.

Here are some additional reflections that grow from our insight:

- When the individual or organization is committed to both action and reflection, the need for consultative assistance is minimized. Such an organization is far more likely to understand the fragility of organizational change and to have a strategy in place. In such a case, the consultant's usefulness is as a guide, or perhaps to help with a specific task requested by the organization that is capably managing its own affairs.
- When there is not a commitment to hold action and reflection together, action or reflection become compartmentalized and no longer inform each other. Further, the preferred mode—whether action or reflection—becomes calcified. That is, action or reflection become a means to enforce what the individual or organization already thinks or does, however flawed everyone acknowledges it to be.
- The diagram is expressed along an arc rather than as a continuum to show how easily the person or organization can switch from action to reflection when there is a healthy balance, and how similar the dysfunctions of **Shut-Rut** and **Paralysis by Analysis** look when action or reflection stand alone.
- When imbalance exists, the individual or organization drops into a zone which calls for consultative intervention. Without intervention, change initiatives are led by the most politically astute and powerful within the organization, not necessarily the people most skilled to manage change and lead the organization to fulfill its mission. Failure to address these problems virtually assures a short tenure for new leaders and a long tenure of organizational malaise.

Recognizing Shut-Rut

Usually, a combination of **Shut-Rut** responses are present:

- **Tell me, but don't tell me.** Continuing leaders ask what they should do but are quick to say why it cannot be done.
- **Thought resistance.** Organizational leaders complain that the consultant is making them think.
- **Enforcers.** Regardless of whether hard data indicates needed change and regardless of whether that data is provided by an employee, a task force, the consultant, or even the Chair of the Board, decision makers turn to organizational power brokers for verification or for a signal that the power brokers are not opposed.
- **More of the same.** Solutions put forward by continuing leaders are only variations of what is already being done. Sometimes this combines with blaming clients, constituents or employees for their stupidity.
- **Scapegoats.** Previous messengers of change, usually former, newer and younger leaders, are noticeably absent and are the ones blamed for continuing problems.

- **Crisis cries.** The organization has a history of considering new possibilities only when it is in crisis and when survival is believed to be threatened. Once a sense of normalcy returns, a desire to return to previous patterns of behavior emerges.

The Example of Not Enough Space: *One client needed more space for meetings of its constituency. Fortunately, a modular wall could be taken down instead of renovating the entire space. The client had faced this scenario many times but failed to make the extra room. Each time the organization balked, numbers began to decline and the board would determine expansion was no longer necessary, failing to draw any connection between declining attendance and the lack of space. The client was again facing numbers that stretched the current facility configuration. The board met and determined that when constituency meetings averaged more than 110 persons for more than three months, the modular wall would come down. When this actually happened, an influential board member made an impassioned speech to the board about keeping the room the way it was because she saw at least five open seats at the last meeting. The board resolved not to expand the space yet again. Attendance went into decline*

Recognizing Paralysis by Analysis

Again, more than one of these is usually present.

- **Deadlined deadlines.** Agendas are ignored or absent. Key leaders ask questions in order to delay any declaration of opinion. Urgent matters are immediately tabled.
- **Keeping down with the Joneses.** “Who else is doing this?” becomes a more frequently asked question than “How will these ideas help us enact our vision?” In a healthy organization “Who else” is a matter of due diligence and information gathering. In a dysfunctional organization this question is driven by fear.
- **Open admission.** Leaders openly admit they know the organization is stuck. They may even openly admit they have studied the problem, shot the messenger and shelved the findings.
- **Double-checking.** In this case, double-checking is not about checks and balances, but growing redundant and duplicative structures.
- **Crisis cries.** The organization has a history of acting only when in crisis and survival is believed to be threatened. Once a sense of normalcy returns, pressure is exerted to return to the old pattern of critiquing the new option to death.



The Example of the Delayed Application: *One client asked for a sophisticated federal form to be completed in order to update its incorporation. The form was given to the Board Chair for some needed information and a signature so the form could be sent. In his review of the form, the chair commissioned a fellow board member to fill out a fresh copy. The previous effort begun by the consultant was thrown away after copying over some of the information. When the new form was finally submitted, it was late enough that new and tighter federal rules applied, requiring yet a new form to be filled out and delaying the incorporation changes by more than a year.*

In Summary: When organizations and leaders are faced with change, they default to a position of Action or Reflection. When a balance of Action and Reflection are in place, organizational health can be maintained. When Action and Reflection are separated, the organization or individual can be trapped in the dysfunctions of **Shut-Rut** or **Paralysis by Analysis**. Consultation in a balanced scenario is best offered as guidance. Consultation in a dysfunctional scenario is best offered as intervention. Skilled consultants can recognize the default position of the organization or individual, can diagnose whether health or dysfunction is present, and can choose appropriate helping strategies to bring desired change.

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