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Everybody

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Abstract

Organizational Engineering (OE) has been used to support many corporate initiatives. VBD, Inc. has gone one step further. OE has been integrated into the very fabric of the business.

This article describes how OE is being used with management, customers, suppliers and trades people. This global implementation is yielding gains that are compounding upon themselves. OE is now a part of VBD's competitive advantage in the marketplace.

ENGINEERING EVERYBODY

By: Colette Gandelot

INTRODUCTION

Organizational Engineering was introduced to Vujovich Design and Build, Inc. (VDB) as a way of trying to save my job.

I left a large real estate firm where I held the position of Manager, Sales and Marketing to join VDB in roughly the same capacity. My motive was to get closer to where the "rubber meets the road." VDB is the gold standard in the Minneapolis market and seemed to be the ideal place for me to realize my dream.

I arrived on the job. My initial assessment was that VDB had a bit of a "macho" culture. This did not seem to be much of an impediment. I had handled this before in my prior life with the real estate firm. I was arrogant enough to believe that I could power my way through it again on the basis of force of personality. All I had to do was show them what I could do. They would come around.

What actually happened is that I hit a brick wall. OUCH! The guys were not macho. They were just absolutely convinced that they knew the "right" way to do things. They kept shooting down my ideas. They kept finding things that could go wrong. They seemed to be unable to make a decision in a "reasonable" amount of time. It was ugly.

I was faced with an incongruity. These "pig-headed" people had built a premier firm that places in the top ten firms of its kind in the nation. Who was crazy here—they or me?

The stress continued to build for all involved. Something was going to happen. The only question was what and when. What happened was my father.

My father, Howard Gandelot, is a professional consultant. He is also my trusted sounding board. In long telephone conversations I vented my anger and frustration. He listened. Then he came up with a new option. He offered to come up to Minnesota to debrief the management team using a new tool, "I Opt." I leapt at the potential salvation!

Dad's visit produced awesome results. The four "pig-headed" senior executives turned out to be using an LP/HA strategy. I was a highly committed RI/RS. As Dad explained what this meant the scales began to drop off of everyone's eyes. Nobody was crazy. Nobody had anything to "fix." Nobody was broken.

Using the TeamAnalysis™ and LeaderAnalysis™ technologies, Dad showed us that the missing ingredient was organization. Not the kind that lives on pieces of paper in desk drawers but the kind that governs human interaction.

The missing piece was the understanding of how we could take advantage of each other's strengths. We discovered that the sources of frustration were really sources of strength. All we had to do was to learn how to use them. Dad saved my bacon and planted a seed for the firm. That seed was to grow into a major competitive advantage

THE FIRM

VDB is a custom remodeler and builder. Its clients are people who own and have a strong emotional attachment to the homes on which we work. Everything is personal. It would be difficult to find a more demanding clientele.

VDB is small by the standards of Caterpillar, Shell, Birds Eye and the other firms that use the technology extensively. VDB has only 22 full-time people on the payroll. However, this size is deceptive.

Remodeling projects typically involve many people from many different areas. VDB has ongoing relations with contractors, independent trades people, architects, engineers, lawyers and designers among others. These people flow in and out on the basis of the jobs underway. The "real" number of people involved varies widely, but it is large.

Perhaps more importantly, the organization of people on a remodeling project is complex. People must show up at the right time, do the right thing and complete their work on schedule. Contracts define these matters but, as any lawyer will tell you, no contract defines everything. In final analysis, relationships and organization determine success.

Even this is not the extent of VDB's challenge. Success is judged in the eyes of the personally involved, emotionally invested client. An item that meets contractor standards and the letter of a contract might fall short of the client's vision of their home. The successful resolution of an issue can involve VDB, the client and the contractor. And this can happen over and over again in the course of a single job. Every time it does relationships can be threatened.

Even when the client is not involved, complexities arise. The 22 VDB people each have roles within a project. These roles interact with each other as well as with those of our partners. Our partners also interact with each other. Missteps anywhere in the chain have nasty consequences.

VDB may be small, but it is not simple. This has significant implications. Organizational design and development can be as important for VDB as it is for large firms. In fact, it may be more important.

In large firms, there are many ways of creating competitive advantages. VDB has fewer. It accesses the same asset base as every other Design and Build firm. Contractors can work for us one day and someone else the next. We all visit the same finance sources. The same vendors offering the same technologies visit us all. Any innovation is instantly visible and can be copied by a competitor.

The single point where we can create a competitive advantage is in our organizational prowess. Even if competitors know what we are doing they cannot replicate it. We are insulated. Our strategy is based on the specific mix of strategic styles in our group. If another firm tries to copy our strategy with another mix of styles, they will ultimately fail. This means we can sustain our advantage over time.

We even get an advantage when other firms do try to copy us. They spend resources that could have been targeted to our more vulnerable areas. In addition, they are likely to generate inefficiencies as people try to integrate themselves in inappropriate ways. Dad thought he was just fixing my problem. What was really happening was that he was creating an enduring advantage for the firm.

MANAGEMENT

Dad's initial point of impact was the management team. He walked in on a team with a history. We had already been at each other's throats. We all had scars. Strong emotions bubbled below the surface. This was not going to be an academic exercise.

As is typical, the individual "I Opt" reports hit the mark on all of us. The LP/HA's agreed that they wanted certainty of outcome. They saw their need for detail and their preference for methodical approaches. From my side, I saw my need for speed of resolution. I agreed that I preferred to work with minimal detail and also recognized my willingness to fail and try again.

During this initial stage we exchanged information on the way we liked to process information. The four "pig-headed" guys were surprised to find that they shared a common perspective. Their attention had centered on their differences and these were many. They came from different backgrounds, married different women, had different educa-

tions and on and on. "I Opt" made their commonalities visible. It told them why they were able to get along so well.

When my turn came up, no one was surprised that I was REALLY different. However, they were a bit surprised that a person could conduct a life using my strategy. Like most people (me included), they thought their way was the "right" way. Finding out that other people had other "right" ways was eye opening for us all.

Dad's first stage helped relieve some tension by giving all of us reasons for our differences. They were not acting the way they did because they were "macho" men (although they are). I was not acting the way I did because I was a woman. Something else was going on.

At the end of this stage we all understood that we all had valid ways of approaching life. This was nice. But it did not really solve the problem. My way was still the "right" way. Unfortunately, they continued to think that their way was the "right" way. The emotions had been tempered but the rational, organization-level problem still existed.

Dad was not done. He then introduced TeamAnalysis. Here he showed us that we all had "blind" spots. He went on to explain that our blind spots were not all in the same place. We could offset many of these. All we had to do was to recognize what a situation called for as its best resolution method. Then it was just a matter of listening to the person who had the highest skill in that area.

BINGO!! The lights in everyone's head went off at the same time. None of us had the "right" way. But together we had most of the bases covered. The concept of "team" came through like a freight train. It was not about "let's all be nice to each other." It was a "we need each other to get the job done" concept. It applied at a management level as surely as it applied to carpenters, plumbers and electrician's working together to complete a remodeling job.

Dad went on to give us some tools we could use to help work together more effectively. Some of these were rules, others were roles and still others were methods. However, the basic point had already been made. It was to our mutual advantage to find ways to work together. We all now knew what each other had to offer and we had a motive to using it. At this point you could not have stopped us from becoming a team. I always knew Dad was a superhero!

Dad then went on to repeat the process with all of the people on the VDB team. The results repeated themselves. Insights blossomed all over. These insights were important and the results were phenomenal.

For example, I had found one person particularly difficult. He was so tedious that it was painful just talking to him. From his side, I appeared to be a "space cadet" who was not to be taken seriously. Tension had reached a point where we both had trouble even looking at each other. It was bad.

The new insights gave both of us a motive to try again. It was not sudden. But over time we both began to find out what the other had to offer. I have now reached a point where I am kicking myself for being so stupid. The guy is a treasure. The relationship has broadened my perspective enormously. The really great part is that I do not have to

become him to get the goodies. I just have to be smart enough to listen to what he as to say. I know where he is "coming from" and can now make the mental adjustments needed to fit it in with my way of doing things. It's easy.

This example points to a fundamental truth. The "be nice to each other" prescription is an outcome, NOT a cause. It automatically occurs when the people involved have respect for each other. A weak semblance of this respect can be obtained in "ropes" courses, outdoor adventures and other similar exercises. However, real respect occurs when that respect is born in and pertains to the actual workplace.

Respect is a reflection of the value each person places on the other. Not in a general "your okay, I'm okay" sense. Rather, it is a respect founded in their common work endeavor. This effect is self-sustaining. The more it is used in the work context, the stronger it gets. This is clearly superior to the expensive, event based exercises offered by many in the organizational field.

Having seen the power of "I Opt" first hand, it was time to take advantage of Dad again. After all, what are Dads for? I got him to spend the time to give me a foundation level certification course in Organizational Engineering. I knew it worked. I wanted to find out why it worked and how it could be extended to other areas. Dad complied. Dads are pushovers.

This step housed the power of "I Opt" within the firm. Dad no longer had to fly out to help. We now had the knowledge internally. It was time to extend its reach.

THE WORKFORCE

VDB's lifeblood are trades people. It is they who actually create the value that our clients buy. They are also some of the toughest customers around. If they think something is poppycock, they do not hesitate to tell you.

The gains were so great at a management level, VDB decided to use it with the trades people on staff. The reason was that, like everyone else, trades people have to work together to get the job done. They do this using a hierarchical system that makes the military look like boy scouts.

For example, carpenters establish a rank order among themselves almost instantly. Rank is determined by the skill. This system clearly defines the "masters" who can be looked to as a teaching resource. Since most of the carpenters are LP/HA, they have a lot to teach.

The problem is that carpentry, like most things, has different facets. There was one case where a carpenter was judged to be mediocre and ranked accordingly. However, in the area of finish carpentry the person was without peer. The other carpenters handled him as an anomaly. In other words, he was weird but tolerable.

"I Opt" explained what was happening. The great finish carpenter used a lot of HA/RI in his approach. He was great because he could analyze new situations and figure out totally new ways of accomplishing an objective. That same process also kicked in when he as doing ordinary work where it slowed him down. In other words, he was analyzing things he did not have to analyze.

Insights like this opened the carpenter's eyes to the value of "I Opt". The finish carpenter had suddenly become an asset that could be drawn upon. Here was a guy to call if they confronted an unusual situation. He was no longer weird. He was now an asset to be protected. If anyone ever wants to put a swimming pool on top of a garage, they have access to a guy with ideas on how it might be done.

The value of "I Opt" was clear from the insights it gave. However, what really nailed it down for the carpenters was that it did not depend on any deep psychological concepts ("mumbo jumbo" in their terms). It was straightforward and logical. This is their natural turf.

In the end, the extension to the workforce went without a hitch. The next step was to make sure that it stayed that way.

RECRUITING

Like other rapidly growing firms, VDB is constantly recruiting. Our basic need is for skill and that is what we look for first.

The next thing we look for is fit. The new candidate has to work with other people who also have skills. We do not want to confound these existing skills by introducing the wrong person. For example, adding someone who is detail averse to a team that is detail oriented can destroy (or at least diminish) everyone's work. Not a smart thing to do.

Here we use "I Opt" as an aid. Since all styles are "good" there is no style that will automatically include or exclude a person. What it does do is give VDB information that can be used to explore behavioral implications.

The process is to have the potential recruit take an "I Opt" survey. The results are processed. The report is shared and discussed with the candidate. In effect, "I Opt" becomes just another input into a hiring decision. But it is a very important one.

The reception of the technology at the recruiting level has been good. Most people understand and agree with the basic analysis. The absence of deep psychological concepts means that they can discuss the points made visible in the report. There is no reason for anyone to be intimidated.

The discussion is important. "I Opt" only talks about underlying tendencies. These can be suppressed or redirected by culture, training, upbringing and thousands of other influences. VDB hires adults who have accumulated a lifetime of these crosscurrents. The basic tendencies described by "I Opt" are always there. The discussion allows them to be interpreted correctly.

The results of this process have been outstanding. Many times "I Opt" becomes a directional tool. Often VDB has multiple places where new people can be put. By using "I Opt" VDB can place people where they will be successful. Reason has replaced a "flip of the coin" in our placement decisions.

Recruiting using the "I Opt" paradigm created a solid core. The next step was to include VDB's strategic partners.

STRATEGIC PARTNERS

VDB is the core of a much larger enterprise. To complete the jobs we undertake requires us to expand and contract very rapidly. In addition, both of these conditions can happen at the same time. Some jobs are starting, others are ending and still others are in process.

To complete any of the jobs that VDB accepts requires incorporating others into its organization. Architects, engineers, construction firms, inspectors and a host of others move in and out depending on the stage of a project. These people are as much a part of our organization as are the employees of VDB. A breakdown anywhere means that VDB fails—and VDB does not fail.

One basic issue for VDB is the ability to predict the likely response of our partners to changing conditions. For example, can an engineer work with incomplete architectural plans? What will a contractor's likely response be to a change that requires redoing construction already in place. These issues arise constantly. Knowing the probable response of our partners lets us adjust our behavior to make their lives easier. In the end they benefit, we benefit and the client benefits.

Introducing "I Opt" to our partners is not as difficult as it first might appear. We freely share our results to demonstrate that there is no secret agenda. We usually begin at a one-on-one level. The value of the technology becomes immediately apparent. From there it is just a matter of time before the remainder of our partner's organization joins in.

Perhaps one of the most effective ways of "proving" that "I Opt" works is demonstration. Partners are invited to try out a TwoPerson™ on themselves and their spouse. This usually drives home the accuracy of "I Opt" with a vengeance. The spouse is someone they know. They find out that "I Opt" can explain things that had always perplexed them. This typically convinces even our most skeptical partners that "I Opt" has real value.

One of the unexpected outcomes is the depth of interest. We have found ourselves providing analytical service to parts of our partner's organization with which we do not typically deal. Even this helped us. In making our partners stronger, we increased their ability to lend us that strength when we needed it. Everybody wins.

An example may illustrate the point. We have found that small business owners tend to have a high RS component. This is a great "get it done" strategy. It is a lousy tool for explaining exactly what you want done. The net result is that everyone can end up frustrated. Nobody wins.

This RS phenomenon becomes increasingly important as a firm grows. The RS can keep his or her finger on everything for a while. Eventually, it gets out of control. The result is that the size of the RS's organization can be artificially limited. VDB's interest is best served when there is no artificial limit. We want strong partners. The stronger, the better.

By using "I Opt" we are usually able to help both the owners and the firms that they run. Once "I Opt" styles are understood, everyone has a motive to use their new knowl-

edge. The owner has a better chance of getting what he or she wants. The staff lessens the risk of delivering an unacceptable product. Both efficiency and effectiveness improve.

Word has also leaked out to organizations that are only indirectly affiliated with VDB. For example, VDB has conducted organizational analysis for the Board of Landscaping. Like everyone else, they have organizational issues. "I Opt" works as well there as it does in commercial ventures. Like our commercial partners, strengthening these organizations strengthens VDB.

VDB itself and its partners now can engineer themselves for excellence. There remains, however, one critical player to address—the client.

THE CLIENT

Most firms build their products for an abstract "customer" who they will probably never meet. VDB is different. Not only do we know our clients, we usually work with them at every stage in building process. The client is an integral part of our team.

VDB has begun to invite cooperative clients to use "I Opt" as a way of smoothing the remodeling process. The client typically has an emotional investment in their homes and this can easily get out of hand. By knowing the information processing preferences of our client, we can act to make the experience more comfortable for all involved.

An example may help illustrate the gains available. One of our clients was a woman who commissioned an extensive renovation of her home. She decided to live in a single room with her five cats while the renovation proceeded. From our perspective, this was not an ideal situation.

The situation got worse. The client took a deep interest in the process. She would wander around the house at night. She would note irregularities in varnish drying in the V-grooves of her new floor. Questions, comments and challenges abounded. It would have been easy to view her as a bit unhinged.

Knowledge of "I Opt" allowed us to see a more reasonable explanation. Our client was very sensitive to detail. She had a great need for certainty of outcome. She did not have the knowledge to interpret what she was seeing correctly. However, she was behaving exactly as predicted by "I Opt." There was nothing wrong with her and nothing wrong with us.

Knowing what was happening gave us the vehicle for managing the situation. We were able to explain to our partners the condition in coldly rational terms. This is a format they found naturally appealing. We then took a little more time and explained to our client what was going to happen and what she should expect. This eliminated many issues and greatly reduced the tension she was feeling.

The job was still not easy but it got done. The client walked away happy with the result and with us. Without "I Opt" the result could have been very different. In fact, there is a strong likelihood that someone could have ended suing someone else.

This is just one kind of client. We have others who display more of an RS inclination. If we were to use the same strategy on them as we did with the woman with five

cats, we could create our own problem. Typically, our RS clients do not want to hear about details. Burdening them with explanations would only increase their tension and dissatisfaction. For the RS, the only prescription needed is "get it done."

These contrasting clients illustrate the value of "I Opt" in client service. We do not have one kind of customer. We have many. "I Opt" allows us to tell who is who. This lets us get off on the right foot and stay on it throughout the remodeling process. The job goes easier, our partners are more efficient and the client is happier. Once again, everyone wins.

VDB is now using "I Opt" with willing clients. However, even when a client declines we can get value. Just observing behavior is often enough to get a reasonable estimate of the client's primary style. As VDB gets more experience with "I Opt" our estimates get better and better. Estimates will never substitute for knowing the whole profile, but the results are a lot better than chance. Even when a client declines, "I Opt" makes a positive contribution.

CONCLUSION

VDB's wide scale use of "I Opt" and organizational engineering technology is paying benefits on a daily basis. The style names themselves have become valuable tools. People are using the terminology of HA, RS, LP and RI as tools of coordination.

One key to VDB's success is simple. The technology gives everyone a basis for mutual respect. We each see the value of the other person in terms of our own well being. They see our value in terms of their well being. This mutual recognition creates a firm foundation that strengthens over time.

Another key to success is predictability. Mutual respect is enough to reduce tension and improve the social environment. However, full benefit is obtained when the technology is used to predict the behavior of individuals and groups. It is behavior that gets the job done. Being able to predict it in advance gives us the ability to control the outcome. Since we are all in the same boat, this control ultimately works for the benefit of everyone.

Mutual respect sets an overall tone. But, it is the engineering of groups where one person's strength offsets another's vulnerability. This is where the power lies.

Dad originally intervened in 1998 to save my bacon. He did that and a lot more. The technology he brought with him has made a positive contribution to a lot of lives on both professional and personal levels. It has strengthened entire organizations and helped VDB create a sustainable competitive advantage

Thanks, Dad.

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