Faster, Shorter, Cheaper May Be Simple; It's Never Easy

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This article describes an experimental alternative to months-long systems redesigns. In one meeting, the global furniture retailer, IKEA, applying the principle of "whole system in the room," created a new structure and process for product design, manufacture, and distribution, decentralizing an agglomeration of "silos" that no longer served. Some 52 stakeholders examined the existing system, developed a new design, created a strategic plan and formed task forces led by key executives to implement it. In 18 hours, the plan was developed and signed off on by the company president and key people from all affected functions, with active support from several customers. Was this idiosyncratic to IKEA or repeatable anywhere? The authors hypothesize that one way to change a system in real time is for those with critical stakes in it to share what they know under conditions that enable action without asking permission from anyone not present.

Keywords: systems design; strategic plan; future search; sociotechnical systems

IKEA's strength today comes from their mastery of three key aspects of the value chain: unique design capabilities, unique sourcing, and tightly controlled logistics. This means that they are able to produce products that are distinctive enough to provide market recognition, secure sourcing for long runs at profitable levels, and reduce inventory costs through regional warehouses which work very closely with stores. In this way they have been able to buck industry trends and steadily increase their share of slow growing, sometimes shrinking markets.

—Grol and Schoch (1998, p. **PAGE**)

In this article we describe an experimental 18-hour alternative to monthlong systems redesigns. We explore the potential for setting in motion in one short meeting

consequential systemic changes that ripple out in time, touching tens of thousands of lives. Not so long ago, we believed that only projects and programs lasting 2 to 3 years could alter a large system's policies, procedures, and norms. This was "reality," reinforced by experience with small groups—task forces, work teams—working separately or sequentially. In the 1980s, using a series of five or six 2- to 3-day meetings, we learned to do "sociotechnical systems" (STS) work designs with groups of 50 to 60 people. We rarely could get from initial commitment to analysis to synthesis to action plan and implementation strategy in less than 6 months. No matter how many people were involved, some key players had to be brought along after the fact, requiring tense strategy sessions that could go on week after week.

In this case, the world's only global furniture retailer, IKEA, created in a single meeting a new system for product design, manufacture, and distribution, agreeing to decentralize an agglomeration of "silos" that no longer served effectively. This was not simply a meeting to validate what top management already had thought up. People who had never met before created something that had not existed. Some 52 stakeholders examined the existing system, developed a new system, created a strategic plan, and formed task forces led by key executives to implement it. In 18 hours, the plan was made, validated, and signed off by the company president, key people from all affected functions, and several customers.

This, of course, strikes us as theoretically impossible, for nobody taught them how to do that. In traditional STS designs, consultants provide concepts and methods for reducing supervision, flattening structures, creating multiskilled teams, and institutionalizing internal controls and self-management (Lytle, 1998). In this case, our role was limited to managing a meeting under which a diverse client group could do all the work itself, using only what people brought with them. Instead of teaching people systems thinking, we set up conditions under which they could experience the whole system and accept responsibility for the consequences. Indeed, were it not for the clients' testimony, we could not imagine that so little "consulting" would lead to such far-reaching actions.

The method IKEA adapted was based on Future Search, a planning meeting that we had experimented with since the early 1980s (Weisbord & Janoff, 2000). Future Search differs in several ways from traditional strategic planning. Diverse participants go from data collection to action in a few hours rather than months. They also share responsibility for implementation to a degree usually unknown. Future Search consultants function more like stage managers than key players. They set up structures under which people can act responsibly if they choose. Then they get out of the way.

The Future Search procedures derive from four principles:

- The "whole system" in the room, usually 50 to 80 people, who among them have *authority*, *resources*, *expertise*, *information*, and *need*
- Exploring the whole as known by all present before seeking to fix any part
- Seeking common ground and shared aspirations, treating problems and conflicts as information only, not action agendas
- Participant responsibility for managing their own small groups, supplying and interpreting information, and choosing to act

A typical Future Search requires 4 half days. People usually meet from lunch time on Day 1 to early afternoon of Day 3, which they did in this case. When all four principles are applied in these time frames, a whole system can transform its capability for action. Plans, policies, procedures, and forms of cooperation emerge by the meeting's end that seemed impossible before. Typical outputs are three: an understanding of the whole by all present that no one had at the start, a shared vision based on finding common ground, a joint implementation plan with authority, and high commitment to carry it out. To have all three at once still strikes us, after decades of this work, as the most time- and cost-efficient route to high-quality strategic planning that we have known.

Modifying the Method

There was a critical difference, however, between what we had learned to do and what IKEA wanted. Future Search usually provides an umbrella of shared values and vision over long-range strategic plans. Such plans rarely call for people to change the nature of their own jobs. IKEA sought to redesign a specific product development and distribution system. The managers already knew that to restore their market advantage, they had to flatten the hierarchy and broaden lines of communication. What they did not know was how to do it. IKEA was requesting from us a process not unlike an STS redesign in which the techniques lead people to redistribute power and eliminate levels of supervision. The client's sense of urgency precluded a feasibility study or even a proven series of multiple meetings of the sort that Richard Axelrod (2000) called the Conference Model®. Nor was this the result of the client's ignorance. Several key managers had attended Future Search training. It was they, not we, who pressed for a one-meeting adaptation. They wanted us to modify our method without altering the basic principles.

Background

IKEA is the brainchild of a modest, driven, thrifty, nonconformist entrepreneur named Ingvar Kamprad. His single-minded mission has been to stay close to customers and suppliers, keep quality high, product design simple, and prices low by nonstop cost cutting. In 1943, Kamprad at age 17 began peddling pens, wallets, picture frames, and other miscellany to his neighbors from his family farm, Elmtaryd, in a tiny village, Agunnaryd, in Southern Sweden. (Combine the initials of the founder's name, the farm, and the village and you spell . . . IKEA.) Eventually, Kamprad revolutionized his industry by designing and selling unassembled furniture that the customer could transport and put together at home. He also created child-friendly stores where shopping became a family event. His vision was as plain as the Swedish countryside: "a wide range of home furnishing items of good design and function, at prices so low that the majority of people can afford to buy them." His values went far beyond economics to include cooperation, enthusiasm, simplicity, humbleness, support for innovation, personal initiative, leadership by example, and environmental responsibility.

IKEA became the first retailer in its field to establish stores in all of Europe, North America, Asia, and the Middle East. Kamprad insisted the company go into Russia and China at a time when key advisers were against it. These moves notwithstanding, for decades the company grew slowly, its success based on the omnipresent founder's commitment to highest quality at lowest cost. By 2001, a decision was made to grow more rapidly. Tomas Oxelman, a veteran internal consultant, feared that IKEA could not reorganize its far-flung systems in time to meet growing competition from other global giants. Oxelman, after a Future Search workshop, decided that Future Search could be adapted to rethink the company's product development cycle and supply chain. We doubted our process could be stretched so far in one meeting. Oxelman observed that Future Search principles paralleled IKEA's corporate values. Adapting the meeting design was a minor detail for him compared to the congruence of the method with a corporate culture of openness, involvement, and experimentation.

Oxelman soon arranged for us to meet Anders Dahlvig, the firm's president, and Josephine Rydberg-Dumont, managing director of IKEA of Sweden, the entity responsible for all products. These executives were determined to overhaul the company's product "pipeline," the flow of products from the drawing boards in Almhult, Sweden, to its far-flung factories, then to distribution points, stores, and customers around the world. This was a daunting task. We had never before helped clients plan such a system overhaul in less than 6 months. We were willing to experiment with a 3-day meeting if the clients held realistic expectations, meaning we would learn together. The executives guaranteed that all the right people from Dahlvig on down would be there. We thought of the old moral, "Do not wish for what you want, you might get it." We now had support from the top for a meeting never attempted that we were not sure how to design.

To this end, we spent a day with Oxelman and Ulf Caap, a former store manager, also now an internal consultant. The pipeline, they pointed out, looks simple enough on paper. In fact, it describes an interactive web of complex interdependencies (see Figure 1). All 10,000 products were designed by IKEA employees in Sweden. Materials, from raw goods to finished products, were bought from roughly 1,500 suppliers in 55 countries and warehoused as close as possible to the stores. The 179 stores in 23 countries enjoyed more than 365 million customer visits a year, and soon there would be 20 stores more.

The company a few years earlier had been reorganized into 11 business areas by product type, for example, upholstered seating, shelving, office, kitchen, and so on. The goal was to shorten the path from supplier to customer by eliminating regional offices. Its unintended consequence was a proliferation of centralized staff in Sweden, seeking to coordinate the far-flung operations. How conceptualize the possible redesign of 10,000 pipelines? With unlimited time and resources, this was a formidable task. What could be done in one meeting? Common ground and a shared vision? That we felt confident of, given 20 years of precedent. An action plan? Very likely. But a systems redesign, new structure and process, and the structure to implement it? That seemed a little far-fetched. That was not the way Oxelman and Caap saw it. Knowing the company as we did not, they believed that resources and expertise could be lined up if people were involved from the start.
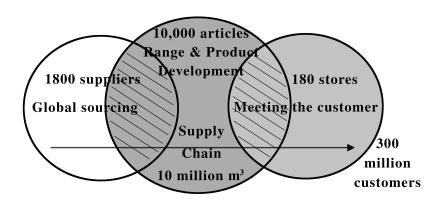
ONE IKEA

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Choosing a Task

We considered several options from examining the whole pipeline to taking one product line, say seating, and creating a prototype that could be repeated. Which was the quickest way to get the whole system moving? After hours of conversation, we hit on a risky scheme that at least seemed manageable. We would adapt Future Search to a *single product*, the "Ektorp" sofa, a traditional design that had sold well for years. The Ektorp came in many styles (armchair, sofa, corner sofa, etc.) with a variety of slip covers. We would use this concrete task as a stepping-stone to redoing the whole system. People could document the Ektorp's journey from design center to customer and reimagine how the task could be made easier, less costly, and more customer-friendly. We would involve all those who touched an Ektorp to rethink their processes, procedures, and policies. Catarina Bengtsson, the manager of the upholstered seating business group, had set ambitious product goals: double Ektorp sales, improve quality, cut the price 30% without cutting profit, make sofa shopping easier for customers, and cut delivery times. Her agenda was to use the conference to help achieve these goals. Dalhvig and Rydberg-Dumont saw the meeting as the key to unlocking the whole system.

Now we needed an agenda. We would modify Future Search to include what we imagined to be essential to a system redesign. Our process already included an "environmental scan" of outside forces affecting the system, what we call a "mind map" of trends affecting IKEA. However, a "technical analysis" of the work flow and its "variances" (deviations from required performance) and a "social analysis" (the extent to which people enjoyed optimum jobs and working conditions) could hardly be

shoehorned into a few hours. Still, we were convinced we had to document the existing system in some detail if we hoped to have people redesign it (Weisbord, 2004, chap. 18).

Usually we go through five phases: the past, the present, the future, common ground, and action plans. The last three, we decided, would need little changing. How could we document the system in detail while reviewing the past and delineating the present, all in 1 day or less? We considered the detailed systems analysis essential, and now we wanted 52 people involved. So we imagined starting this adaptation by having the group make a grand flowchart on which each person would indicate all steps in the pipeline and its key variances. On second thought, how could we afford several hours just for this? Not to worry, said the internal staff. We will prepare a wall-size flowchart of the existing system. Early in the meeting, we will have each person describe their job and place a card describing their step in the work flow on the large chart. People could make a portrait of how the system works now without having to imagine it from scratch. Thus, we would adapt our generic Future Search so as to focus specifically on the pipeline in a global context.

THE MEETING

In March 2003, 52 stakeholders met in a hotel in Hamburg, Germany, for 3 days. They had been handpicked by a planning group led by Bengtsson, using a "whole system" to mean people with *authority*, *resources*, *expertise*, *information*, and *need*. Present were company president Dahlvig and seating product line head Bengtsson; top staff from design and product development, inventory management, sales, supply and distribution, trading, purchasing, Information Technology (IT); finance and retail managers; suppliers from Poland, Mexico, and China; and six customers who had bought Ektorp sofas. The meeting room, a large, square, well-lit space was furnished only with chairs, easels and chart pads, a small table for water, and in one corner a green Ektorp sofa fronted by a coffee table, where, as it turned out, we spent much of the time watching people work.

A jarring surprise for us was the promised flowchart. We anticipated a detailed systems map. What we found on the wall was a simple diagram with three circles on it—as in Figure 1. We looked at each other. "We can't get there from here!" We were starting from scratch after all. People were already filing in, many having just flown half way around the world. Despite the bare-bones flowchart, we saw no choice but to proceed with our original plan and hope for a breakthrough.

Anders Dahlvig welcomed people and pointed out that for him the Ektorp was a vehicle toward a larger goal: to build a quicker, leaner, and simpler IKEA, even as the company grew rapidly. He wished to see the "silos" taken down to restore the open, trustful working climate for innovation and risk taking, company hallmarks beset by creeping bureaucracy. Our first objective was to help the diverse group members experience themselves as part of an interdependent whole. Catarina Bengtsson, the seating group head, asked each person to describe their part in the existing system and to place the identity cards they had made on the chart. We no longer kidded ourselves that this

could be the functional equivalent of a technical analysis. What we got was a low-energy start-up, providing little either in content or interaction, not a good omen. We knew we were in uncharted territory.

We slogged ahead into a review of the past. Normally, we would post three blank 24-foot-long time lines on the wall for people to record personal, global, and company histories. To save time, we cut the time lines to one, planning to have two people write up a company history as group members recalled it. At this point, however, people had been sitting for more than an hour. Wanting to see more engagement, we reverted to our usual method and asked people to write on the company time line themselves. We then asked a half dozen groups of randomly mixed stakeholders to answer two questions: (a) What does the time line tell you about IKEA? and (b) What does it mean for the work we will do here?

The results were not what we were accustomed to. We missed the excitement generated by three levels of history and the recognition of the connections among personal, global, and company pasts. "Well," we said ruefully, "no more single time lines!" Still not seeing how we would get where we needed to go, we moved from the past to the present. We were "trusting the process" beyond reason as we engaged the group in making a mind map of current trends. With the exception of a few native English speakers, people from 10 countries were working in a second language. A few had colleagues whispering into their ears in Chinese or Polish. Many who understood English were reluctant to speak it in public. Nonetheless, a rich map was built, and we ended the day asking people to put colored dots on those issues they believed had to be addressed in a redesign. Themes that stood out were the pace of change, rapid growth in the company, and pressures eroding company values. We now had a pretty good snapshot of what the company faced and not much knowledge of the system we were charged to redesign.

How Do You Get There From Here?

"They are in deep denial," one IKEA colleague said. "Nobody wants to lose power and influence; that's what they think will happen if we flatten the hierarchy." Normally, we would put people into stakeholder groups to confront the global trends on the mind map. However, we still felt a nagging anxiety. It came from our belief that the time line stories had not been enough for people to confirm that they all lived in the same multifaceted world, an essential condition for real dialogue (Emery, 1992). Next morning, contrary to normal practice, we started in the same mixed groups as the day before. We feared that differentiating too soon into stakeholder groups would reinforce the old "silos." So we asked mixed groups to talk about the way the trends were affecting the whole pipeline. Again we erred. Because the participants had not differentiated themselves in stakeholder groups, we could not learn how each group viewed various trends. This modification did not get us where we hoped to be.

Lamenting this, we at last asked people in midmorning next day to meet in stakeholder groups. We had them do a task adapted from the STS repertoire, a "gap analysis" to make one more stab at documenting the existing system. We asked groups to look at the trends they considered important and to identify what they saw as "gaps" in

the way the company was responding now compared to the way they believed it should respond. At last we began to see animated conversations and a rich analysis on the flip charts. As each group reported, we could see heads nod in disbelief or confirmation. For the first time, the existing system, its exquisite complexity and obvious flaws, came into focus for most people.

When we asked for a large group conversation, however, almost nobody spoke. We recalled our experiences in Singapore, where people would be animated in small groups and nearly silent in whole group dialogues. Our local colleagues said this reflected a cultural disposition against calling attention to oneself (a trait shared by many Swedes). So we did what we had done in Asia. We asked people to go back into small groups and talk over the reports they had heard. What conclusions could they draw? Again there was much excitement and a deepening sense that there were many creative possibilities for a new system design. Moreover, it became easier for people to report their collective ideas and carry on a more meaningful discussion in the whole group. Drawing on proven Future Search practice, we also asked people to talk about what they were proudest of and sorriest about in their own approach to the pipeline. Again, various groups owned up to shortcomings, particularly competition among functions, while iterating their many strengths. As usual, this step eased the burden of letting go the past. Still, nobody mentioned what some believed to be the unspoken key issue: fear for their own jobs.

Reimagining the Pipeline

Now it was time to go into the future. In mixed groups again, people were asked to design an Ektorp pipeline that would (a) be responsive to key trends in society; (b) close critical gaps; (c) preserve core values and practices; and (d) enhance the commitment of producers, consumers, and suppliers. Groups would create a detailed description of the new system as if it were already implemented and dramatize their vision through a creative scenario. In addition, the scenarios ought to be technically feasible, socially desirable, and personally motivating. The six scenarios were diverse. One was an enthusiastic replay of the existing system as it ought to work (and obviously did not). Two other scenarios, however, dealt with issues of shortening the time from design to store. Three were imaginative evocations of a direct connection between suppliers and individual stores that had not existed since the company's earliest days; one, the most radical, envisioned customers involved in product design and an information system that enabled stores to replenish inventories while bypassing a central office in Sweden.

Interesting product innovations emerged that later would be implemented. One was the idea of selling three sets of slipcovers with each sofa, so that customers could do a seasonal makeover without having to buy new furniture. Collectively, the scenarios played out many ways to handle the complex issues of global coordination. It was possible, of course, that people still sat on key issues. But this hardly looked to us like a group in denial. We now saw a system up for grabs, as evidenced by the heated conversations during breaks and dinner.

Next we asked the mixed groups to identify "common ground," what they all agreed were the "minimum critical specifications" (a term borrowed from STS) for a revised Ektorp pipeline. These were posted and discussed until every stakeholder was satisfied. The agreed-upon specs were surprisingly concrete, many reflecting the most far-reaching of the future scenarios. They included greatly flattening the hierarchy, involving customers and suppliers in product development from the start, providing direct contact between suppliers and stores, changing the roles of central staff, using test markets before launching new products, and modifying information systems to give everyone greater influence on the system's coordination and control. People also included competence development, defined as "everyone in the pipeline understands how it works and the effects of their actions on others."

In an intense hour or so the design was validated and seven key areas for action agreed to by all. That many roles would change was no longer in doubt. The group had crossed that bridge with the decision to involve customers and shorten the lines of communication with suppliers. That evening at dinner, Catarina Bengtsson spoke individually with various executives who were logical choices to lead the new initiatives. Next morning, the executives each convened teams, a mixture of volunteers and those already engaged in the area, around each of the key action items. Groups began making implementation plans.

During a long break in midmorning, Bengtsson assembled the team leaders to check on progress and to discuss the implications of going forward. In the next 45 minutes, we saw played out before us a drama that in the past might have gone on inconclusively for weeks or months. The executives' energy and their attraction to an innovative new way of doing business came face-to-face with their apprehension and suspicion of change. They were being asked, one said pointedly, to run two systems in parallel. They would have to commit the added time, effort, and resources that it would take to put new structures in place for the Ektorp line, while continuing the old system for other products. What about the company's commitment to quality of life for employees? How much did one sacrifice for the greater good?

Crossing the Bridge to Implementation

"If you're not with this in any way, we have to know now," said Bengtsson. One by one, the concerns, personal and organizational, were put on the table. This was ultimate "reality," for the key decision makers were all present. Either this group would do it or the job would not be done. Dahlvig, who stayed out of this meeting, had already told them he would support whatever they decided. The mood shifted to creative problem solving, as the executives sought to support one another. During this conversation, we made our only "expert" suggestion. A key dilemma was how to coordinate and control a plan that involved people on several continents. From 35 years of experience we knew that such plans cannot be managed effectively by people outside of the day-to-day action (although the wish to do that is alive and well everywhere).

Indeed, external control and coordination were the very practices IKEA sought to change. "Why not," we suggested, "have a periodic conference call? You can bring each other up to date, make further plans, and coordinate yourselves based on shared

information. Collectively you can manage this strategy in a few hours a week." People need not give up control and influence. They could share it. In a few hours, support structures were built and regular check-ins scheduled via telephone, email and the Internet. This practice would enable a degree of self-organizing not previously seen.

People had designed a new system, created an implementation plan, and got buy in from all affected functions, all without consultant input. The design came out of a dialogue born from a deep knowledge in each person of their connection to the product and a grounding in shared values. They proved Tomas Oxelman's seminal insight that the congruence between IKEA's values and Future Search processes was a key variable for success. Mary Parker Follett, a wise observer of management practices 75 years ago, had a vivid description for what we had seen. People, she wrote, could bypass arbitrary leadership practices if they agreed to take their orders from "the law of the situation" (Metcalf & Urwick, 1940, p. 59). This law could only be discovered in dialogue with others, including those with authority, resources, expertise, information, and need. We also believe the role played by IKEA's leadership in this conference was critical to the outcome. The top executives joined the dialogue without specifying a new structure.

In short order, seven task forces were at work around the world, redoing every aspect of the Ektorp pipeline. During the Future Search, for example, customers highlighted the need for an economy sofa, similar in quality to the Ektorp and lower in price. In the old days, experts might have placed a new product in stores quickly, soliciting customer feedback afterward. Not this time. Just days after the Future Search, a product developer, a supplier, a purchaser, and two customers met to create a new product, the "Fixhult" sofa. The sofa was placed in a few stores in Germany, modified, and put into stores in France. After a few more iterations in diverse cultures it was rolled out, with confidence, to stores around the world. This became the living model for future product rollouts.

OUTCOMES AND IMPLICATIONS

A year later, we called Bengtsson to see how the pipeline fared. Ektorp, she said, had exceeded her targets. They had increased volume, cut costs, preserved profit margins, maintained product quality, and reduced the price. One reason for better sales was greater availability. Customers who wanted a sofa right now could get it. Like all system redesigns, we learned this one too had its rocky moments. Bengtsson herself found the transition difficult. She was learning, with support from Rydberg-Dumont, a new form of leadership. She had begun to manage in a way that would keep people focused on the success of the whole in addition to their own issues. Two of her direct reports, unhappy with their new roles, had chosen to leave.

Gradually other product lines were being affected. Lars Dafnas, involved with the Range [of products] Strategy for all IKEA, said, "We've started having more frequent product launch times during the year. That was definitely a result of us strategizing together." Other executives added to a mosaic suggesting how this meeting had affected company norms, policies, procedures, and cooperation among functions. It

was certainly not a systems redesign in the sociotechnical sense. What did happen, though, may turn out to be more important in the long run. Key people for the first time all got a sense of the whole. See below, "What Happened Anyway?"

What Happened Anyway?

I previously had five managers reporting to me. Now I have two: one for supply, quality, and purchasing, and one for product range and commercial questions like advertising, rollouts, and marketing. Now the interfaces are clearer to all of us. In the Future Search meeting, I saw exactly where we were. I realized that I needed another kind of leadership to help my organization get all the way there. When it comes to product development at the suppliers, we have come far. Our latest example is a four-product program called "Solsta" that was developed at a supplier in Romania, for the German market. The stakeholders developed a new distribution setup to minimize the cost from supplier to customer as well as make it possible for the German stores to order different combinations of the four products. The first delivery was last week. The development time was less than half of what it was a year ago. (Catarina Bengtsson, business area manager, seating group)

When I left Hamburg, I had high hopes. After the meeting, we really started to see the whole pipeline, to see the flow, and to realize we had to have one process. When I look at how we work now [a year later], we have changed our way of thinking—not only with the Ektorp but other products as well. We're thinking more in a process-oriented way. And I think that was our greatest achievement. (Per Gustavsson, supply manager)

Before the meeting I didn't know what to expect. Being with the total pipeline, from the beginning to the very end, made it clear to me that not only are there a lot of people and functions involved, but that there is a connection between what I do and what someone in the pipeline after me does. Since I don't contact that person every day, it's good to know we now have the same picture. (Gunilla Danielsson, product developer)

Speculating on Systems Thinking and Messy Change

This form of systems design relies on different principles than do more analytic models. Many things happen at once, greatly shortening the time from idea to action. You cannot produce a detailed roadmap for action this way. Indeed, that may no longer be functional in an age of nonstop change when the shape of the whole keeps changing like the weather. It is possible that a short, intense, whole system meeting enables something not available in any other way: a gestalt of the whole in all participants that dramatically improves their relationship to their work and their coworkers. This is not a matter for organization charts and job descriptions. We cannot say for sure how these processes work. We can see the results. They suggest that what some colleagues have dubbed "a simpler way" (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1998) may be a dependable route to "shorter, faster, cheaper" systems change. Simple it may be, but it also is messy and never easy.

SYSTEMS THINKING IN EVERYDAY WORKPLACES

A key question for those interested in the dynamics of systems change may be, "What makes a system thinker?" Is it having the *intellectual* understanding that everything is connected to everything else and that the health of a system depends on its energy flow? Is it knowing that cooperation sometimes means letting go practices that have become part of one's identity? Many people—not least of all us—devoutly

believe such concepts. Believing, however, is not the same as doing. We are quickly overcome by emotion when we sense that our own interests may be in conflict with those of the whole. We can become self-protective in an eye blink when we feel threatened by forces we cannot control. The predominant feeling is, "I either win or lose, and I've got to make sure I don't lose." It is easy to forget in such moments whatever sense we have of a larger system at work.

In the kind of meeting we have described, no one sets out to inflict harm on anyone else. Dysfunctional ways of defending personal turf come from imagined, not real, danger when one's employment is not on the line. What is threatened is identity, not survival. Few of us have a vocabulary for discussing such matters. That people might not put such issues on the table right away ought not be considered a pathology. The heart of Future Search is to keep the task central enough and the conversations open long enough so that solutions to complex issues both structural and personal can be found. Such systems *experiencing* requires no conceptual affinity at all. Nor does it require consultants to poke at people for their "undiscussables." It *does* require the whole system in the room with an equal chance for all to be heard.

Thus, we have a testable hypothesis. One way to change a system in real time is for those with critical stakes to know the whole through one another's eyes under conditions that enable action without asking permission from anyone not present. In so doing, systems thinking metamorphoses from conceptual to experiential. No chief executives, strategic planners, expert consultants, *or* design teams can get their arms around a global system securely enough to redesign it *and* to implement their redesign. The tension between self and system will defeat the most brilliant strategic plans until people work the plans through with each other.

That does not mean the tension cannot be managed. Operationalizing systems thinking requires opportunities for people to act on their concerns for self and for the whole. Most people have the capability to do that. There is no certainty that they will unless they see a way to influence the whole. It is possible that the IKEA pipeline case is an idiosyncratic anomaly, derived entirely from a unique corporate history and values. The company, after all, is still privately held. Its managers need not subordinate long-range decisions to the whims of Wall Street. Moreover, the founder still takes an active interest in corporate strategy, and his core values are never far from any employee's consciousness. Oddly enough, from everything we have learned about Ingvar Kamprad, he would have little patience with the form of participation described here. We are confident, though, that he would love the results.

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