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Making R&D work better

## When the Solution is not the Opposite of the Problem

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**It's a familiar story**, and we have all lived it more than once. We have a problem that feels a lot like a problem that we've had before...and we thought we had solved it before...so why are we here again?

For example, you might enjoy playing tennis with friends and neighbors, but then you find it is just not enough. You do get in some good games, but sometimes partners cancel or just want to whack the ball around. You are not getting the exercise you want, and your game isn't improving, and it's just not worth the time. So you join a league.

But after a while, it seems like the league is really too full of rules and responsibilities. You have to give up your weekends, take tests, go to meetings, "volunteer" for committees, buy special shirts, etc. That's not what you wanted, either. So you quit the league. You're back where you started.

**There are plenty of examples in business, of course.** In a company that began life as an innovative start-up, informal, "let's give it a try" new product development processes fit well with the size of the team, the temperament of creative technologists, and the early-adopter marketplace. As employees, customers, and competitors accumulate, however, managers may look about them and see looming chaos and threats – slipping schedules, wavering customer loyalty, waste, funding difficulties – and they may feel generally out of control.

*The best solution is not at either extreme.*

A typical reaction is to "get organized," which brings in formal NPD processes with documentation, status meetings, and printed organization charts. The problem was chaos, so the solution is formal processes. Right? But has the problem been solved? Well, it's hard to tell. Schedules may still slip (probably for different reasons). Customers may still be worried, and management is now faced with growing overhead, stagnation, and disempowered employees. The pendulum between informality and "getting organized" may swing back and forth and back again.

**Why is the "problem" never "solved"?** It's because the best solution is not at either extreme. In situations like these, the best approach is to create dynamic balance between the opposing extremes of informality and formality and to maintain the creative tension with an "early warning system" that establishes warning flags and responsibilities for actions that will return an out-of-balance system to productive balance. To be sustainable, this approach must be both participative and "emerging" – which means that it is able to adapt to increasing learning from experience within the company, changing product/technology strategies, and new external factors.

### Overview

Do you know a small, growing company – perhaps yours? – that has to fill the same key position over and over again?

One after another, a potential new hire's skills and experience look so good on paper, but his/her first few weeks on the job are very disappointing, and the company's whole operation seems to stumble and slow down.

The underlying cause could be "the culture issue."

**The principle and general guidelines for application.** There certainly are times when the solution IS the opposite of the problem. Similarly, many problems have several alternative "correct" solutions. In such cases, when one alternative is selected and applied, the problem is solved and remains so.

*When we try to solve a problem by doing the opposite instead, we just get different problems.*

But the world we human beings live and work in is complex, and "correct" solutions can be hard to come by. Situations like the one described in earlier paragraphs occur often in individual and organizational life; when we try to solve a problem by doing the opposite instead, we just get different problems. The answer is not one extreme or another, or an exact point between two opposites; rather, it is a managed dynamic balance that is unique to each company. Finding the right balance for your company begins with understanding the positives and negatives at both extremes and looking for dynamic solutions you can manage to maximize the positives and minimize the negatives.

(This discussion, in part, adapts ideas presented in *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems*, written by Barry Johnson and published by HRD Press.)