Getting Started

An excerpt from *Making Change Happen: The Art and Science of Intervention*

by David Kantor, Mobius Senior Expert

The book in progress from which this excerpt is drawn, *Making Change Happen: The Art and Science of Intervention,* represents a challenge I have been looking forward to for a long time —setting down once and for all, and in fastidious detail, not only what one does step by step when putting Structural Dynamics, the theory, to work in its practice model, but the principles for designing interventions, and the principles behind their implementation.

From this perspective, readers get a rare, inside-my-mind view what I think a demonstration of a practice should look like: the thinking behind what a practitioner does, what succeeds and why; what fails and why; how inescapably implicated the interventionist is in all he or she does; and how hard it is but altogether possible to effect real change that endures.

The case described in the excerpt, the Management team of Technospan, a firm that has barely escaped indictment for cooking its books during a race to get its prime product to market before a rival does, is demoralized and hardly functioning. Though my first choice is to start there, I decide—against principle--to take on first the CEO and his legal council, or what I call a "corporate couple."

– David Kantor, November 2013

All people are story gatherers. Some, bringing stories that have gone wrong, seek out professionals for help in making their stories come out right. The best of these professionals, to my mind, use stories of their own, or what I call a *testable practice model*[1].

A Practice Model that intervenes in human systems is itself a story, with a storyline (a theory), a set of key themes (concepts), a beginning, middle and end (stages), a set of characters who are in trouble and calling for help (clients) and a key player, a narrator (a professional practitioner) who sets out to change for the better the story's current course. In my model, the narrator becomes part of the storyline. Like other characters, he is inextricably implicated in the story's outcome.

Like three acts in a play, my practice models (I have several2) always are conducted in three stages, each with its own goals, and a set of specific "steps" for achieving these goals. I will discuss my rationale for this in Chapter 6.

Current Realities

Before I set out to describe my three-stage model for *Making Change Happen in teams, I must say where I think things stand with respect to the readiness of top executives to put themselves and their teams on the line.*

Before submitting their teams to an outside consultant, many CEOs first ask for help for themselves. They want an executive coach, and/or a consultant who can coach them in leading their teams. This approach is becoming popular as the field of coaching continues to take off.

Few leaders, regrettably, agree to the consultant working directly with their teams with them included as members. In the situation I described in Reading the Room, ClearFacts', CEO Ralph Waterman was open to coach Duncan Travis working both with him alone and directly with his team, but

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1 Why stress 'testable?' I have addressed my position on this issue—the paucity of models that are, or are capable of being, subjected to empirical test. In *Reading the Room*, I made the case for SD's readiness for this.

2 I have models for working with families and teams, "corporate" and "intimate" couples, and larger entities such as whole organizations. All draw on two sources, both originating in Structural Dynamics, its theory of *face-to-face communication*, and its model of models.

the team demurred. In the situation I describe here, Technospan's CEO Jack Woodrow, is reluctant to open a path to team work without checking me out first, and the team, though in bad shape, and clearly in need of help is afraid to cross him. Whereas my preference would be to get quickly to his disabled team, Jack's resistance forces me to use my model for working with a "corporate couple" first.3 As I set out to work with him and Catherine, who is both legal council and a key member of his management team, I am aware that I will have to earn my way.

A Model for Working With a Corporate Couple

Table 2-1 lists the ten steps I take in Stage 1 when working either with a "corporate" or "intimate" couple.

Stage One: Steps
1. Managing Initial Engagements
2. Demonstrating my way of working
3. Building a container
4. Entering the system and its story
5. Mapping the system (for dysfunctional patterns)
6. Identifying a Problematic stuck structure.
7. Testing (and sometimes perturbing) the stuck structure.
8. Effecting initial change in the selected structure
9. Offering a tentative diagnosis and proposing a treatment plan.
10. Establishing a contract and stating my terms

Think Spiral, Not Lineal

It goes without saying that any list describing an intervention process can be misleading and unreliable if for no other reason than unexpected client realities that can blow our best laid plans widely off course. Therefore it is best to view this ten step process leading to my making a contract as spiral not lineal in nature, with changes in the prescribed order of things naturally occurring, with some of the steps continuing well beyond initial contacts, others requiring revisiting before being complete, and others requiring 3-5 sessions before they are fully covered. All that aside, all ten steps are fixed in my mind, and I try to cover all before agreeing to take on extended work with a new client.

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3 A "corporate couple" is any closely knit two person system who, as members of a team or organization, seek help. With an "intimate couple," sex, or love, and children or family is involved. The model for helping both is quite similar, differentiated mainly by how the stakes in intimacy spawn issues that demand longer and deeper treatment.

Two of the steps—building a container and stating my terms—clearly demonstrate that the steps are not sequential, but rather are flexibly timed to overall developments and particular events taking place in the room. Here, I'll say a word about each.

Container Building

Generally speaking, container building is always in motion, gathering credible shape and form as the client gradually gains confidence and trust in the consultant as a person and in her model's ability to do its job. But strictly speaking, it isn't really felt until a crisis occurs of such proportion that the whole consult seems ready to crash and crumble but is guided through to some new place without injury or harm to the warring parties. I will say more about it in Chapter 3 when the kind of crisis I allude to threatens the Catherine-Jack relationship and my work with them.

Stating my Terms

As for stating my terms, it is probable that most clinicians have terms and limits as to whom they choose to work with and how. Mine are not meant to sort clients out that do not fall within my specialty, though of course there is some of this. More than this, however, they are strategic to how I do my work (Step 2), and a condition for establishing a contract (Step 10). There is no way to predict beforehand the exact moment to introduce it except to say that it should occur before or at the time conditions require that I take a risky stance on some crucial issue. Briefly, at that time –and these in brief are my *terms–I ask for, nay require a "Right to Err", and a "No-Fire" condition until I've formed a diagnosis. Because I would like to describe my terms and its rationale in full, I have put it in an appendix (A) rather than here in the text.*

Step 1: Managing Initial Engagement— Catherine Bass

First contacts are not to be treated lightly. I make a point of handling the first phone contact myself, since I consider that my work begins there. The caller either wants to know if I'm available, or whether there is a fit between what I am known to do— from word of mouth, my publications, and my website--and the problem they bring. In these calls, I want to do three things primarily. I want: to know *in as few words as possible* what the caller thinks

the problem is; to get a sense of the target system she represents; and what she thinks others in that system think the problem is. I am determined not to side with the caller, my way of saying that my preferred client is the system, not the one who makes the first call.

Catherine Bass Calls

This is Catherine Bass from Technospan. Our management team is in a f*#%ng mess. You come recommended. Do you have the time? (Pause.)

D: *Ignoring her question, I ask: How shall I call you? (Catherine), okay, call me David.*

C: *Deal! Well do you?*

D: *It's not a question of time Catherine. It's a question of 'fit'.*

C.: *I said we've checked you out.*

D: *Great. Now let me check you out. The way you are handling me right now has gotten you where you are today, right? (Notice my framing.)*

C: *(Laughing). Yes, that and my good looks.*

D: *So, what you are saying is, 'Listen up David, I'm your equal, nobody pushes me around.' (I am making a move from the bystander position)*

C: *True. Not my parents when I was a kid, not my law school professors, and yes, not you. (Catherine laughs) But Jack Woodrow, my boss, we wrangle often, when he gets into his…Sh…his stuff. There, it doesn't work so well, and that's the problem.*

D: *Before you tell me, dare I say that your style, which is disarmingly straightforward, challenging and impressive, also gets you into trouble? (I'm bystanding, but also privately wondering whether she is a stuck opposer.) Don't answer now. My point is, I like it. (I do like most, but not all opposers, it's how I grow my model) But there are types out there who may not. But please, let's move on. Simply say briefly what you think the problem is, what Jack thinks, and what the team thinks.*

> What I am Thinking

From my words and voice, and the action stances I took, Catherine Bass knows I respect her, but that I mean to help change her behavioral options. Her lead with an obscenity (a form of opposing, either implicit or explicit), deliberate I imagine, says, "See, I'm one of the boys." Her words and voice immediately suggest that a strong mover, opposer, and possibly a stuck opposer is at the core of her behavioral profile, at least is she is revealing it in this phone context with me. I'm curious to see how this holds when Jack is in the room.

Step 2: Demonstrating How I Work

Whereas demonstrating to clients and to you readers how I work begins, as you must have noticed, at the very beginning, it has no end until the door closes behind what I hope is a satisfied and changed client system. It is briefly described here for heuristic convenience.

All Interventionists are taught to listen. On this issue, my model is ruthlessly clear. It intones: Listen, but listen in order to act, act in ways that change the nature of discourse in a broken or underperforming communicative system. Thus, when I am most on my game, every vocal action on my part is calculated, intentional, and directional; that is, it has as its target, a dysfunctional structure or incapacitating storyline. If I *move* (or *follow*, silently or actively *bystand* or strongly *oppose*), as you will see at times with Catherine, but especially with Jack, it is because that is what I believe is called for. My strategic use of the four action modes is a live, but invisible demonstration of *communicative competency,* the ultimate goal of what I want clients in any system in which I intervene, to take away with them.

I am constantly and often consciously using one or the other of the four action modes, not haphazardly or casually, but in calculated sequences, when it might appear that I am merely engaged in conversation or soliciting it. (I will make clear in chapter 8, Intervention, how sequencing is done and why it is so critical to effective outcome.)

Eventually, at a select moment, I will name and spatially demonstrate the Four Player Model in the room. Doing this, I will show, is a key means of shifting he nature of discourse when the structure of present discourse is broken and doing further harm to already damaged relationships. Until then, it remains, like a distant, rhythmic drumbeat as background to what I am doing front stage. Obviously, there is much more to say about how I work. The sections, What I am thinking and What I am doing serve the purpose of putting the specifics of my approach in a given context.

"**Being a professional—even a well-trained one—is no guarantee that we do not at times do harm. What goes undocumented, and worse, unnoticed, is the harm... we do completely unawares—simply by being who we are and, even when doing the best we can—or believe so.**"

Source: Learning to Read the Room and Change it: A Workbook on Becoming an Interventionist.

Narrative

More relaxed now, Catherine explains. She knows I like to work with whole teams, and she argued with Jack, Technospan's CEO, for starting there. But Jack is not ready for that, she said, and where the team is now, they're not about to challenge him. In fact, "Though they are desperate for help and know it, he got them to agree with him, not me." Her view of the problem is that Jack is disabling the team. Jack's view is that the team is a bunch of wimps who can't take the heat. The team (she names them, briefly characterizing how each deals with Jack's disdainful attributions) is afraid to speak up, even those who'll howl in private.

I come here, she says, *as his 'eminence's' emissary with conditions.* The conditions she comes with are that *I'm to see you for one session to check you out up close and report back to him so that he can decide whether he'll join me here.*

D: *He likes to have his way?*

C: *Needs to.*

D: *And you?*

C: *Hmm, you might say that.*

D: *You seem evenly matched, and, Catherine, you may want to ask for help in how you may be contributing to the problem.*

> What I am Doing

I'm leveling the playing field. I want Catherine to know that though I instantly liked her, and that I'm taking steps to engage her in my way, that I look at communicative problems as circular, that no matter how accurate her portrait of Jack

as a dominating person, I will look at how she contributes to the problem. At some point I will make this clear in a live scenario in the room.

> What I am Thinking

Catherine is preparing me for a clash of models with Jack on the question, "Who is the client?" Before deciding whether to persist or back off, I need to get to know him better to hear his reasons. I sense that I may be facing a structural trap (see Glossary and Chapter 8), and must do something to avoid it.

Narrative Continued

Feeling called upon to address the issue Catherine has introduced, her differences with Jack about how to sign on with me, I decide to take a stand (a strong *move with opposer intimations*). The three of us could get trapped (not a serious or unfamiliar one, mind you) in an obtuse scalene triangle, in which Jack, because he may feel more distant from Catherine and me, a) if I were to see her alone first, thus forming a separate bond, and b) because she and I are closer on the question of who the client is, he then would then have reason to suspect a conspiracy. To avoid this, I say, I prefer not to see you alone. You'll both get the scoop on me soon enough. In reporting back to Jack, tell him I must speak with him by phone before I decide whether to see the two of you together in an initial contact, but let him know that I'd likely want to see the team soon, unless he convinces me it's a bad idea.

> What I am Doing

Mainly, I am slipping out of a potential structural trap, but

also, I am going on record of opposing Jack. An obvious risk. Many powerful leaders are accustomed to giving orders and having them followed. Following is the weakest action in my behavioral profile. But I decide that my profile is not the issue here. By opposing Jack in absentia, I am relieving Catherine of responsibility, and, since she will pass my position on to him, it is a means of testing the structure (how he reacts when opposed), a subject I will return to below. But I am also exposing an unwanted triangle by firmly taking charge of the process.

Jack Woodrow Calls

Jack: *You wanted to speak with me? Shoot!*

David: *(Laughing) Literally? With what? My weapons are harmless. I asked that you call for a simple reason. It is my wish to hear from you, in your own words, what you think the problem is. I've heard Catherine's view, and I need to hear yours. Simple as that, I suspect that you don't trust people like me; consultants, that is.*

Jack: Did Catherine say that?

David: Not a word, I assure you. You've made the news, the press is harsh whenever there is a good story. I cannot imagine that you would not want to check me out with Catherine as a trusted courier.

Jack: Impressive. Exactly what I had in mind.

David: Have no fear. If I think you are an S.O.B, I'll say so.

Jack (chuckling): I suppose she's given you an earful, that I'm "the problem".

David: I asked and got permission from Catherine to use anything I heard during her call in this conversation with you. I expect that your two stories about what the problem is would not match? (Exactly, he says) Please know this, they never do, never, so just tell me briefly how you see the problem. I need to know how you and Catherine differ in how you view the worlds you share.

> What I am Doing

In engaging Jack, I have reframed his need to control the process. I am also forecasting my model's position on difference.

In my model, differences between self and 'other,' far from being seen as most clients do, as the bane of their existence in relationships, and the 'cause' of problems in communication, are seen, as their ultimate salvation. As here, I will often softly seed ideas like this about my model early on. When I hammer my point hard at crucial moments later on when they matter most, many clients admit they were puzzled but curious when they'd first heard them.

Back to the Narrative

Jack: *I've broken some rules, no big deal, a little tinkering with facts. Like a trick play in football. Real pros hate them, but there are times when they are necessary and every team has pulled one off in hope of winning the game. The "reggies," at the SEC let the allegation go. Too often, I think my team is made up of wanna-be's not pros.*

David: *You won that one with the SEC, but, and I know you know this, Catherine thinks you've lost your team, and I think maybe you're in danger of losing the game of leadership. You*

were a star on the football field and on Wall Street. If I take you on, still an 'if,' you may have to change your strategies. (I'm opposing). I believe they need help, and soon.

Jack: *Look, I like you…so far. I'm willing to take my chances, on the field or off. And about 'losing' my team? I'll take my chances. No leader is worth his salt who is not a risk-taker. But on the question of your seeing the team, that's a no. They are not ready for it.*

David: *And so I'll take a risk. Here is something you may not want to hear. I think **you** are not ready for it, Jack. Humor me and let me have the last word on this. I'd like you to arrange a time for you and Catherine to come in. Let's let the team issue rest for now. But I will raise it again.*

Jack: *Okay. You just scored a point. You're pretty good. This way, we both win.*

> What I am Doing

[Note: I could have introduced my terms for agreeing to take a client on here (see Appendix A), but chose to wait. I must first succeed more than I have in engaging him and in building a container. These are not best achieved in an initial phone contact]

I am speaking the language of power, Jack's language of choice. (Jack's profile you will come to see is mover/opposer in closed power.) This—speaking other's preference for the language of affect, power, or meaning—is another way of engaging a client, unless it comes across as inauthentic. Though power is the weakest language preference in my profile, following after meaning and then affect, and closed is my weakest system preference, following random and then open, I can exhibit closed power 'in my way when I have to'. Nevertheless, Jack and I have antithetical profiles and I will have to keep a close eye out for bias on my part.

I am aware that I am leaping ahead in my story. I am referring here to Structural Dynamics' communication domain and its three languages—affect, power, and meaning; and its three operational domains of closed, open, and random. As noted, in this chapter, I am, for heuristic ease and clarity, confining myself to structural level 1, the four action modes. I have loosened my resolve in this instance as a hint of what is to come in chapter 3, where I address behavior at the two other structural levels, but more to indicate that there is more to diagnosis than you will see in this chapter, and to let you know that I am gathering more system diagnostic data than I am sharing at this time.

> What I am Thinking

In the closing moments of our phone conversation Jack wanted to stay in the 'up' position, which he did by giving me a 'passing grade.' I could have taken a one- down stance, a well known technique if effectively delivered (chapter 8), but decided to establish myself in the 'up' along with him.

In matches like this, I must watch myself on two counts. First, I must not get drawn into a contest as to who is in charge. (I flash back to the Brooklyn schoolyard when I was 12 and a fight I had with a tough kid who tried to take over the basketball court that my friends and I were playing on. Even then a leader, scared, but undaunted, I had to wrest a knife from him before leveling the field for a fair fight. A precedent was set in which I defend underdogs.) So what I have to watch out for in my work is a tendency to take bullies on in a fight. Second, in a match up like this one between Jack and Catherine, I hear the voices of my own children, now grown with kids of their own, who claim I favored my girl children over the boys when they were growing up.

And one more thing. Here is a question I asked in my post-session notes. In taking the stand I took, was what I did a procedural issue, a model issue, a technique, or an action driven by *my behavioral profile?* ∎

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